

HISTORY This Week EP 420: Fire in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.

Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. March 25, 1911. I'm Sally Helm.

On the north side of Washington Square Park in lower Manhattan, a group of ladies is sitting down to tea. Mrs. Margaret Norris, wife of a wealthy banker, is entertaining her friend Frances Perkins. They're probably talking about the charity work they're involved in. Maybe commenting on the nice weather. It's beautiful outside. Spring has finally arrived.

Then suddenly, out the window, they hear a scream.

There's some kind of commotion happening on the other side of the park. Blaring sirens, more screams. The ladies leave their tea on the table and rush outside. They cross the square and come upon a shocking scene.

The upper floors of a tall factory building are on fire. They can see flames, and thick, suffocating smoke. Then they notice what looks like a bundle of fabric being tossed out of the building to the ground... and realize it's something much worse. The garment workers on the ninth floor of this building have tried every other method of escape. Now, they've been forced to the windows. And they're beginning to jump.

Before the day is over, almost a hundred and fifty people will be dead. Witnesses will be reeling. Newspapers will fill their front pages with harrowing descriptions. Even photos of bodies on the ground. And everyone will be asking the question: how did we let this happen?

Today: The Triangle shirtwaist factory fire. What was the chain of events that set off this catastrophe? And how did it eventually change the workplace for all of us?

[PREROLL]

Sally Helm: In the 1990s, reporter David Von Drehle had just moved to Greenwich Village in New York City.

David Von Drehle: I was out, walking around my new neighborhood, and I passed a building that had historical markers attached to the side of it.

Sally Helm: A bronze plaque. I've probably passed hundreds of these in my life and barely noticed. But David Von Drehle? That's not his style.

David Von Drehle: I'm that one person in a hundred thousand who reads those things. So, I went over and read you know, in this building, March 25th, 1911, the triangle shirtwaist factory fire happened.

Sally Helm: Oh wow, it was the building itself.

David Von Drehle: It was the building. I had no idea that the building had survived. I knew only the sketchiest information about the fire itself. But reading that plaque made me want to know more.

Sally Helm: So, he asks around.

David Von Drehle: Everybody virtually had heard of the triangle fire. And many of them thought they knew some things about it, but almost everything they knew was wrong, a little bit wrong or a lot wrong.

Sally Helm: Von Drehle, who now works for the Washington Post, winds up writing a book about the fire. To set the record straight.

And he says, he had a sense that working conditions in the early 20th century were bad. Long hours, little pay, unsafe conditions. But he learned: whatever he'd been picturing, the truth was *way* worse.

David Von Drehle: An average of 100 people died on the job in the United States every single day in 1911, they were killed by the hundreds in mine collapses, ship sinking, railroad accidents. They fell into pots of molten steel. They had their arms and legs ripped off by exposed machinery. Workplaces were phenomenally dangerous.

Sally Helm: And yet, here was big surprise number one: the Triangle was far from the worst of them. Von Drehle told us, one of the biggest misconceptions he ran into was the idea that this factory was the most terrible sweatshop in New York City at the time. It wasn't.

David Von Drehle: The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, was the largest maker of women's blouses in America and the most modern up to date, cutting edge garment factory in New York.

Sally Helm: The shirtwaist—this new kind of looser blouse—had become very popular. The Triangle was churning out a million dollars' worth of them per year. That's over \$30 million today. And the factory itself occupied the top three floors of a building right by Washington Square Park. It had electric sewing machines. Lofted ceilings. The owners would have looked around and said...*look at this light! All this space! This cutting-edge machinery! How could our workers ever complain?*

Especially because... the owners of the triangle... they had once been garment workers themselves.

David Von Drehle: They had come as immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe about 20 years earlier, and had started out as, poorly treated, sweatshop clothing makers.

Sally Helm: In the 1890s, they joined the garment industry's largely Jewish workforce on the Lower East Side. There's Isaac Harris:

David Von Drehle: This sort of mousey, skinny, fellow, very skilled tailor himself.

