

Abraham Plotkin Excerpt #4

“However, since my friend was working part time learning how to knit sweaters in a relative's store, and when I was asked whether I cared to try, and was told that I was pretty good, I was intrigued. It started a career that lasted quite a few years.

The next few years are more or less a blur. In between going to school, working afternoons, and contributing sweatshop earnings to the support of the family, I learned to hate my surroundings. I hated the shop I worked in, and I hated Rivington Street and its gangs and pickpockets. And every time I saw a policeman, I shuddered. But what was more agonizing than anything else was what I saw at home. Even with my pitiful contributions, it was not the sameness of the diet, there was just a lack of it. I was old enough to sense that my parents were denying themselves so that my brother and I had enough to eat. Finally I persisted and insisted that my father go with me so that I could get my working papers. It was the first and only time in my life that I ever saw my father cry.

From that point on, I became a Jack of all trades, taking what ever job I could get. I was a messenger boy for Western Union; I worked in John Wanamaker's store at 8th and Broadway. I washed dishes. There wasn't anything I didn't try once. The one thing I tried to avoid, however, was to go back to knitting. It didn't pay enough to begin with, and the shops were both dirty and unsanitary. It was 1907 and the financial panic hit the country, and one was glad to take anything.”

Source: International Ladies Garment Workers Union Oral History Collection
5780 OH 19