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Immigration

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory

Imagine you are an overworked, non-English speaking, young female immigrant who works at a horrible factory with unreasonable working policies and safety conditions. You are working unfair hours for immoral co owners. Imagine that you are working at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory forced young immigrant employees to work abhorrent hours and terrible conditions. After the deadly fire in the factory, attention was brought to safety and working conditions leading to new laws and regulations.

The Triangle Shirtwaist factory was a factory which produced a type of shirt called shirtwaists, made by women and made for women. The factory, which was active in the early 1900's, was located on the corner of Greene Street and Washington Place on the 8-10th floors of the Asch Building in New York City. The factory was a modern building, less than ten years old.

The working conditions were terrible. Exits to the building were locked all day. Workers were rushed in the bathroom by a supervisor who had to chaperone them outside of the bathroom. Also, if they were 5 or more minutes late to work, they would lose half of their pay for the week. On these floors of the building, there were no fire alarms, fire sprinklers, or fire hoses. Clearly, safety for the workers was bottom priority at this factory.

The pay was no better than the working conditions and safety concerns. The women worked 13 hours a day, yet only earned \$0.13 an hour. The women were not happy with their

pay, so went on strike to get better pay in 1909. Sadly, they lost the fight. After the major fire in 1911, their wish for better pay was granted, but sadly some of the women were not there to see it.

The workers at the factory were girls as young as fifteen and mostly Jewish and Italian immigrants. Some of these immigrants came to America to seek greater economic opportunities. Most of them could not speak or understand proper English. Two of the women who worked there were Clara Lemlich and Pauline Newman. Clara Lemlich was a 23 year old Ukrainian immigrant who rose to a powerful position in the women's labor movement. She grew up in a Jewish, religious family. Many families, including Clara's, left Eastern Europe in the turn of the century, and after the Kishinev pogrom. Clara got work at a sweatshop in the Lower East Side, at 17 years old. From the first day, she found the working conditions unbearable, so she and her fellow female workers went into the newly Founded International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU for short.) Pauline Newman helped advance the International Ladies Garment Workers' Union. Pauline was The first woman ever appointed general organizer of ILGWU. She continued to work for ILGWU for 70 years, first as an organizer, then as a labor journalist, a health educator, and a liaison between the union and government officials. Pauline played an essential role in the union.

The inside of the factory was nice looking, as the front was, as well. Inside, 240 workers sat at tables in 16 parallel rows, each 75 feet long, each row holding 15 machines. Each floor looked like this. There was a high ceiling and the rooms were well lit. The factory was said to be fireproof and the building was run by electricity. There were narrow staircases multiple locked exits, and the elevators could only hold twelve people at a time.

Although the factory was not a pleasant place to be, their products were pleasant to wear. The shirtwaist is a very fashionable button down blouse that was popular in the late 1800's to the early 1900's. The shirt gave a workplace appearance and many women found it flattering. In the early 20th century, lace and frills were added to the shirt. It could be worn with a jacket, or fashionably tucked into a waistband of a skirt.

The factory gained fame because of the tragic fire. On March 5, 1911, there was a deadly fire which killed 146 workers. A theory of how the fire was started is by a cigarette tossed into a bin of rags. The fire chief believed that the fire spread so quickly due to gasoline in the machines. The reasons the fire was so deadly were that the fire escape was too weak to carry all of the people who were trying to escape, so collapsed. The doors and exits were locked and the stair cases were smoke filled. To top it off, the firefighters ladder could not reach the 8th floor. The women had no choice but to jump out the window onto the hard pavement to their devastating deaths because of this.

After the fire, a lot of things changed. The co-owners of the factory, Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, were put on trial for the deaths of the victims of the fire. There were 150 witnesses and most of them were shirtwaist employees. The workers argued that it was the two men's fault that the doors of the 8th and 9th floors were locked. Despite all of that evidence against them, after two hours in the court, the men were found innocent. One reason this may have happened was that the men argued that they didn't know that the doors were locked on the 8th and 9th floors. Alongside that, the men hired Max Stuer, one of New York's most expensive lawyers. If this lawyer was not hired, Harris and Blanck may not have been found innocent.

Anger and shock struck the people of New York City, after they heard about this tragic event at the factory. They demanded that something must be done to insure nothing like this would ever happen again. A memorial meeting was held at the Metropolitan Opera House on April 2, 1911. Another honorary event for the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire victims was held on April 5, 1911. This time, it was a memorial march. 100,000 workers marched in it to tribute the sorrowful event of 146 innocent lost lives, and 300,000 people watched it. The sheer numbers showed how much people cared about the sufferers of the fire.

Although the tragic event at the factory was horrible in many ways, some good did come out of it. At the factory, new working conditions came to be. These conditions included better pay and safer conditions, women and girls were not allowed to work before 6:00 am and after 9:00 pm, and no girl would be able to work if they are 16 or younger. The only exception would be if the girl had a certificate to prove that they are approved to work.

Not only did these new conditions apply to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, but were enacted into laws alongside many others. Many new laws for workplaces were suggested, and 36 of them were enacted. Some more of these laws consist of the factory building actually needing to be fireproofed. Also, fire alarms, fire hoses, and fire extinguishers all had to be installed in the building. These laws were the strictest of their kind and became model laws for other states.

The story of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory is the story of a factory of low quality, which got burned down in a terrible fire. Many lives were lost in that tragedy and these lost lives were ones that belonged to young female immigrants. Sadly, there is nothing we could do to fix the unfortunate events of the Triangle fire, but we have put laws and safety measures in place to guarantee that this will not ever happen again.