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# REFORM AND THE TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST COMPANY FIRE

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On March 25, 1911, a terrible tragedy struck New York City, a horrifying fire, claiming scores of lives at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. But the 146 people who perished in the fire did not die in vain.[1] Their deaths sparked a new flame in New York City. The pleas of the working class for better factory conditions, long ignored, were finally heard after the Triangle deaths. For those deaths stimulated a guilty concern over the state of factory safety, a concern which called for action, for change. And so out of the ashes of the Triangle victims a Factory Investigating Commission was built, a Commission which over a period of four years examined thousands of industrial establishments, listened to hundreds of witnesses, held public hearings, and finally pushed through the legislation needed to reorganize the New York City labor and fire departments, and to insure safer factories for the working class.[2]

When Frances Perkins, a member of the Factory Investigating Commission dubbed the workshops and factories of the clothing industry virtual "fire and death traps," she was not exaggerating.[3] And the fire which began in Washington Square at 4:40 on Saturday afternoon, March 25, 1911, inside the Asche

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Building—where the Triangle Shirtwaist Company and its 500 employees occupied the eighth, ninth and tenth floors—was her testimony.

The cause of the fire was unknown, but suddenly people on the eighth floor of the Triangle Company began to cry "fire," and according to one survivor, flames seemed simply "to push up from under tables."[4] The eighth floor of the factory (like all the floors in Triangle) was overcrowded, and the sewing machine tables were crammed so close together that there was little aisle space in which to move.[5] Further, scraps of the flimsy fabric and paper patterns used to make the shirtwaists lay scattered everywhere and caught fire quickly, only aiding the spread of the flames.[6] Those on the eighth floor who were able to make an escape rushed to the stairway or pushed their way into one of the two narrow passenger elevators.[7] But within minutes, the entire floor became a "mass of flames." [8] The girls were met at the stairs by the blaze.[9] The elevator ceased to function.[10]

The elevator never even reached the ninth floor, the biggest "fire and death trap."[11] The ninth floor was the last to learn of the fire. On the tenth where the offices were located, a phone call of warning was received and employees climbed onto the roof and managed to escape.[12] However, on the ninth, the most crowded floor, fire simply instantaneously appeared. Many jumped on machine tables.[13] Others, their dresses on fire, ran to the windows, preferring to jump rather than be burned to death.[14] Some were caught so unaware that later firemen found "skeletons bending over sewing machines," and fifty-eight girls frozen dead in the dressing room.[15] The people on nine who had the time to escape were, nevertheless, just as trapped: the door to the ninth floor was locked (to keep the girls from stealing cloth during the day); the passenger elevators never came; and the one fire escape that the building possessed quickly collapsed.[16] Desperate and with nowhere to turn, more Triangle workers dove off window ledges.

The scene outside this snare of flames was also characterized by death, as the crowd which had gathered in Washington

Square watched dozens of girls hang from the building's windows and fall some eighty feet to the pavement.[17] They watched as Sophie Salami and Della Costello leapt, arms around each other, from the ninth floor; as a thirteen-year-old girl held on with her fingertips for three minutes until fire burned her fingers and she fell; as girls prayed and covered their eyes with rags before they jumped—sometimes as many as five at a time, "fire streaming back from their hair and dresses," and landed, "thud—dead" on the pavement.[18] "On the sidewalk lay heaps of broken bodies."[19] Only a few of them were injured—most were dead and many unrecognizable.[20]

According to the *New York Times*, "The firemen had trouble bringing their apparatus into position because of the bodies which strewed the pavement and sidewalks."[21] The bodies, said fireman Frank Rubino, "were hitting us all around."[22] But there was little help the firemen could offer the falling girls. Their ladders were not tall enough to reach the three top floors of the building, and the life nets they had were of no use.[23] For, Battalion Chief Edward J. Worth explained, the girls came down with such force that they "went right through the life nets, pavement, and all."[24] The firemen could only drag the dead bodies away and later use pulleys to remove one blackened body after another from the building's remains.[25] The *New York Times* reported the morning after the fire that "two girls, charred beyond all hope of identification, were found in the smoking ruins with their arms clasped around each other's necks."[26]

It was this, the drama of the tragedy, which was powerful and poignant enough to reach the public of New York and make them stop to consider their factories—that they were unsafe, that they were "fire traps."

