

## Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire March 25, 1911

It was an ordinary day like every Saturday with over 600 young immigrant European women and men working at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory located on the 8th, 9th, and 10th floors of the Asch Building in lower Manhattan, New York. They had recently arrived from Italy, Russia, Poland, and Ukraine to escape religious persecution or climatic changes in their home countries. They were working to support their parents and younger siblings.

On average they worked 14 hours a day, six days a week and earned \$2 a week. But their bosses also charged them for using the company needles, thread, and electricity and thus they received less after those deductions. Therefore the owners, Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, continued to make \$1 million dollars in profit annually.

The working conditions were intense. Each machine worker was to sew 3,000 stitches a minute without a mistake. If they made a mistake, they did not receive a check. Without a check they would go hungry and could not support their families. They were not allowed to stop and take a break, go to the bathroom, or drink. Before leaving for the evening each workers bags were checked to prevent theft.

On Saturday March 25, 1911, the factory fire effected many lives and changed the course of labor laws in the United States. As the young women powered down their machines and were making their exit toward the elevator, a cigarette dropped into the floor starting a small fire from the scrapes of fabric. Panicked people rushed to the fire escape, elevators, and stairs while the two owners on the 10th floor crossed the roof top to an adjacent building after receiving a call from the 8th floor. No one notified any of the 200 workers on the 9th floor.

Mary Bucelli : *I was throwing them out of the way. I was pushing them down. I was only looking out for my own life.*

Kate Alterman : *A young lady began to pull me in the back of my dress. I kicked her with my foot and I don't know what became of her.*

Yetta Lubitz : *I jumped over two lines of machines away from the flames. I looked and I saw an old Italian woman. She couldn't jump over the machines.*

Unfortunately, the fire escapes had been locked and no one had the keys. The fire continued to spread and began to engulf the entire 8th floor. In less than five minutes since the fire alarm sounded, the fire department finally arrived. As they raised their ladders they suddenly realized they were 30 feet to short and could not reach the 8th floor.

Women began to walk along the sides of the building and cried for the ladders to help them down. Finally understanding their dire situation 53 women chose to jump below to the sidewalks. Some holding others hands or by themselves each women leaped into the fire men's nets. The nets tore from the grips of the firemen unable to save any of their lives. Only one woman who leaped initially survived but she would die four days later from the major injuries she sustained.

The firemen took control of the fire within 30 minutes and within 3 hours the firemen entered the building to assess the damage. They discovered the bodies of 50 women burned next to the machines. Nineteen women fell down the elevator shaft. Another 23 dropped when the rusty fire escape collapsed. By midnight the last body had been removed totaling 146 people, 23 being men. The youngest worker was just 14 years old and half the victims were teenagers.