

from

141 DIE IN FACTORY FIRE

1911

On March 25, 1911, fire broke out in the Triangle Shirtwaist Company factory in New York City. The factory had no fire escapes, and managers routinely locked all doors to prevent workers from leaving the factory floor for breaks. This article, which appeared the next day in the *New York Times*, shocked and horrified the nation. The subsequent public outrage led to the growth of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (founded in 1900) and increased government regulation of industrial working conditions.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Identifying Problems

What role can the press play in shaping public opinion about the role of government?

141 MEN AND GIRLS DIE IN WAIST FACTORY FIRE; TRAPPED HIGH UP IN WASHINGTON PLACE BUILDING; STREET STREWN WITH BODIES; PILES OF DEAD INSIDE

The rapidity of the flames is shown in the experience of Max Rother, a tailor in the employ of the Triangle Waist Company, who was on the eighth floor of the building when the fire started. Rother was on the Washington Place side when he heard the cry of alarm coming from the Greene Street side of the loft. Hanging over the heads of the operators at the machines in the room was a line of clothes ablaze. With the manager of the firm, Max Burnstein, he tried to put the fire out with pails of water. While at this work the rope on which the clothes were hung burned in half and the burning clothes fell over their heads.

Soon the room was in flames. Rother ran for the stairs on the Greene Street side of the building and escaped. He does not know what became of Burnstein, the manager.

Cecilia Walker, 20 years old, who lives at 20 Stanton Street, slid down the cable at the Washington Place elevator and escaped with burned hands and body bruises. She was on the eighth floor of the building when the fire started. Running over to the elevator shaft she rang for the car, but it did not come. As she passed the sixth floor sliding on the cable she became unconscious, she said, and does not know what happened until she reached St. Vincent's Hospital, where she is now.

"A girl and I," she told the doctors at the hospital, "were on the eighth floor and when I ran for the elevator shaft my girl friend started for the window on the Washington Street side. I looked around to call her but she had gone."

JUMP BEFORE FIREFIGHTERS ARRIVE.

According to several eye witnesses, the flames were pouring from the windows and the girls jumping to the sidewalk for several minutes before the first fire truck with ladders arrived. Benjamin Levy of 995 Freeman Street, the Bronx, one of the first men to arrive at the burning building, says that it was all of ten minutes after the fire started before the first engine arrived. Mr. Levy is the junior member of the firm of I. Levy & Son, wholesale clothing manufacturers, just around the corner, at 3 and 5 Waverley Place.

"I was upstairs in our work-room," said he, "when one of the employes who happened to be looking out of the window cried that there was a fire around the corner. I rushed downstairs, and when I reached the sidewalk the girls were already jumping from the windows. None of them moved after they struck the sidewalk. Several men ran up with a net which they got somewhere, and I seized one side of it to help them hold it."

"It was about ten feet square and we managed to catch about fifteen girls. I don't believe we saved over one or two, however. The fall was so great that they bounced to the sidewalk after striking the net. Bodies were falling all around us, and two or three of the men with me were knocked down. The girls just leaped wildly out of the windows and turned over and over before reaching the sidewalk."

"I only saw one man jump. All the rest were girls. They stood on the window sills, tearing their hair out in handfuls, and then they jumped."

"One girl held back after all the rest and clung to the window casing until the flames from the windows below crept up to her and set her clothing on fire. Then she jumped far over the net and was killed instantly, like all the rest."

One of the policemen who were checking up the bodies as they were being shipped to the Morgue told of one heap in which a girl was found still alive when the others were taken off her. She died before an ambulance doctor could reach her.

ELEVATOR MADE ONE TRIP.

Samuel Levine, a machine operator on the ninth floor, who lives at 1982 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn, told this story when he had recovered from his injuries at the New York Hospital: "I was at work when I heard the shout of 'Fire!' The girls on the floor dropped everything and rushed wildly around, some in the direction of windows and others toward the elevator door. I saw the elevator go down past our floor once. It was crowded to the limit and no one could have got on. It did not stop. Not another trip was made."

"There were flames all around in no time. Three girls, I think from the floor below, came rushing past me. Their clothes were on fire. I grabbed the fire pails and tried to pour the water on them, but they did not stop. They ran screaming toward the windows. I knew there was no hope there, so I stayed where I was, hoping that the elevator would come up again."

"I finally smashed open the doors to the elevator. I guess I must have done it with my hands. I reached out and grabbed the cables, wrapped my legs around them, and started to slide down. I can remember getting to the sixth floor. While on my way down, as slow as I could let myself drop, the bodies of six

girls went falling past me. One of them struck me and I fell to the top of the elevator. I fell on the dead body of a girl. My back hit the beam that runs across the top of the car.