Newspaper reporter Bill Shepherd was one who as a result of the fire paused to reflect: "I looked upon the heap of dead bodies and I remembered these girls were shirtwaist makers. I remembered their great strike last year in which the same girls had demanded more sanitary conditions and more safety precautions in the shops. These dead bodies were the answer."[27]

On November 24, 1909, 1800 waistmakers, including the workers of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, went on strike as members of the Garment Workers' Union.[28] However, the shirtmakers' demands, unlocked doors and sufficient fire escapes among them, were never met.[29] Rather, Triangle management responded by locking out its 500 strikers and by advertising for replacements.[30] "If the union had won," explained 1909 Triangle Shirtwaist Company striker Rose Safran,

> we would have been safe. Two of our demands were for adequate fire escapes and for open doors from the factories to the street. But the bosses defeated us and we didn't get the open doors or the better fire escapes. So our friends are dead.[31]

At the public funeral for the Triangle victims, the garment workers marched under one banner: "We demand fire protection."[32] This time they would be heard: numerous citizens ranging from businessmen to suffragists, from priests to East Side workers, met and spoke in the weeks and months following the conflagration.[33] Through these people the conscience of the city emerged. They aired a sense of public guilt and genuine concern over conditions in factories, conditions which they realized no one had previously taken enough responsibility for.[34]

The committee on public affairs, insurance and fire regulations of the New York Board of Trade, the Merchants' Association, the Public Safety Committee of the Federation of Women's Clubs, the Chamber of Commerce of New York, the Collegiate Equal Suffrage League, the Executive Committee of the Architectural League, the Board of Directors of the United Cloak, Suit and Skirt Manufacturers of New York, the Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, and the employer's welfare section of the National Civic Federation, all immediately held special meetings in the week following the fire, meetings in which a shared responsibility for the catastrophe was expressed.[35] C.W. Phillips, assemblyman at the National Civic Federation's Meeting, remorsefully stated that New York State, although an industrial state with thousands of factories, "has 75 game protectors in its Department of Game, but only 50 human protectors in its Department of Labor."[36] At the Calvary Baptist Church, the Reverend Dr. R.S.

MacArthur spoke of a further responsibility, the responsibility of the employer. He said that employers should be responsible for "making proper exits," and should be concerned for "...the lives of those under their employ."[37] "We are responsible," asserted Dr. Anna Shaw at the gathering of the Collegiate Equal Suffrage League. "As I read the terrible story of the fire," she divulged,

> "I asked 'Am I my sister's keeper ?' For the Lord said to me, 'Where is thy sister?' And I bowed my head and said 'I am responsible.' Yes every man and woman in this city is responsible...you men...are responsible. As voters, it was your business...There was a time when a woman worked in the home...all that has changed. Now she can no longer regulate her own conditions. She had been left...food for the flames."[38]

The consensus amongst the people of New York was that this responsibility did have to be assumed by all, but that there had been enough talk. The worker needed to be protected, and a course of action needed to be decided upon. Anne Morgan (J.P. Morgan's niece) rented out the Metropolitan Opera House, on behalf of the Women's Trade Union League, for the evening of April 2nd, in hopes that the night would be a public assembly bringing together people from different segments of society who felt the need to unite towards a common goal—reform.[39] At the Met, workers, most of them East Side immigrants, packed the balconies, and distinguished members of society filled the orchestra seats.[40] The panel on stage was composed of prestigious leaders of the community, church, charity and government.[41] But it was Rose Schneiderman, who had been a leader in the strike at Triangle two years before, who set the tone of the evening: "This is not the first time girls have been burned alive in this city," the East Sider told the audience.

> Every week I must learn of the untimely death of one of my sister workers...the life of men and women is so cheap and property is so sacred! There are so many of us for one job, it matters little if 149-odd are burned to death...citizens...we are trying you now...[42]

"The meaning of the hour," explained Rabbi Stephen S. Wise that night, "is that the life of the lowliest worker in the nation is sacred and inviolable..."[43] To protect the life of this worker, a resolution was made at the Met, a resolution which called for the invention of a Bureau of Fire Prevention, and the addition of more fire and factory inspectors in the state.[44]

The first step towards this bureau was a twenty-five member committee to improve safety in working places which was established immediately after the Met meeting.[45] Its members included respected New Yorkers Anne Morgan, Frances Perkins, and Henry L. Stimson.[46] The nine-member commission, chaired by state senators Robert W. Wagner and Alfred E. Smith, would from 1911 to 1919 serve not only as a bureau of fire prevention, investigating fire safety in factories and eventually getting legislation passed which would prevent fire-related disasters in the future,[47] but also as a bureau on other kinds of factory safety, concerned with the health and welfare of workers in general.[48] "It was the aim of the commission to devote itself to a consideration of measures that had for their purpose the conservation of human life."[49]

The Commission took its job seriously. Within the first year of its work alone, it inspected 1,836 industrial establishments in New York and heard a total of 222 witnesses.[50] Throughout this process, it held hearings before the New York legislature and proposed new laws or amendments.[51] The legislature in turn enacted remedial legislation. The four-year term of the commission is, in fact, commonly acknowledged as "the golden era in remedial factory legislation."[52] The labor laws passed between 1911 and 1919 correspond to the Commission's findings—when the Commission discovered a problem, change ensued.

