Phyllis Dillon presented on Jewish immigrant’s contribution to the American apparel industry. Before this seminar, I never knew that the Jewish immigrants played such an important role in America’s suit factories. Phyllis also mentioned that while there were factories with harsh conditions for its employees, many of them were nice places for Jewish immigrants to work at. The presentation was a history lesson on America’s once thriving apparel and textile industry.

During the middle to late 19th century, German and Jewish immigrants helped found the suit industry in the United States. Suits were and still are a necessity in a man’s wardrobe. While immigrants were arriving to the United States, they needed a suit to look sharp in order to get a job to support their family. Clothing back then, for the most part, was made to order. In 1855, the Singer sewing machine was invented and allowed for industrial sewing and factories could now make ready to wear suits. The three cities that had clothing making factories were Boston, New York and Philadelphia. New York became the fashion capital of world both commercially and manufacturing. In 1858, $40 million in men’s wholesale clothing was made.

Many Jewish families opened their businesses in the U.S., and are now well-known conglomerates like Levi Strauss, Bendels and Bergdorfs. Levi Strauss’s family opened in the lower east side of New York as a fabric store. Five years later, Levi and his mother moved to the U.S. and he moved out west during the gold rush. He pedaled for money out there to start his business.

The Jewish culture looked favorably at owning businesses. This is a major reason why they jumped into the suit industry because there were so many opportunities in owning or working in the factories, pedaling fabrics and selling at fairs. They knew a lot about fashion and were very successful at selling fabrics that were in style.

In the many history courses I have taken, I was always told about the poor working conditions in clothing factories in New York and Lowell, Massachusetts. Phyllis explained that the sweatshops were the ones that had issues with sexual assault, dangerous working conditions, long hours and low wages. The factories that the clothing was made in were enjoyable places to work at. The workers made good money, had fashionable clothes and enjoyed working with other employees. These factories made clothes that were sold in stores in the Lower East Side and eventually supplied the department stores around the nation.

Department stores that we shop at now are much different than the ones during the late 19th, early 20th century. They were known as the mecca for women’s shopping. The stores carried so many different manufacturers that contained small amounts of clothing. They offered a little bit of everything. Nowadays, department stores carry only specific brands and buy so much of each item. Most of the clothing and other items are not made in America, either.

The Jewish immigrants played a major role in the textile and clothing industry in the United States, especially in suits. Many peddlers became businessmen and created successful companies that are still in business today. In history courses, we only talk about the Jewish population under the terms of World War II, so it was refreshing to learn more about their success in the apparel industry.