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THE PRESS DEPICTION OF THE TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST FACTORY FIRE IN NEW YORK ON MARCH 25, 1911

The outbreak of the Industrial Revolution in England and Scotland, which dates around 1760s, triggered numerous changes in social life of the inhabitants of the Western world. Along the development of modern machinery, there appeared the factory system, which involved a new type of employee. Together with the appearance of factories, the demand for respecting one's rights for proper working conditions emerged. As the sources claim,

During the 1790s, for example, the average workday was twelve to sixteen hours. In 1791 carpenters in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, went on strike for a shorter working day. They demanded a twelve-hour day, including ten hours of work and two hours off for meals – breakfast and dinner. “They will work from six to six – how absurd!” remarked a local Philadelphia newspaper. The strike failed and the carpenters eventually went back to work¹.

Seemingly, the first attempts of strikes were futile, but they were soon repeated with greater success.

At the end of the nineteenth century, working conditions were subject of heated social debate. Since New York was one of the biggest centers of industry and culture, no wonder that it became the birthplace of organizations that aimed at changes. As the sources claim:

Women labor reformers believed that they shared a gendered sympathy for working-class women and that they were uniquely positioned to speak on their behalf. They also viewed women workers as a particularly vulnerable group, not least because they were all but ignored by male union leaders. Women's organizations pointed out that women worked long hours at wages that were sometimes less than half of what men earned².

Unfortunately, the appalling conditions of working in factories led to numerous tragedies, the example of which was the infamous Shirtwaist Factory fire that took place in New York on March 25, 1911. The fatal event took place in the so called Asch

¹ R. Worth, *Workers' Rights (Open for Debate)*, Tarrytown: New York, 2008, s. 18.

² V.H. May, *Unprotected Labor: Household Workers, Politics, and Middle-Class Reform in New York, 1870–1940*, Chapel Hill, NC, 2011, s. 75.

Building, at Greene Street and Washington Place and attracted the attention of not only New York inhabitants, but also the citizens of the whole Eastern coast of the US.

On the following day, March 26, the press offered a variety of possible versions of the fire and its causes. The Washington Herald issued on that day presented a detailed description of the events in the article on its front page, entitled *142 Die When Shirtwaist Factory Burns*, stressing that *Long rows of coffined dead on the shedded morgue pier (...) marked the work of fire in the Asch Building*³. The author gives a very vivid, but terrifying testimony of the events, stating: *Girl employes [original spelling – auth.] leap to death from windows* and adds that there were *Bodies piled in heaps on sidewalks*⁴. The horrible scene of corpses lying in the street is presented by the author:

*When the fire came, men and women leaped into the street by dozens and died there. There were fifty-three corpses on the Greene street sidewalk when the reporters got there. There were more dead at the bottom of the elevator shaft, and many more, some of them burned to mere skeletons, on the upper floor*⁵.

The author continues by enumerating the bodies being gathered from the puddles by firemen led by Chief Croker and the police inspectors.

On the same day, March 26, there appeared an article in The New York Tribune, in which more details were revealed. The author suggests that the factory doors were closed, which may be the reason of so many deaths of the workers: *Access to stairway may have been barred*⁶. At the time, locking the door was a common practice used to prevent theft. In the paper, the words of Fire Chief Croker are cited: *He saw a pile of bodies six feet high against that door*⁷, which may suggest that the workers grouped by the exit and died of wound and suffocation. The article is enriched by a detailed plan of the building as well as several pictures presenting the bodies and the people who were responsible for the rescue mission. Alfred Ludwig, who is depicted as a well-known specialist, Assistant Superintendent of Buildings says that *the building which burned should have had three stairways instead of two*⁸, which may be the main reason of the number of casualties. Another issue mentioned by Ludwig is the material used:

*The stairways were protected by a four-inch terra cotta wall, which was thick enough to last until the tenants could pass out, but there were no fire walls*⁹.

³ *142 Dies When Shirtwaist Factory Burns*, “The Washington Herald”, Washington, DC, 26 March 1911, s. 1.

⁴ Tamże.

⁵ Tamże.

⁶ *More Than 140 Die as Flames Sweep through Three Stories*, “The New York Tribune”, New York, 26 March 1911, s. 1.

⁷ Tamże.

⁸ Tamże.

⁹ Tamże.

As Ludwig suggests, the improper plan of the building was accepted in 1900, the same year the place was (also) erected, by Thomas J. Brady, the former Superintendent of Buildings. He added that *In so far as the stairways were concerned, there was a violation of the Building Code*¹⁰. He concluded, claiming that a revision of the Building Code should be performed so that similar tragedies would not happen in the future.

In the same article, there appeared a hint which gives an insight to the legal matters connected with the accident. The author cites Rhineland Waldo, Fire Commissioner of New York:

*Fire escapes are under the supervision of the Buildings Department. (...) There is now a bill before the Legislature which will go a long way toward remedying conditions in buildings now without fire escapes which should have them. I expect the regulation of fire escapes may soon be brought under the supervision of the Fire Department*¹¹.

On the following day, March 27, more details were exposed to the public eye. In New York Tribune there appeared an article, in which Chief Croker, formerly cited in the papers mentioned, threatens:

*There may be any time a repetition of this disaster with its appalling loss of life in any of the great office buildings employing thousands of persons, mostly girls. There are no fire escapes on those buildings and no means of egress in case of fire*¹².

