




## REMEMBERING THE

# TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST FACTORY FIRE



 Bill Curtis

This March 25<sup>th</sup> marks the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the tragic 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in Lower Manhattan. The fire took the lives of 146 garment workers—123 immigrant women and girls and 23 men—who made women's blouses known as "shirtwaists." Outrage at the terrible loss of life galvanized

public opinion, fortified the nascent union movement, and led to the institution of worker protections and fire safety laws.

The fire began in a scrap bin from what was believed to be a discarded cigarette on the eighth floor of a new skyscraper near Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village. A bookkeeper on the eighth floor was able to notify people on the tenth floor by telephone but with no audible alarm, those on the ninth floor had no warning. Owners and employees on the tenth floor escaped to the roof where tenants from the building next door had lowered ladders. Panicked workers crowded onto a passenger elevator designed for no

more than twelve. The elevator operator, Joseph Zito, made multiple trips to rescue as many as he could. A single exterior fire escape collapsed under the weight of fleeing workers who plunged onto an iron fence. Just one exit door was reachable in the flames and it was locked. More than fifty others fleeing the advancing fire climbed windows and jumped or fell to their death. Fire trucks arrived within a few minutes but their ladders reached only to the sixth floor. In eighteen minutes, the fire, fueled by cloth, wood and paper, engulfed all three floors.



Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire on March 25, 1911



Triangle Waist Company workers.



A little over one year earlier in 1909, working women in New York went on strike for higher wages, shorter hours and better working conditions. One valiant woman, Julia Rosen, a widowed Jewish émigré from Russia and mother of four, remained on strike for weeks. Her seventeen-year-old son, Israel, also worked for the Triangle Waist Company. Both perished that March day. Julia was one of those who jumped. Coroners at the scene found a folded handkerchief under her stocking with money she had somehow managed to save despite being unemployed during the strike. Esther Rosen, at fifteen the oldest of Julia's orphaned children and unable to read, only learned about the fire when her mother did not return home.



Mourners await an empty horse-drawn hearse, April 5, 1911

The horrifying task of identifying Julia's body at the makeshift morgue fell to her. Julia and Israel are buried near each other in Mt. Zion Cemetery in Queens in a section occupied by victims of the fire (see photo). Esther went to work as a milliner and in 1915, married Charles Cirulnik, a barber whom she knew from her Brooklyn neighborhood. She had two children, Harold and Irving. Esther lived to be 90 years old and died on Dec 5, 1986. Julia Rosen was my great-grandmother and Esther my paternal grandmother.

The Triangle Fire is commemorated with a ceremony every March 25<sup>th</sup> at the Asch Building, the site of the fire; the building still stands. On the same day, volunteers for The Chalk Project chalk the names and ages of all 146 victims on sidewalks in front of their former homes. One of the best documentaries about the fire is HBO's *Triangle: Remembering the Fire* (2011), which tells the story through recollections of descendants of those who died or witnessed the tragedy. The last survivor of the fire, Rose Freedman, died in 2001 at the age of 107.



**TAUNTON**  
A.VENUE  
BAKERY




FRESH BREAD DAILY · SWEET BREAD · CORN BREAD · PASTRIES · CAKE FOR ALL OCCASIONS  
CHEESE · MILK · LARGE SELECTION OF PORTUGUESE GROCERIES

Mon - Sat: 5am - 7:30pm    Sunday: 5am - 7pm













TAUNTON AVENUE BAKERY | 217 TAUNTON AVE | EAST PROVIDENCE, RI 02914

tauntonavenuebakery.com    tauntonbakery@hotmail.com

**401-434-3450**

Visit us on Facebook: Taunton Avenue Bakery