"Finally I heard the firemen cutting their way into the elevator shaft, and they came and let us out. I think others were taken out alive with me."

Mr. Samilson of the firm of Samilson & Co., on the second floor of the building, was standing at one of the windows of his office just after the fire was discovered. In the next few minutes, he said, he saw several bodies shoot past the window from above, most of them girls. When the firemen reached him, at nearly 6 o'clock, he was still standing there, horrified. He says he could not tear himself away.

Few of the girls that fell from the windows on the ninth floor, it was learned, jumped of their own accord. They were pushed forward by the panic-stricken crowd in the room behind them.

One of the bookkeepers, Morris Lewine, said he was on the top floor. He threw the books with the exception of a ledger into a safe when the cry of fire was raised. He then made his way to the roof, followed by two girls. He found a ladder and made his way with one of the girls to the roof of an adjoining building. He did not know what became of the second girl.

Thomas Gregory, an elevator man, who works at 103 Bleecker Street, said he was going home when he came to the fire. He says he ran into the building and made three trips in the elevator, taking down about fifteen persons at each trip. He said he left the hallways on the upper floors crowded with frenzied men and women, who fought to get into the elevator and clawed his face and neck. After the third trip the machinery broke down, he said. He said there were two elevators when he went into the building. One was on the ground floor, and one was on one of the upper floors. He saw no operator.

A man who said he was Samuel Tauber and that he had been employed as a foreman at the Triangle Company shops told about a fire on the eighth floor which happened two years ago. He said that on this occasion the motor which supplies power for the two hundred sewing and cutting machines on that floor had emitted a flame which set fire to some cuttings nearby. He said that this fire had not been serious, but that it had thrown the girls working there into a panic. Tauber said that he believed yesterday's fire might have been caused in the same way.

Frank Fingerman, employed by the firm of M. S. Work & Co., in Washington Place East, turned in a fire alarm from a Broadway box when he heard the cries of the women in the factory building.

"I saw as I ran," he said, "a boy and a girl standing together at a Greene Street window. He was holding her, and she seemed to be trying to jump. They were still there when I came back from the fire box. As the smoke began to come out of the window above them the boy let the girl go, and she jumped. He followed her before she struck the ground.

"Four more came out of the same window immediately. The crowds were jamming our own door until I could not pass out, and the street was packed right up to the fire trucks."

RESCUERS ON THE OUTSIDE.

Frederick Newman, the New York University law student who, with Charles P. Kramer, had charge of the rescue party of the New York University students up on the roof of their institution, said this after the work was done:

"We were in the library of the building in the top floor when we noticed a gust of smoke coming from the building across the courtyard. Sparks drifted in at the open library window and as we jumped from our seats we saw the girl workers crowding at the windows. We saw a man leap out and then the girls began to follow him."

O. S. Smith, another student, was on his way from the Astor Place Subway station to the law library when he first caught sight of the fire. "I was stopped by police at Waverley Place and Greene Street," he said. "Across the street we could see the bodies of five women. As I looked I saw an arm raised, and I knew that one of the women was alive. I called out to a policeman standing near. His only answer was, 'Get back there and mind your own business.' I pointed out the woman to him and told him something ought to be done as the water was pouring down upon her. He didn't understand me, perhaps, for nothing was done."

Alfred K. Schwabach, a student, saw girls rushing to the rear factory windows, their hair on fire, to pause at the window for a moment and then jump out. "I saw four men," he said, "who tried to catch the girls. They seized a horse blanket from a truck horse in Waverley Place and held it out. It gave way like paper as the girls struck it."

HUMAN BRIDGE BUCKS AND FALLS.

Pauline Grossman, 18 years old, who was injured by leaping from a window of the factory as the fire was gaining headway on the eighth floor, says three male employes of the factory made a human chain of their bodies and swung across a narrow alleyway to the building fronting in Greene Street. She declares a number of persons passed across the men's bodies and escaped from the burning building by entering a window of the building opposite.

"As the people crossing upon the human bridge crowded more and more over the men's bodies the weight upon the body of the centre man became too great and his back was broken. She said he fell to the passageway below and the other two men lost their holds upon the window sills and fell. Persons who were crossing upon the human bridge dropped with them to the passageway."

Source: "141 Men and Girls Die in Waist Factory Fire," *The New York Times*, March 26, 1911, pp. 1-2.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY : ANSWER

Students may answer that this account demonstrates the important role the press can play in shaping public opinion about the role of government. Students may note that this news account contains vivid eyewitness testimony about the fire and the horrible, painful deaths it caused. Accounts such as this one can rally public opinion and force the government to more closely regulate working conditions in factories and other businesses.