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## The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire

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Life was looking up for Maria Santangelo. She had left her family and home in Italy almost a year ago. She had been living with her aunt and uncle in New York City since she had arrived in America. Their apartment was small. Now eight people lived in that small space. Maria had tried to find a job right away. She had gotten odd jobs cleaning apartments and waiting on people at the corner grocery. It was 1911, so none of these jobs paid her enough to live on her own. Then in January, her luck had changed. She was able to get a job as a seamstress at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in lower Manhattan.

Maria could earn \$6 a week working at the factory. She could even earn some extra money by doing piece work on the weekends. During her first week at her job, Maria had met another girl almost her own age. She had also come to America from Italy. Angelina also wanted to find a place of her own. Over the next few weeks, Maria and Angelina had become fast friends. They decided that if they put their money together and worked very hard, they would be able to afford a small apartment just a few blocks from their workplace.

Yes, things were looking up for Maria. She and Angelina were set to move into their new home on the first day of April. Today was Saturday, March 25th, so they didn't have much longer to wait. Each girl giggled as quitting time drew near. Tonight they were going to begin packing their few belongings for the move. The quitting bell rang at 4:45 pm. As the girls headed toward the stairway leading down to the street from their 9th floor workplace, someone yelled "Fire!" That was the beginning of one of the worst tragedies to ever occur in American industry.

Safety measures weren't always followed in the early days of industry. In this case, remnants of cloth that couldn't be used in the construction of ladies' dresses were discarded on the floor. Piles of cloth lay all over the floors. It is thought that perhaps one of the men working on the ninth floor had been smoking a cigarette. He may have thrown the cigarette or a match he had used to light the cigarette onto the floor. Whatever it was, a small flame in a pile of cloth soon spread through other piles of cloth and up walls where other cloth was draped. The fire spread quickly.

People on the streets below could hear the screams. When they looked up, they saw what they thought were bolts of material being thrown from the windows above. When the cloth reached the street below, the observers could see that they were actually seeing the bodies of young women jumping to their deaths ahead of the fire. Of the 275 young women working that day, 146 perished either in the fire or by jumping from the ninth floor. How could such a terrible thing happen? How had these young women become trapped in a burning inferno? These questions lingered long after the bodies of these young women had been carried to their graves. An intense investigation was demanded. The results of this investigation affected working conditions for every generation that followed.

When firefighters arrived, they found that they had their own problems. Their fire ladders could only reach the



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sixth floor. Their hoses could only get water to the seventh floor. All they could do was to try and hold life nets below the windows to catch the falling figures. When the young women started jumping out the windows four or five at a time, the nets became useless.

The investigation uncovered many safety problems besides the piles of flammable material on the floors. It seems that the owners of the business, Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, had not trusted their employees very much. The owners had provided twenty-seven buckets of water to be used in the case of fire. This was hardly enough to contain any fire this size. There was only one exit out the back stairs of the building that they were allowed to use. The doors to this exit were kept locked at all times. A man stood at the exit and inspected each worker as she left the building. The owners wanted to make sure that none of the workers took any of the material or dresses home with them. The lock on this door didn't allow for an escape in this fire. The only elevators in the building were very small. They were able to carry a few people out of harm's way, but not many.

The blocked escape routes gave the young women very little choice. They could die a horrible death in the fire or jump to their deaths through the windows. Too many died either way. Families of the dead girls sued the owners of the factory. Harris and Blanck paid each family \$75 to cover their loss. Most of the families could not afford to pursue their cases any further legally. When the public heard about the safety standards the owners used and their lack of sympathy for the families, they were outraged.

Support for reform by the garment workers union grew. Washington was called upon to pass laws protecting the safety of workers in any industry. Labor laws and laws providing for the safety and health of America's workers that were introduced because of the tragedy of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire are still in force today. From the tragedy that befell the likes of Maria and Angelina has come protection for generations to come.

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## Questions

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory was located in New York City.
- A. false
  - B. true
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. What flammable material spread the fire?
- A. gasoline
  - B. newspaper
  - C. oil
  - D. cloth
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. On what floor of the building was the factory located?
- A. 8th
  - B. 9th
  - C. 5th
  - D. 6th

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4. Why didn't the people use the stairway to escape the fire?

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5. Did anything positive come from this fire?

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\_\_\_\_\_ 6. Why did firefighters feel helpless when they reached the burning building?

- A. They were unable to get water.
- B. Their hoses couldn't reach the fire.
- C. The building had already burned to the ground.
- D. The crowd was so large they couldn't reach the fire.

\_\_\_\_\_ 7. How much could you earn working at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory?

- A. \$6 a week plus extra on weekends
- B. \$2 a week
- C. \$100 a week
- D. \$10 a week

\_\_\_\_\_ 8. Where had Angelina and Maria come from when they arrived in America?

- A. Germany
- B. Spain
- C. Ireland
- D. Italy

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How many of these can you write about? Think! Write! Check all the ones you answered.

- What safety measures would you expect to find in your work place or school?
- What would you do if you were trapped in a burning building?

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