Sally Helm: ... and Max Blanck.

David Von Drehle: Max Blanck was a great big burly guy very outgoing. Kind of brash. And he was the salesman of the two.

Sally Helm: Back then, clothes were mostly made in tenement building apartments. Picture small groups of workers in low light, cutting and sewing for an average of twelve hours a day. Some of the rooms are so cramped that they become incubators for disease. In fact, that happens so often that tuberculosis comes to be called, "the tailor's disease." Or "the Jewish disease." (beat)

Max Blanck and Isaac Harris end up marrying a pair of cousins. And in 1900, these two immigrant workers open a garment factory themselves. Blanck is the one rustling up orders. The outside guy.

David Von Drehle: And Isaac Harris, he was the inside guy. He ran the factory and guaranteed the quality of the work and of the clothing. So, they were a good pair that way.

Sally Helm: Their factory is really successful... and *much* more spacious and pleasant than the cramped tenement factories of the old days.

David Von Drehle: The owners could look back on conditions in their youth, and they could look at their workers and say, oh, they have it so much better than we had it. And that was true. They did have it better than it was in the 1870s and 1880s. But that blinded them to the dangers of the new factories which were suddenly at the tops of skyscrapers, which it turned out were much more dangerous places to work.

Sally Helm: By 1911, half of all the workers in Manhattan are on the 7th floor or above... and served by a fire department with ladders that only reach six stories.

Kat Lloyd, the vice president of programs and interpretation at New York's Tenement Museum, told us: workers start to sense that factory owners ultimately see them as expendable.

Kat Lloyd: You would be required to work through injuries. If you got a needle stuck in your finger. You have to, you know, keep going. You're paid by the piece.

Sally Helm: Owners squeeze their workers for every penny.

Kat Lloyd: We see workers required to pay for a chair if they wanna sit down, workers who are required to pay for a hook if they want to hang their hat.

Sally Helm: Most of these immigrant factory workers are Jewish. And yet they're required to work on Saturdays, the Jewish day of rest.

Kat Lloyd: In order for you and your family to have enough food to eat, you often have to make sacrifices and compromises that put your family's religious traditions sort of in the back burner.

Sally Helm: Meanwhile, profits are rising faster than the New York City skyline. But still: at the Triangle, Max Blanck is so concerned that workers might walk off with small scraps of fabric that he

insists on locking the factory's side doors, so the workers had to exit single file with a guard checking their bags on the way out.

This new factory setup does mean that there are hundreds of workers together in the same place. Which makes it easy to talk and organize. Workers want reliable hours. Higher wages. And respect. So: while Blanck and Harris are pulling up to their factories in chauffeured cars, garment workers begin to walk out.

David Von Drehle: There's an expression in the striking world called wildcat strikes, and these are, you know, disorganized, strikes that happen in a single workplace. And in late summer and early fall of 1909, the garment industry was just, crawling with wildcat strikes.

Sally Helm: Onto this volatile scene walks Clara Lemlich. 23 years old, five feet tall. A Jewish immigrant whose family story followed the well-worn script: escape from religious persecution in Eastern Europe in search of economic opportunity in America.

David Von Drehle: She was one of the “*frabrente maydlakh*,” as they say in Yiddish, the fiery girls.

Sally Helm: Lemlich is a born organizer. A lot of her fellow workers are women. And she starts moving from shop to shop, urging them to resist ill treatment.

David Von Drehle: One of the treats of publishing the book was that I met Clara's nephew. [laughs] And he told me stories of her later in life. She was not invited to a number of family weddings because she was so argumentative and sparky and spunky.

Sally Helm: One day in the fall of 1909, Lemlich is leaving the picket line from one of those wildcat strikes when suddenly... she realizes she's being followed.

David Von Drehle: She turned around and here was this big thug, who had been paid to beat her up, which he promptly did. Left her in the gutter bleeding.

