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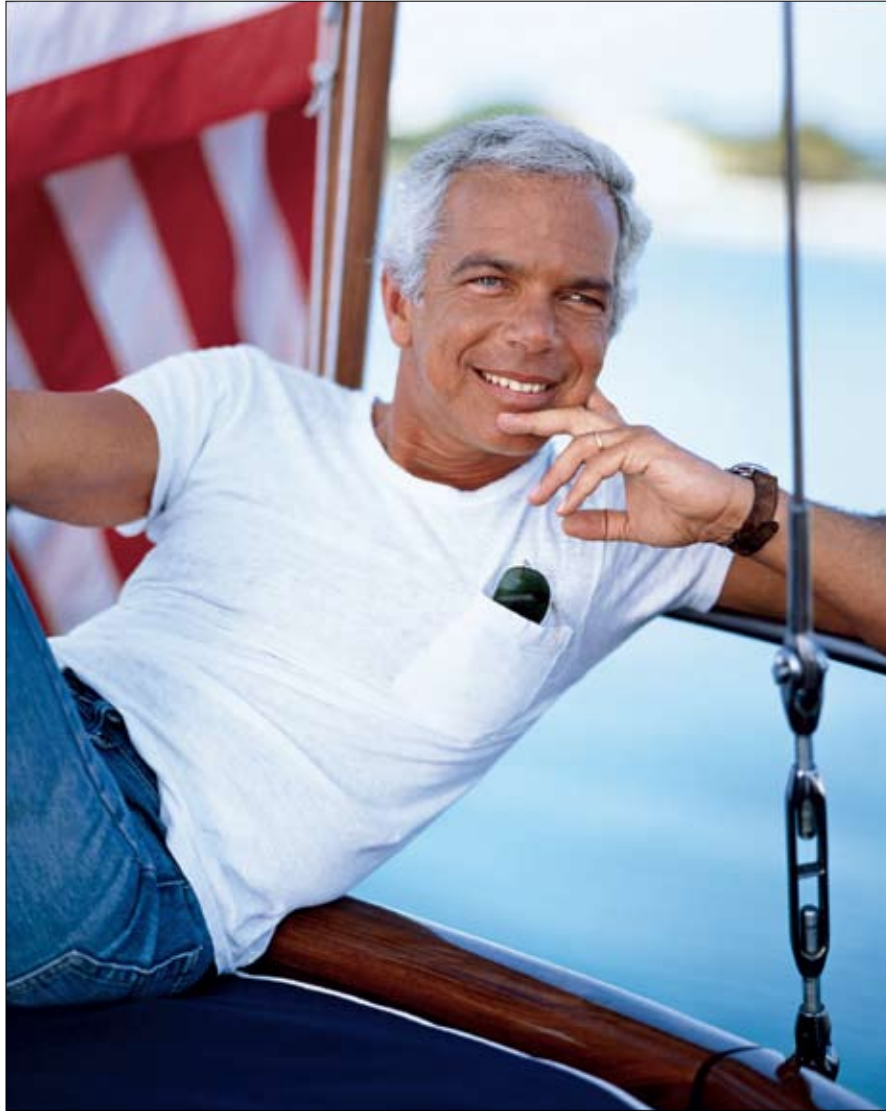
**HOW AMERICAN JEWS
TOPPLED PARIS COUTURE AND
REDESIGNED THE FASHION INDUSTRY**

Johanna Neuman

Ralph Rueben Lifshitz's father was a housepainter who longed to be an artist. His mother, green-eyed Frieda Lifshitz, insisted that Ralph and her other three children attend yeshiva in the hope that they would bring her "Jewish *nachas*." But Ralph, born in 1939 in the Bronx, had other ideas. While other kids in the fifties were wearing motorcycle jackets, he saved money from after-school jobs to buy oxford shirts, crew neck sweaters and white high-top sneakers. When he couldn't find clothes to match his instincts, he designed his own.

