

The Triangle Shirt Waist Factory Fire

March 25, 1911

My First Job

By Rose Cohen (*a sweatshop worker and a survivor of the Triangle Factory Fire.*)

From this hour, a hard life began for me. He refused to employ me except by the week. He paid me three dollars and for this he hurried me from early until late. He gave me only two coats at a time to do. When I took them over and as he handed me the new work he would say quickly and sharply, "Hurry!" And when he did not say it in words he looked at me and I seemed to hear even more plainly, "Hurry!" I hurried but he was never satisfied. By looks and manner he made me feel that I was not doing enough. Late at night when the people would stand up and begin to fold their work away and I too would rise, feeling stiff in every limb and thinking with dread of our cold empty little room and the uncooked rice, he would come over with still another coat.

"I need it the first thing in the morning," he would give as an excuse. I understood that he was taking advantage of me because I was a child. And now that it was dark in the shop except for the low single gas jet over my table and the one over his at the other end of the room, and there was no one to see, more tears fell on the sleeve lining as I bent over it than there were stitches in it.

Stories of Survivors, Witnesses and Rescuers Outside

New York Times, March 26, 1911, P. 4

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.

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 fire 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.

Was There Any Justice?

Eight months after the fire, a jury acquitted Blanck and Harris, the factory owners, of any wrong doing.

The task of the jurors had been to determine whether the owners knew that the doors were locked at the time of the fire.

Customarily, the only way out for workers at quitting time was through an opening on the Green Street side, where all pocketbooks were inspected to prevent stealing. Worker after worker testified to their inability to open the doors to their only viable escape route? The stairs to the Washington Place exit, because the Green Street side stairs were completely engulfed by fire. More testimony supported this fact. Yet, the brilliant defense attorney Max Steuer planted enough doubt in the jurors' minds to win a not-guilty verdict. Grieving families and much of the public felt that justice had not been done. "Justice!" they cried. **"Where is justice? "Twenty-three individual civil suits were brought against the owners of the Asch building. On March 11, 1913, three years after the fire, Harris and Blanck settled. They paid 75 dollars per life lost.**