Sally Helm: He's been paid by factory owners. And the police do nothing to stop him. Because... they are creatures of Tammany Hall, New York's corrupt political machine. And factory owners, especially in the garment industry, have plenty of money... not just to hire people to beat up their workers. But also, to spread around to Tammany Hall politicians.

Taking on such a powerful alliance—factory owners backed by Tammany Hall—it's going to take a huge alliance of workers. Taking to the streets. And in 1909, those workers hold a meeting.

David Von Drehle: Everybody gathered at Cooper Union, on the east side, not far from the Triangle Factory to hash this out.

Sally Helm: A group of coat makers are saying... *you know, I think next year would be the best time to strike.*

David Von Drehle: All these men were giving speeches about, yes, it's terrible. We're gonna take on the owners, but not yet. Not yet. Be patient.

Sally Helm: At least one 23-year-old member of the audience doesn't like what she's hearing.

Kat Lloyd: Clara Lemlich could sense that, there was not, you know, a real momentum to, to actually go on strike.

David Von Drehle: She wasn't scheduled to be on the program, she just took the stage, still bearing, you know, some of the bruises from the beating she had taken, and she got up and gave a speech in Yiddish. And said, I've listened to you people tell us to wait. We're not gonna wait. I say, let's go out on strike. And there was huge cheer, and she carried the room with her.

Kat Lloyd: And she became the one who really galvanized, what became known as the, the uprising of 20,000.

David Von Drehle: The first major strike by women in American history.

Sally Helm: And how soon does it happen? Is it like?

David Von Drehle: Next day. The next day.

Sally Helm: Wow. So, she gives a speech and just like immediate impact.

David Von Drehle: It's like a movie. Yeah, it's like a movie scene.

Sally Helm: 20,000 shirtwaist workers go on strike. And New York is watching.

David Von Drehle: It was a dazzling sensation. Nothing like this had ever happened. The girl strikers, as they were called, of the shirt waste industry, were the most celebrated people in New York.

Sally Helm: Wealthy progressive ladies get involved and start bailing strikers out of jail.

David Von Drehle: There was a huge party thrown in honor of a group of strikers. They went straight from prison to the Colony Club, the most exclusive women's club in New York to you know, be celebrated at a tea party.

Sally Helm: But... in the executive offices at America's largest shirtwaist maker, no one is celebrating.

David Von Drehle: The owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory were leaders of the opposition.

Sally Helm: Max Blanck and Isaac Harris believe the best response to union activity is to crush it. They set up a fake union at the factory, headed by their relatives, and try to trick workers into joining.

David Von Drehle: They hired publicity agents to try to fight back against the kind of glamor of the women's strikers.

Sally Helm: They entice other workers to cross the picket line, with incentives like oranges given out as snacks in the middle of the day. And when they see picketers outside the building, they call the police.

David Von Drehle: Who were, as I said, corrupted by Tammany Hall, come and break up the picket lines outside their factory.

Sally Helm: The strike drags on. Fall turns to winter. Finally, after months without pay, the strikers accept a compromise. Slightly higher wages and shorter hours... but no significant safety improvements. And no union recognition. Blanck and Harris at the Triangle, in particular, refuse to budge.

David Von Drehle: I had come across this quote from the forward, which was the daily newspaper of the Lower East Side Jewish immigrants. The quote refers to the triangle as this bloody, this name will go down in history as shamed. And I had assumed when I first saw it that this had been written right after the fire. But no, they had written this in the context of the strike. So, the Triangle Factory was already notorious, infamous, long before the fire, it was the, the center of, oppression.

Sally Helm: And its plunge into infamy has only just begun.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: March 25. Quarter to five pm at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory.

David Von Drehle: So, it's quitting time. Saturday afternoon.

Sally Helm: Today is payday. People are picking up their envelopes of money. Factory manager Samuel Bernstein is there, negotiating pay rates with a new employee.

David Von Drehle: Samuel Bernstein was a relative of Blanck and Harris. A lot of the family members worked in the factory.