The Commission was told of Triangle: "There is no question that the emergency exits from the building were foolishly inadequate."[53] Fire Marshall Beers added, "I can show you 150 loft buildings far worse than this one."[54] At least 14 industrial buildings in New York City were found with no fire escapes at all.[55] Further, in the Triangle fire, the crowding on floors contributed to the number of lives lost.[56] According to Fire Chief Crocker, "The overcrowding of these loft buildings is a menace to life…"[57] Eventually, a series of corrective acts was passed. These laws specified that in factories there must be two exits per floor, one of these a staircase and another an interior or exterior enclosed fire escape.[58] If the area of the floor exceeded 5,000 square feet, an extra exit was required (and for every additional 5,000 square feet beyond this number, another exit was ordered), and if the building's height was over 100 feet, there had to be at least one exterior enclosed fire escape accessible from every point in the building.[59] The legislation also stated that all stairways must be fireproof (concrete or brick) and all fire escapes iron or steel, and if enclosed, enclosed by fireproof walls.[60] Just as vital was the part of the act which limited the number of occupants per floor. As a result of the law, the number of workers allowed to work in factories was limited according to the number able to safely escape from the building.[61]

In 1912, legislation was enacted requiring the installation of an automatic sprinkler system in factory buildings over seven stories high with more than 200 people employed above the seventh floor.[62] Fire Chief John Kenlon had previously reported to the Commission that although an automatic sprinkler system would have cost the Asche Building $5,000, it was his belief that no life would have been lost in the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire had one been installed.[63] Similarly, it was agreed that the lack of a fire drill at Triangle caused panic when fire broke out.[64] And undoubtedly, at Triangle, where fire swept through the building without warning, a fire alarm would have insured an earlier detection of fire, and an earlier escape. Consequently, an addition to the labor law called for a fire drill at least every three months, and the installation of a fire alarm signal system in any factory building over two stories high, employing 25 persons above the ground floor.[65] Also, during the Triangle fire, scraps of fabric and paper cuttings which lay in heaps, covering the floor and tables, fed the spread of the blaze.[66] Hence, a new law ordered that all waste in factories (e.g. cuttings) must be deposited into fireproof receptacles, and that no such waste be allowed to accumulate on the floor.[67] Thirty bodies were discovered in the shirtwaist company's open elevator shafts after the conflagration, and so the New York legislature in July of 1911 dictated that all elevator shafts in all city buildings must be enclosed.[68]

Safety hazards unrelated to fire safety were also unveiled in the Factory Investigation Commission's probes. The Commission found working children, lead poisoning and industrial accidents, and insufficient ventilation and toilets in factories.[69] In response, child labor reforms were passed limiting the number of work hours for minors and prohibiting the operation of dangerous machinery by those under the age of 16.[70] Further, all industrial accidents and poisonings were required to be reported to the state.[71] Finally, "suitable and proper" ventilation and washrooms were made compulsory by law.[72]

But all the legislation was useless unless the New York State government could sufficiently continue to investigate conditions after the Commission's time was completed, and regulate and enforce the law. At the meeting at the Met in April of 1911, E.R.A. Seligman, a professor at Columbia University, referred to the city's administration as "impotent," and the truth was that the administration did, in fact, feel impotent.[73] The State of New York Building Superintendent complained to the Commission of an inadequate force of inspectors, and the fire commission's lack of power to enforce preventive measures.[74] The legislature increased the administration's influence. It dispensed a force of 125 inspectors to the labor department which had previously tried to combat violations in over 50,000 buildings in Manhattan alone with a mere 47 inspectors.[75] It also reorganized the labor department—outlined the power and duties of the department of labor, stated how inspections should be run (organized by district), and spelled out the jobs of the Chief Factory Inspector and the First Deputy Commissioner.[76] In addition, the new laws clarified the responsibilities of the Fire Marshall to supervise the adequacy of exits and fire drills "in places where great numbers of people work," and the task of the Fire Commissioner to enforce all regulations of the industrial board of labor "in respect to the prevention of fire."[77]

The Factory Investigation Commission was successful. Not only did it manage to see passed a sheaf of legislation "the likes of which have never been seen in any four sessions of any state legislature," but it insured that the State of New York would never again be "lax" in regard to safety in factories.[78] The change only came about through perseverance—the perseverance of the living, of the public who rallied together, of the Commission who followed through. And in the end, the actions of those whom Commission member Frances Perkins called "people in penitence," the living who knew that they had neglected action for too long, "brought about…laws which make New York State to this day the best in relation to factory laws."[79]

During their strike in 1909, the workers at the Triangle Shirtwaist Company probably sang this popular and optimistic Garment Workers' Union song:

> Hail! The waistmakers of nineteen nine…
> Breaking the power of those who reign,
> Pointing the way, smashing the chain.
>
> We showed the world that women could fight.
> And we rose and won with women's might.[80]

Their strike in 1909 was not successful, but the Triangle waistmakers still "won." By 1914, the law, not factory owners, reigned in the garment industry, and in the manufacturing buildings of New York. Although they had died for their cause, the victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire had pointed the way towards a safer future for the working class.

