

My Family History
By Sharon Martinas

My paternal grandparents came from Russia in the early 1900's. They were part of the massive wave of Southern and Eastern European immigrants – over 25 million – who came to the U.S. between 1880 and 1914. My grandparents faced both religious and political persecution in Russia. They were socialists, and they fled the repression following the failed 1905 revolution. Like millions of other poor Europeans, they came in the holds of ships.

They settled in the crowded tenement district of New York City's lower East side. My grandfather went to work in a sweatshop of a garment factory, just as did millions of his fellow countrymen. He helped to organize a union in his factory to combat the horrendous working conditions and miserable pay given to immigrant garment workers. His sisters became school teachers, and eventually, helped to found New York City's militant teachers union, the United Federation of Teachers–AFT.

Hard work, a close knit family and a community support network eventually paid off for my grandfather. By the time he retired, exhausted from years of overwork, he was the owner of a small garment factory, which he left to my father. During World War II, my father's factory got government contracts for manufacturing soldiers' uniforms, and my father made a lot of money.

My father always told me that he made his money because he worked hard, just like his grandfather did. Well, they *did* work hard, but that wasn't the only reason they made money. They got their "head start," their *preferential treatment* because, when they first came here, they immediately found jobs in the huge garment industry.

Why were there so many jobs in New York City's garment industry? In the early 1900's there was both a huge market for cheap cotton garments, *and an abundance of cheap cotton*. But why was the cotton so cheap? Because it was produced by African American sharecroppers in the South, working in semi-slave conditions under land owners who never paid them enough to get out of debt, never mind to survive, thrive, and look forward to a better future for their children, as my grandparents did.

So, my race and my class privilege stem directly from the superexploited and oppressed labor of African American people, no longer slaves, but not free. I am a product of that white privilege.

My grand aunts, as I mentioned before, were militant unionists. So militant, that they came back out of retirement in 1968 to participate in a city-wide teachers strike called by UFT president Albert Shanker. But the strike was not called to improve wages or working conditions. Shanker called the strike in an effort to smash the first African American/ Puerto Rican American community controlled school district in the country: in Ocean Hill–Brownsville, New York City. The teachers were successful. They crushed the community control effort. My aunts were proud. They had acted as good, militant unionists, fighting for their rights as workers, as they understood them.

This is my family history. When I first learned of it, I was paralyzed by guilt. But guilt is a luxury of the privileged. So I decided to transform my guilt into this story, as a model of how descendants of European ancestors can begin to take responsibility for the history of our family's white privilege and actions as oppressors of people of color; as well as our justified pride in the strength of their resistance to oppression.