Sally Helm: The Triangle takes up floors eight through ten of its building. And Bernstein is on the 8th floor. That floor includes the cutting room, where skilled workers called cutters are laying down their scissors for the day. Cutters are responsible for making the most of every bolt of cloth. Leaving as little leftover as possible. The remaining scraps are piled in bins beneath each table. On this Saturday, it's been weeks since the bins were emptied.

David Von Drehle: These bins were virtually full of tissue paper and light cotton. One of the few things in the world that's more flammable than tissue paper is cotton.

Sally Helm: That's why factories like the Triangle have strict no-smoking policies. But... good cutters are hard to find. A manager like Samuel Bernstein knows that if you fire one, he'll just walk across the

street and sign on with a competitor. So, even though the boss is around, and the rules prohibit it, and the scrap bins are full... some of the cutters pull out a little Saturday afternoon cigarette.

David Von Drehle: These cutters light up cigarettes right under the signs that said, no smoking and one of these cigarettes, or a match or an ash, something goes into one of these bins full of super flammable tissue paper and cotton, and it goes up like a firebomb.

Sally Helm: Samuel Bernstein acts fast. He throws a pail of water on the flames... but a gust comes up from a nearby elevator shaft. And the flames only climb higher.

There are seven ways to get in and out of the Triangle Shirtwaist factory. Despite its name, it's more like a square. There's a staircase at either corner of the floor. One fire escape. Two freight elevators, and in the opposite corner, two passenger elevators. Those passenger elevators are mostly used by management. And the freight elevators are right next to the bin where the fire breaks out.

David Von Drehle: When this fire went up, the operators of those elevators ran for their lives, and so those elevators were not running.

Sally Helm: One of the staircases is right beside those elevators. But:

David Von Drehle: The fire started right next to that exit on the eighth floor. And so, the flames quickly filled that stairwell.

Sally Helm: Three of the exits are now mostly unusable. And the eighth floor is quickly filling with smoke. Samuel Bernstein starts shouting orders at the workers around him.

David Von Drehle: He showed them how to escape from the eighth floor. They ran either down the stairs or some of them were able to use that fire escape to get to a lower floor and escape that way.

Sally Helm: Bernstein now turns his attention to fighting the flames. He grabs a hose from the stairwell, yells at a cutter to open the valve and... nothing. We still don't know why—maybe the valve is rusted shut, or not open properly. But the result is... no water comes out.

David Von Drehle: Ultimately the fire was too explosive. There was too much of this scrap cloth around for it to feed on, and he had to give up and run for his own life.

Sally Helm: People are running. Screaming. Trying to get to the elevators. But one employee pauses on her way out to telephone Blanck and Harris on the 10th floor. They have no idea that an inferno has started up below.

David Von Drehle: Max Blanck's kids were there. He was getting ready to take them out shopping.

Sally Helm: A shipping clerk named Eddie Markowitz also thinks to warn the owners on the 10th floor. He runs up there... and finds Max Blanck paralyzed with fear. Markowitz grabs Blanck's daughter from his arms and coaxes the family toward the stairs.

Isaac Harris, on the other hand, is not frozen. He starts ushering workers into the stairwell, heading *up*, to the roof. He and a number of employees escape by crossing over to the neighboring buildings.

David Von Drehle: The owners barely escaped with their lives, but they did because this warning was phoned up to the 10th floor.

Sally Helm: So, the 10th floor is evacuating, and, on the 8th floor, people are scrambling for the exits that remain.

David Von Drehle: But no word was gotten to the ninth floor in between.

Sally Helm: Max Hochfield, a 16-year-old sewing machine operator, later recalled, "Nobody warned them." Max left right at quitting time, so he was on his way downstairs when the fire broke out. But his sister Esther, who had a date with her fiancé, she was still in the 9th floor dressing room, getting ready, making herself look nice.

David Von Drehle: A bell had just rung signaling the end of the day. The workers were slowly making their way up these narrow aisles to leave when suddenly they saw the flames from the lower floor licking up in the windows and coming up those stairs.