Encouraged by his father, who appreciated his sense of color and texture, Lifshitz, by then Ralph Lauren, founded his own company in 1968, choosing the name Polo to evoke the power and style of the upper-class sport. From the start, his clothes reflected the gentrified sensibility of polo matches, yacht clubs and family crests. He became the breakout design star of the post-war era, a pioneer who understood the global hunger for assimilation.

Today, Lauren is ubiquitous in fashion, head of a powerful global empire that designs all of its products—from sportswear to fragrances to home furnishings and even paint—with an aura of casual American comfort and upper-crust British class. In keeping with the Polo image, Lauren has perfected his persona as a charter member of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant establishment. He's a car enthusiast who maintains a world-class collection of rare automobiles, and a patriot who helped the Smithsonian Institution restore the flag that inspired *The Star-Spangled Banner*.



Former yeshiva student Ralph Lauren became the breakout design star of the post-war era.

Ralph Lauren's parents had come from Belarus, and his success can be in part attributed to his immigrant upbringing. "By virtue of his status as an outsider, he was able to look at WASP culture and see and create the fantasy of it," says Alana Newhouse, editor of *Tablet Magazine*. Like other Jewish designers, including Calvin Klein, Donna Karan and Isaac Mizrahi, he owes something to the generations of Jews who made and peddled clothes throughout Europe, most of whom never saw an English country estate, stepped foot on a yacht or heard of polo.

In Europe, only a few professions were open to Jews. Largely barred from owning land, they were forced to earn their living as tailors or traders, honing skills that would serve them well in the New World. They arrived in 19th-century America just as a new technology—the sewing machine—was revolutionizing the apparel business. As Americans moved from the farm to the city and began buying from the Sears & Roebuck catalogue or the general store, a new industry of ready-made clothes began to take shape. Jewish immigrants streamed into the cities, providing cheap

labor for garment factories in New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Baltimore and elsewhere. "Based in urban centers and pushed by history toward entrepreneurship, Jews found fashion one of the fields open to them," says Valerie Steele, a historian at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York.

It was one of those paradigm-shifting moments in history. As author Malcolm Gladwell writes in *Outliers: The Story of Success*, the Jewish immigrants had the skills to match the times: "To come to New York City in the 1890s with a background in dressmaking or sewing or *schwittwaren handlung* (piece goods) was a stroke of extraordinary good fortune. It was like showing up in Silicon Valley in 1986 with ten thousand hours of computer programming already under your belt."

Jewish immigrants had another advantage—a talent for reinventing themselves and a sensitivity to image. Centuries of wandering had bred a unique antenna for the cultural zeitgeist of gentile society. That inheritance translated into a keen understanding of what would sell. In a country where image was king, Jews created looks that spoke not to their ethnic backgrounds but to their instincts about how Americans saw themselves—and of how the world would see America.

Jacob Youphes came to America from Latvia in 1854 with grand ambitions. Changing his name to Jacob W. Davis, he traveled the country, investing in breweries, coal, tobacco and pork, even panning for gold. But as he approached 40, with a wife and six children to support, Davis resigned himself to the Old World life of a Jewish tailor.

He was in his shop on Virginia Street in Reno one December day in 1870 when a woman ordered a pair of work pants for her husband, a large man who kept wearing out the pockets and splitting the seams of his clothes. For

three dollars, Davis began making a pair of trousers in 10-ounce duck twill that he had purchased from Levi Strauss' dry goods store in San Francisco. As he was stitching them up, he noticed some copper rivets nearby, the kind he used to attach straps to horse blankets for cattle drivers. "So when the pants were done," he later recalled, "the rivets were lying on the tables—and the thought struck me to fasten the pockets with rivets."

The quintessential American garment, blue jeans, was born. The pants were an immediate hit—Davis sold 200 pairs in the next 18 months—and soon imitators began copying his design. His wife objected to a patent, arguing that he had already paid good money for two successful patent applications that had made them no richer. So Davis wrote to his supplier, Strauss, asking him to become a partner. Strauss agreed, and the firm gave the famous "501" lot number to the pants with the rivets. The rest is history.