[1] Frances Perkins, "Address, 50th Anniversary Memorial Meeting, March 25, 1961," cited in Leon Stein, Out of the Sweatshop (New York: New York Times Book Co., 1977) p. 201

[2] Leon Stein, The Triangle Fire (New York: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1962) p. 209

[3] Philip S. Foner, Women and the American Labor Movement (New York: The Free Press, 1979) p. 367

[4] Stein, pp. 34, 35

[5] "Waist Factory Fire" The New York Times (26 March 1911) p. 5

[6] The New York World, cited in Schoener, Allon, Portal in America: The Lower East Side 1870-1925 (Canada: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967) p. 172

[7] Stein, The Triangle Fire, p. 36

[8] Stein., p. 41

[9] The New York Times, p. 2

[10] Ibid., p. 2

[11] Foner, p. 367

[12] Stein, p. 43, 46

[13] Chris Llewellyn, Fragments From the Fire (New York: Penguin Books, 1977)

[14] The New York Times, p. 4

[15] Schoener, p. 171; Foner, p. 359

[16] The New York Times p. 2; Foner, p. 359

[17] Stein, p. 15

[18] Stein, p. 148, Foner, p. 359

[19] William L. Shepherd, "Eyewitness at Triangle," cited in Leon Stein, Out of the Sweatshop, p. 189

[20] The New York Times, p. 2

[21] Ibid., p. 1

[22] Stein, The Triangle Fire, p. 17

[23, 24] Ibid., p. 17

[25] The New York Times, p. 2

[26] Ibid., p. 3

[27] Stein, p. 20

[28] Barbara Wertheimer, We Were There (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977) p. 309

[29] Ibid., p. 309

[30] Foner, p. 324

[31] Stein, p. 168

[32] Ibid., p. 154

[33] Ibid., p. 135

[34, 35, 36] Ibid., p. 135

[37] Ibid., p. 134

[38] Ibid., p. 139

[39] Ibid., p. 141

[40, 41] Ibid., p. 141

[42] Stein, Out of the Sweatshop, pp. 197-197

[43] Ibid., p. 195

[44] Stein, The Triangle Fire, p. 144

[45] Ibid., p. 207

[46] Ibid., p. 207

[47] The Laws of New York, Chapter 561 of 1911 (page 1269)

[48] Stein, p. 208

[49] Alfred E. Smith, in Stein, Out of the Sweatshop, p. 199

[50] Stein, The Triangle Fire, p. 209

[51] The Laws of New York, Chapter 561 of 1911 (page 1269)

[52] Stein, p. 210

[53] Ira H. Woolson, in Stein, The Triangle Fire, p. 117

[54] Foner, p. 359

[55] Ibid., p. 359

[56] The New York Times, p. 5

[57] Ibid., p. 5

[58] The Laws of New York, Chapter 461 of 1913 (page 951)

[59] Ibid., p. 951

[60] Ibid., p. 951

[61] Ibid. p. 959

[62] The Laws of New York, Chapter 332 of 1912 (page 661)

[63] Stein, The Triangle Fire, p. 209

[64] The New York Times, p. 2

[65] The Laws of New York, Chapter 203 of 1913 (page 363)

[66] Schoener, p. 72

[67] The Laws of New York, Chapter 329 of 1912 (page 658)

[68] The New York Times, p.1; The Laws of New York, Chapter 693 of 1911 (page 1820)

[69] Stein, p. 210

[70] The Laws of New York, Chapter 866 of 1911 (page 2412); The Laws of New York, Chapter 969 of 1913 (page 975)

[71] The Laws of New York, Chapter 195 of 1913 (page 256)

[72] The Laws of New York, Chapter 866 of 1911 (page 2413)

[73] Stein, p. 143

[74] Ibid, p. 116; The New York Times, p. 6

[75] The Laws of New York, Chapter 729 of 1911 (page 1954); Stein, p. 116

[76] Ibid., p. 116

[77] The Laws of New York, Chapter 204, of 1913 (pages 364-365)

[78] Frances Perkins, “Address, 50th Anniversary Memorial Meeting, March 25, 1961,” cited in Leon Stein, Out of the Sweatshop, p. 210; Stein, The Triangle Fire, p. 212

[79] Stein, Out of the Sweatshop, p. 201

[80] Foner, p. 345