Sally Helm: Max is on the stairs when he sees flames shooting into the stairwells from the floors above him. But he can't make it back up to look for Esther. He waits in the hall for a while, hoping that one of the women running by him will be his sister. But he doesn't see her. Esther ends up dying in the fire.

Shipping clerk Eddie Markowitz is still in the building. After helping the owners escape, he rushes down to the 9th floor.

David Von Drehle: Markowitz, called to people follow me to the roof. You know, people didn't even know that those stairs could take you to the roof.

Sally Helm: They could... but they're full of smoke and flames. These are the stairs right next to the fire's epicenter. When 24-year-old Yetta Lubitz gets to the stairwell, she stops in her tracks. *Run into THAT?* But she doesn't have a choice. She covers her face with the coat and plunges forward. Lubitz makes it out alive.

David Von Drehle: Some people were brave enough to run into the flames following Eddie Markowitz, and they were able to escape to the roof. But then the flames became impenetrable, so that exit was blocked.

Sally Helm: There's still the *other* staircase. The one farther from where the fire began. Except:

David Von Drehle: The door there was locked.

Sally Helm: Why was it locked?

David Von Drehle: As a security precaution. Blanck and Harris were very concerned about theft.

Sally Helm: Remember Max Blanck's obsession with stopping workers from stealing scraps? Triangle policy was to make the workers exit single file through one door, so their handbags could be searched. The other door, leading to another set of stairs, was kept locked.

So, no stairs. Two elevators out of service. But one set of elevators is still running. They've gotten everyone off the tenth floor—all the executives have escaped. So, the elevator operators start going to floor nine. To pick up the workers trapped there.

David Von Drehle: The operators of those two passenger elevators are really the heroes of the triangle fire. Despite the flames, these operators kept running their elevators past the flames on the eighth floor.

Sally Helm: Past them like they could feel them and see them?

David Von Drehle: They could see them; they could feel them. They licked into the car.

Sally Helm: Operator Joseph Zito remembered, "When I first opened the elevator door on the ninth floor all I could see was a crowd of girls and men with great flames and smoke right behind them." Only a fraction of the desperate, stranded workers can cram into each elevator car before the operator has to close the door and head down.

David Von Drehle: They made three or four trips and saved an unknown number of workers. But by the time they were leaving the last time with their cars so packed that people were literally lying on top of each other, like a mosh pit. It was clear that they would not be coming back again.

Sally Helm: Zito later remembers, "When I came to the floor the [last] time, "the girls were standing on the windowsills with the fire all around them."

David Von Drehle: Workers began throwing themselves onto the top of the car and then trying to slide down the elevator cables.

Sally Helm: Nineteen people who jump are later found dead in the elevator shaft.

Several minutes have passed since the fire broke out. On the ground, firefighters have arrived...but their ladders only reach floor six. Desperate workers from the ninth-floor flood onto the fire escape.

David Von Drehle: But that was already jammed with people from the eighth floor. Fire escape became overloaded. It tore away from the wall.

Sally Helm: About two dozen people fall to their deaths.

For the workers still alive in the building... the situation is all but hopeless. That's why some girls are standing on the windowsills, surrounded by flames.

David Von Drehle: There was no way out except through the windows that looked out over Washington Place.

Sally Helm: Where New York residents have been strolling in the Spring sunshine, maybe heading out for a pleasant evening in Washington Square Park.

David Von Drehle: Within about 12 minutes of it starting, the workers began to jump.

Sally Helm: The firefighters hold out nets to try and catch them. But a reporter on the scene says their bodies tear through like "jumping through a paper hoop." Another describes the "thud" as each one hits.

David Von Drehle: It's the closest thing to happen in New York to our experience of 9/11. This helplessness of watching as high above the ground, workers trapped by fire are making the terrible decision, of how they're going to die.

Sally Helm: In the end, the fire claims 146 lives. In less than fifteen minutes.

Kat Lloyd says that the day after the fire, the immigrant press describes the victims as martyrs.