The Davis-Levi Strauss partnership (Davis sold his share in 1907) was one of the first major Jewish footholds in the American garment industry. Although New York was its epicenter, Jews owned dry goods stores throughout the country that were well positioned for entrepreneurial expansion. During the Civil War, the Fechheimer brothers of Cincinnati—whose father and grandfather were peddlers in Germany—won a contract to supply standard size uniforms to the Union Army. The company, now owned by Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway, is still making uniforms for police officers, firefighters, postal workers and even baseball umpires.

Each wave of Jewish immigration brought success stories. One of the most dramatic is that of Rabbi Moses Phillips and his wife Endel, who emigrated from Poland. In 1881, with eight children to feed, they began sewing shirts by hand and selling them from pushcarts to coal miners in Pottsville, Pennsylvania.

Their business grew into the world's largest shirt company, the Phillips-Van Heusen Corp., which by 1921 had introduced the self-folding collar and begun trading publicly on the New York Stock Exchange. In 1929, the company cemented its appeal by introducing shirts with attached collars—looser, more comfortable and easier to wash in new electric washing machines.

From the beginning, the connective tissue of Jewish history in the rag trade was family. "This business, the fashion industry, is truly a family business," said Andrew Rosen, founder of the Theory fashion label and now CEO of Helmut

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—MALCOLM GLADWELL

Lang, a big New York clothing company. Rosen's grandfather Arthur founded Puritan Fashions in 1910, his father Carl was a leading Seventh Avenue executive. "It's about relationships, about community, about threading one generation to the next," he says.

As the industry grew, so did the extended family. Soon Jews were involved in nearly every aspect of clothing—from the supply end to the retail world, from the sweatshops and manufacturing to the department stores

and the advertising. Corporate America still maintained a strong glass ceiling—so-called gentlemen's agreements barred entry into fields like medicine and the law—but in the *schmatte* business, the only ceiling was creativity and sweat equity, savvy and timing. Jews, says Alana Newhouse, "used their knowledge of the garment industry to pole vault themselves into high fashion."

The 1930s designer Adrian was born to immigrants in Connecticut. Although Adrian Adolph Greenberg knew no one in the garment business, he was armed with talent: While studying in Paris, his designs caught the eye of Rudolph Valentino's wife, and he began designing for the actor. It was only a matter of time before he left for Hollywood, becoming its first major costume designer and helping Hollywood moguls, many of them Jewish, define glamour. As chief designer at MGM, Adrian set new standards in movie creativity by dressing the characters in the 1939 *The Wizard of Oz*. (We have him to thank for film's signature red-sequined ruby slippers.) Macy's copied one of Adrian's designs for Joan Crawford—worn in a 1932 movie called *Letty Lynton*—and sold a half million dresses. His designs in the 1939 film *The Women* were so breathtaking that while the movie was shot in black and white, the studio used Technicolor for a 10-minute fashion parade featuring his work.

While Adrian was designing for Greta Garbo and Norma Shearer, a few Jewish designers in New York were gaining national attention. Austrian Henrietta Kanangeiser renamed herself Hattie Carnegie (after the nation's most famous industrialist, Andrew Carnegie), and designed colorful dresses and artful jewelry for Crawford and Tallulah Bankhead and public figures like Clare Boothe Luce and the Duchess of Windsor.

Sally Milgrim designed the light blue gown that Eleanor Roosevelt

wore to her husband's first inaugural ball in 1933. Known for the quality of her clothes and accessories at a time when most ready-to-wear items were anything but, she won contracts from actresses Ethel Merman and Mary Pickford. Another early star was Mollie Parnis, who with her husband Leon Livingston (née Levinson) opened a business at the height of the Depression. Though she couldn't cut, sew or draw, Mollie Parnis Livingston had what one observer called "an architect's eye for proportion," producing designs geared to flatter women over 30.