Kat Lloyd: The Jewish Daily Forward headline, read the morgue is filled with our sacrifices. And of course, they meant quite literally the sacrifice of life that the Jewish communities of New York experienced in losing their daughters, their sisters, their brothers, their fathers, their mothers to this fire that did not have to happen.

Sally Helm: But she says, she hears another undertone in that word "sacrifice."

Kat Lloyd: The fact that March 25th, 1911, was a Saturday, the day of rest, to me stands out. Many families would've still observed the Sabbath and to have that tragedy happen on the Sabbath, I just think for so many families, this is a moment to question, what are we being asked to sacrifice in, in making a living here in the United States, in New York?

Sally Helm: A year earlier, The Forward had written that because of the Triangle's anti-labor tactics, its name was written in blood. Now, in the neighborhoods around the fire-scarred building, the windows of dozens of tenements are covered in black crepe... the color of mourning.

Max Blanck and Isaac Harris eventually stand trial for their role in the carnage... and they're found innocent. The door-locking policy isn't enough to convict them. The jury can't confirm that the owners knew the door was locked *that day*, March 25. That's enough for them to avoid conviction. They even end up making money on fire insurance claims.

Some of the activists who'd organized the garment workers strike, including Clara Lemlich, try to seize on the outrage by pushing for labor reforms. But it is hard to move the political establishment.

David Von Drehle: There's a story about a month after the fire deep in the back pages of the, of the New York Herald that says all the steam has gone out of reform efforts. It was vanishing just as the outrage about so many other workplace tragedies had vanished before it.

Sally Helm: But then comes a turning point. A major player in New York politics does an about face. The leader of Tammany Hall decides that blindly supporting factory owners, doing their bidding—that may no longer be wise. There are new waves of immigrants landing in the city all the time—mostly Italians and Jews from Eastern Europe—and they're outraged by the fire. They're also voters. And some of them, as the strikes have shown, aren't afraid to take their protests to the streets.

One newspaper writes in response to Blank and Harris's acquittal: "The blood of those victims was on more than two heads; on more than twenty heads, perhaps on more than a million heads. Everybody connected with the actual neglect of the fire and building laws... shared in the blame."

Tammany Hall reads the political winds. And creates a factory investigating commission.

David Von Drehle: They spent three years, touring factories, from one end of New York state to the other, learning about the working conditions, the dangers of factory work, and proposing over 50 laws ultimately to make work fairer and safer in New York State.

Sally Helm: One of the Commission's investigators is Clara Lemlich. Another comes from the opposite end of the social spectrum. She's the woman who was sipping tea in a home off the park when the fire broke out. Frances Perkins. About the tragedy, Perkins insists: "We've got to turn this into some kind of victory."

Perkins, Lemlich, and the others get the commission to propose a dramatic series of laws—requiring sprinklers, fire drills, and unlocked factory doors. Also limiting child labor.

David Von Drehle: It was the most sweeping set of workplace reforms that America had ever seen. And guess what? It was incredibly popular with those working-class voters of New York. It gave Tammany Hall a whole new lease on life.

Sally Helm: And when a New York governor named Franklin Delano Roosevelt makes it to the White House, nearly two decades later, he'll bring Frances Perkins along.

David Von Drehle: The first woman cabinet member in American history. She said, near the end of her life, that that the Triangle Fire was the beginning of the New Deal in the 1930s and forties.

Sally Helm: It gave us social security. Minimum wage. Unemployment insurance.

David Von Drehle: The most transformative period of domestic politics. Totally changed the relationship of government to the public.

Sally Helm: And Frances Perkins said: it sprang from the ashes of the Triangle fire.

[CREDITS]

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Special thanks to our guests, Kat Lloyd, vice president of programs and interpretation at New York's Tenement Museum, and David Von Drehle, author of *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America*.

This episode was produced by Julia Press. It was story edited by Jim O'Grady and sound designed by Brian Flood. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Corinne Wallace and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn, and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

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