Austrian-born Nettie Rosenstein, dubbed by *Life* as "among the handful of American dress designers who compete successfully with Paris," was responsible for both of Mamie Eisenhower's inaugural gowns. In an era when department stores insisted on putting their labels on clothes, Rosenstein convinced Bergdorf Goodman and I. Magnin to carry her line under her own name. "Certainly until 1930 you didn't hear the names of designers in America," says the FIT's Steele. "Department stores like Wanamaker's and Garfinckel's" controlled the label. "As late as the 1960s," she adds, "most department stores deliberately kept designers in the background."

But it was World War II that made room on the world stage for American Jewish designers. Paris, long the center of couture, was dominated by big-name fashion houses like those of Charles Frederick Worth, Elsa Schiaparelli and Coco Chanel—a fashion icon who invented the knit suit for day and the little black dress for evening. Jewish individuals and companies were customers, but few were part of the industry. One exception was Jacques Heim, who was forced to flee Paris during the Nazi occupation. (After the war, he would introduce the bikini.) Behind the scenes, Jews were major investors: Pierre Wertheimer was an

early financial backer of Chanel No. 5, and his family would acquire the entire company after the designer's death.

The fashion landscape was turned upside down when the Nazis rolled into Paris, for all intents and purposes cutting off French couture from its manufacturers and clients. The war also made fashion a luxury that would rob soldiers and armies of needed material. Stanley Marcus, head of the Neiman-Marcus Department Store in Dallas, went to Washington to work for the War Production Board, which promulgated a regulation (the infamous L-85) that limited the amount of fabric in new clothes.

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When the war was over, and when British and American fashion writers got their first look at French wartime designs, they were horrified. "While we are wearing rayon," lamented *Vogue*, usually a loyal cheerleader for Paris, "the Frenchwoman is wearing yards of silk." Although the designs were extravagant, truth was that most women in France during the war were freezing, wearing threadbare clothes and culottes that allowed them to bicycle when they could no longer afford petrol for cars.

On the defensive, Paris designed its own rescue, creating a spectacular exhibit of hundreds of dolls, standing 27.5 inches high and dressed by the city's top couturiers. The Theatre de la Mode dolls traveled the world to rave reviews, reminding audiences of the marvel of French artistry. Giving notice that Paris was back, French designer Christian Dior sparked the first rage in post-war design with his New Look of cinched waists and voluminous skirts.

But where once American manufacturers had copied French design for the mass market, now they had more freedom to design. Their location became an advantage: They were attuned to economic, cultural and generational shifts occurring throughout America. GIs had returned to attend college, build homes and grow businesses. Women empowered by wartime employment were outfitting themselves and their children for a new suburban lifestyle that included PTA meetings and Sunday picnic outings in the family Buick.

The trend was a relaxation of the old dress code, a celebration of the good life. "After the war, there was a real explosion of casual culture," says Gabriel Goldstein, curator of a Yeshiva University Museum exhibit called "A Perfect Fit: The Garment Industry and American Jewry 1860-1960." Dior's New Look "may have impacted what ladies wore to lunch," he adds, but "leisurewear, California clothes, kids clothes—Paris couldn't do that. They had to take that from America."

Enter a new generation of American fashion powerhouses ready to create designs for the new era. Jews were prominent and prescient alongside fellow designers such as Bill Blass and Geoffrey Beene, and later Perry Ellis and Tommy Hilfiger.

Anne Klein was one of the early visionaries. In 1948, at the age of 25, the New York-born Hannah Golofski

launched Junior Sophisticates, creating a new category of clothing in a field that was until then defined as men's, women's and children's. Gearing her designs to younger, slimmer girls, she provided a sportier look. In 1968 she introduced her own line, pioneering mix-and-match separates as well as clothes for petite women like herself, yet again creating new category of sales.

Around the same time, Ralph Lauren had launched his first Polo store (it only sold ties) and Calvin Klein sold his first line of coats and sleeveless dresses to Bonwit Teller. The Bronx-born Calvin Klein took mundane items like jeans and underwear and turned them into objects of sexual fashion, becoming famous for the 1980 ad in which 15-year-old actress Brooke Shields posed in blue jeans and asked, "You want to know what comes between me and my Calvins? Nothing."

For 30 years Klein rode atop the fashion world. Shocking the tabloids with a personal life that rocketed between women and men, between drugs and sobriety, he turned his personal biography into an international brand. By the time he sold his company to Phillips-Van Heusen in 2003, he had lent his name to everything from belts to perfumes to jackets, and its cachet is still earning millions. But by then he was out of money and drive. "In order to survive in fashion industry, you have to be so on top of the zeitgeist," says Christina Binkley, a style columnist who covers the fashion industry for *The Wall Street Journal*. "It's almost a sickness, you can't ever stop thinking about it."

Five years after Klein hit the scene, Diane von Furstenberg—child of a Holocaust survivor and one-time wife of a prince—took center stage. Born two years after her mother's liberation from a Nazi concentration camp, Diane Simone Michelle Halfin early on adopted her mother's optimism. During the frigid winters, Lily Nahmias had been forced to march for days in the snow. So, in



Diane von Furstenberg, daughter of a Holocaust survivor, designed the wrap dress in 1973.

true survivor spirit, after the war Lily took her entire reparation check from the German government and blew it on a new sable coat. "She had been so cold in the camps and she never wanted to be cold again!" says von Furstenberg.

In 1973, in an age of counter-culture experimentation when women tried on pants suits and men sported Nehru jackets, von Furstenberg introduced the wrap dress, an unapologetically feminine design. Her genius was to rebel against trend. "Women were ready for clothes that let them be both sexy and successful,

powerful and practical and the wrap dress satisfied those needs," she says.

Von Furstenberg—whose wrap dress is still popular—celebrates her Jewish roots, although Yom Kippur is the only Jewish holy day on her calendar. "I believe in the message of the holiday. For me it is a time of reflection and contemplation. [It's] a clean start for the new year."

While von Furstenberg's appeal was to women of every age and income, another Jewish immigrant designer was making a name for herself in luxury,



Zac Posen designs for stars including Natalie Portman, Rihanna, Cameron Diaz and Kate Winslet.

designing whimsical jeweled handbags for first ladies and Hollywood stars. Born and raised in Budapest, Judith Leiber was spared the concentration camps thanks to a forged diplomatic passport. Forced to abandon her dream of studying in London, she instead became an apprentice to a handbag craftsman. “If the Nazis hadn’t occupied Budapest, I would have become a chemist,” Leiber recalls. With her father an art collector and her grandmother a hat designer, Leiber muses, “perhaps I inherited a sense of design.”

Fashion was in the blood of many post-war designers. Donna Karan, creator of the DKNY line that is a tribute to urban, sophisticated style, grew up in the industry. Her mother was a model, her father a tailor and her stepfather a hat-maker. At 14, working in a clothes shop, she felt confident enough to advise customers on which outfits would most flatter their figures. She trained at Parsons School of Design before signing up with Anne Klein. In 1974, just after Karan gave birth to her daughter Gabrielle, Klein, only 50,

died of breast cancer. Executives asked the 26-year-old Karan to complete the collection and later named her chief designer for the Anne Klein brand. She kicked off her own DKNY line nine years later.

Like Karan, Kenneth Cole has family roots in the profession—his father Charlie owned the El Greco shoe manufacturing company. In 1982, the younger Cole set out to preview his own line of shoes at Market Week at New York’s Hilton Hotel. Without funds to pay for a hotel room let alone a showroom, Cole rented a trailer. But the city would only grant parking permits to trailers used in movies, so he changed his company’s name to Kenneth Cole Productions, writing in his application that its purpose was to shoot a full-length film, *The Birth of a Shoe Company*. The story goes that he sold 40,000 pairs of shoes in three days, and did make a movie. Ever since, he has been known for elegant footwear.

Isaac Mizrahi is also a child of the business. The only son of Zeke and Sarah Mizrahi, he grew up in a tight-knit Syrian Jewish community in New Jersey. His father worked in the garment industry, first as a pattern cutter on Wooster Street and later as a manufacturer of children’s clothes. His mother took her son to the ballet, and on shopping expeditions to the major department stores, teaching him to hunt for quality, showing him the magic of designers like Chanel and Cristobal Balenciaga, a Spaniard in Paris with a reputation for exacting standards.

Openly gay, Mizrahi has said he feels Jewish in his soul but is conflicted by the orthodox belief that homosexuality is wrong. (Another Jewish-born designer, Michael Kors—regarded by some as “a groovy alternative to Oscar de la Renta”—is so conflicted he is said to no longer identify himself as a Jew.) Once, when Mizrahi was asked about what defines couture, he described in loving

detail the way designer clothes are made—the special press of the jacket, the turned head of the sleeve, the way the shoulder pads are inserted. “God,” he said, “is in the tailoring.”

Mizrahi was one of the first designers to take his fabulous seams down market, partnering first with Target and now with Liz Claiborne to deliver fresh, trendy clothes at a modest price. He was also one of the first to mass manufacture offshore, taking advantage of cheap third world labor.

Both trends have deeply impacted the fashion industry: American design may still be king but American factories

have moved to Asia and beyond. “More clothing comes into the Port of Los Angeles from Asia than any other point on the globe,” says *The Wall Street Journal’s* Binkley. “Massive quantities are being made in factories that run 24 hours a day. We’ve added seasons, so stores have new collections every week.” Increased production is not all positive, she adds. “Some would argue that this benefits the consumer, who gets the clothes quickly. But we are filling landfills.”

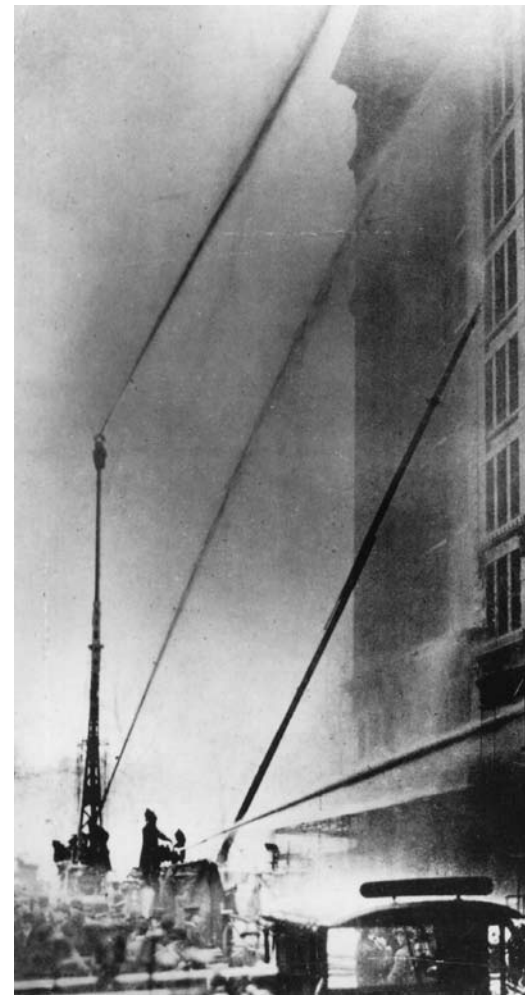
Amid the frenzy, a new generation of Jewish designers is making a splash. Marc Jacobs was fired by Perry Ellis in

1993 for designing a grunge look. He is now creative director for Louis Vuitton. In his own line, Jacobs has managed to make grunge both feminine and profitable. Zac Posen, who as a child stole yarmulkes from his grandparents’ synagogue to make dresses for dolls, is dressing stars, winning praise from clients Natalie Portman, Rihanna, Kate Winslet, Cameron Diaz, Jennifer Lopez and Beyoncé for his feminine aesthetic.

The global hunger for assimilation, still strong, no longer rules. Ethnicity is in, and from its depths has emerged what *Slate* recently dubbed “schmatte chic.” Levi Okunov, the 24-year-old

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The Dark Side of the Garment Industry



On March 25, 1911, William Gunn Shepherd was walking through Manhattan’s Washington Square when he saw smoke coming from a building on Greene Street. The top floors of the Asch Building, which housed the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, were engulfed in flames. Some of the company’s workers, Jewish and Italian immigrants, most of them young women, were screaming at the windows. Outside the building, firefighters arrived but found their ladders would not reach the 7th floor. The girls were trapped inside: The owners, concerned about the pilfering of fabric, had locked the doors from the outside.

“They were burning to death in the windows,” recounted Shepherd, a reporter for the United Press. “One by one the window jambs broke. Down came the bodies in a shower, burning, smoking, flaming bodies, with disheveled hair trailing upward. These torches, suffering ones, fell inertly.”

The Triangle Fire left 146 workers dead, bringing to light the dark side of New York’s booming garment industry. Fueled by immigrants who came off boats through Ellis Island into the Lower East Side looking for work, the neighborhood between Fifth and Ninth Avenues and from 34th to 42nd Streets had become an economic powerhouse. By 1880 New York was producing more garments than all its urban competitors combined. By the turn of the century, clothing manufacturing was the city’s top business. And 10 years later, 70 percent of all women’s clothes in the United States—and 40 percent of men’s—were made in the city.

But conditions for many were brutal, wages barely enough to support families. The Triangle Fire rallied public opinion: Tammany Hall politicians were replaced by reformers who pushed for stricter fire codes. Labor unions, once laboratories for radical politics, successfully championed the plight of sweatshop workers. Another eyewitness to the fire, a wealthy Bostonian in New York attending graduate school, later became the first woman to hold a cabinet position. Appointed as labor secretary by Franklin D. Roosevelt, Frances Perkins often said that the Triangle Fire was “the day the New Deal began.”—*Johanna Neuman*

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son of a Lubavitcher rabbi, has crafted gowns dotted with poetry by 13th-century Sufi poet Rumi, translated into English, Yiddish and Arabic. He recently did a show in which models wore clothing made from the blue velvet used for Torah coverings. Jewish-Brazilian Alexandre Herchcovitch emphasizes that powerful and poignant symbol, the Star of David. "Engaging with Jewish symbols and materials has become something of a trend, not an enormous one, but a trend," says Alana Newhouse.

Jewish designers are not the only ones to go Jewish ethnic. In fact, French icon Jean Paul Gaultier is perhaps the best known designer to do so. Japan's Yohji Yamamoto and Korea's Gunhyo Kim are also exploring the crevasses of time with Hasidic-inspired hats and coats and any image that evokes Jewishness.

Their experimentation with ethnic themes is part of the expanding Asian influence in the design business. A new wave of immigrants—like Jason Wu who designed First Lady Michelle Obama's inaugural gown—is now breaking through. As did Jews who poured into the garment industry more than a century ago, they see in the clothing business an opportunity for success and acceptance. "In a way it's fitting," says FIT's Valerie Steele. "Modern American fashion is a reaction formation against being an immigrant. It's a very competitive field, hard to break into. Now, with our factories moving to China or Vietnam, an uncle in China might help," just as family ties once aided Jewish immigrants. Their success, she says, is "a function of their immigrant story."

The tight-knit Jewish family business that once characterized the rag trade has frayed. Career options outside the business have thinned the ranks, and globalization has done the rest, with large conglomerates swallowing the earlier proud markers of Jewish achievement. But the pull of history and the allure of design is still a draw to young American

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Jews, as it is to immigrants from the former Soviet Union and South America, and to the burgeoning fashion talents of Tel Aviv.

What ever the future, waspy or *schmatte* chic, haute couture or global cheap, there's no denying that Jews

have had a major impact on the world's wardrobe. Says *schmatte* chic designer Levi Okunov: "We were slaves, a bunch of peasants coming off boats, people were starving and trying to do general factory work...and then it became a little more glamorous." ☺



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