These words seem rather harsh and candid, especially when continued:

*I recommended to Borough President (...) fire escapes on all office buildings, but I was told it would spoil the city beautiful*¹³.

Chief Croker in a direct way accused New York authorities for not taking good care of the safety of the inhabitants.

The same issue of New York Tribune bears an article entitled "Cigarette Caused Factory Fire" in which the direct cause of the tragedy is mentioned. The author openly claims that according to Chief Croker, *a cigarette or a match dropped by a smoker started the fire*¹⁴. It openly blames one of the factory employees for setting the building on fire. One enormously interesting linguistic element that can be found in the above mentioned article, namely word *holocaust*: *Croker Finds Stumps and Package that Explains Immediate Origin of the Holocaust*¹⁵. To

¹⁰ *More Than 140 Die as Flames Sweep through Three Stories*, "The New York Tribune", New York, 26 March 1911, s. 1.

¹¹ Tamže.

¹² *What Croker and Whitman Say*, "The New York Tribune", New York, 26 March 1911, s. 1.

¹³ Tamže.

¹⁴ *Cigarette Caused the Factory Fire*, "The New York Tribune", New York, 27 March 1911, s. 1.

¹⁵ Tamže.

contemporary readers the word immediately collocates with WWII and the fate of millions of the Jews and the representatives of other nationalities who lost their lives during military operations and in the Nazi concentration camps. However, the word used in the article published in the New York Tribune, bore no such connotation. According a 1910 “An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language”, *holocaust* means “an entire burnt sacrifice”, with a suggestion: “so called because the victim offered was burnt entire”¹⁶. That definition perfectly matches the use of that lexical item in the news article.

In the same piece of writing there appeared also words of the owner of the premises, Joseph J. Asch, who *denied that a third stairway had ever been demanded by the City Department of Buildings*¹⁷. Thus Asch did not acknowledge his guilt in any way. He said:

*I would have gladly adopted any such suggestion and made any improvement of this kind that might have been demanded by the Buildings Department*¹⁸.

According to his words, no such suggestion came to his office:

*In view of the fact that the Building Department never notified me of any necessary changes or additional means of exit, it never occurred to me to think about these things*¹⁹.

He added that he knew no exact number of people working inside the building he owned since he let the space to other people, factory owners.

In New York Tribune there appeared a suggestion made by District Attorney Whitman that *a similar catastrophe is likely to occur at any time in any one of the other thousands of huge office and oft buildings in the city*²⁰. Whitman promised a detailed investigation to find officials responsible for not conforming with the law:

*I am going to make a thorough investigation to show what the conditions are that will permit such a terrible disaster to take place. Our theatres amusement places, where people go for pleasure and from which they can stay away if they want to, are thoroughly protected by the fire and police regulations and the rules of the Buildings Department*²¹.

He continued his line of thoughts, saying:

*It seems to me much more necessary that at least equal protection should be given to those who are forced to go to these huge structures to work for their daily bread*²².

¹⁶ W. Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, Ware, Hertfordshire, 1910, s. 269.

¹⁷ *Cigarette Caused the Factory Fire*, “The New York Tribune”, New York, 27 March 1911, s. 1.

¹⁸ *Asch Makes a Denial*, “The New York Tribune”, New York, 26 March 1911, s. 1.

¹⁹ Tamże.

²⁰ *Cigarette Caused the Factory Fire*, “The New York Tribune”, New York, 27 March 1911, s. 1.

²¹ Tamże.

²² Tamże.

Undoubtedly, the law, however seemingly equal to all citizens, was applied to keep the wealthy safe in their places of entertainment, whereas was not really kept in the sweatshops, where the majority of employees were poor and uneducated immigrants.

To solve the problem of poor working conditions, numerous organizations joined their forces:

In response to a hurry call sent out by the Women's Trade Union League, representatives of twenty labor organizations assembled at the league headquarters (...) for the purpose of taking immediate action in the matter of fixing the blame for the fire and loss of life²³.

The organizations in question wanted to have a real impact on the investigation to be conducted, with their members as active participants. They also stressed that workers of similar companies as the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory should feel that something is to be done to make them feel safe at work so that:

the great army of girls who are going to work each morning in similar death traps may know that something is being done to protect them²⁴.

The plan to fight against improper working conditions was realized, and as Vanessa H. May claims in her book:

On the front lines of this new middle-class women's reform movement stood two organizations, the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) and the National Consumers' League. These organizations led the way in setting the agenda for women's labor reform and, later, state and federal labor laws. Along the way they formed connections with other organizations that shared their commitment to reaching out to working-class women and children²⁵.

Yet another issue connected with the tragedy, was the problem of identifying the dead. It says:

More than one hundred thousand people had passed down the Charities Dock to look over the broken and burned bodies of lying in their rude wooden coffins and to try to identify them, the police estimated at 6 o'clock last night. And this estimate did not include the thousands on thousands who were turned away²⁶.

After that night, still some bodies remained unrecognized, mainly because of terrible state of the corpses.

²³ *Labor Condemns Horror*, "The New York Tribune", New York, 27 March 1911, s. 4.

²⁴ Tamže.

²⁵ V.H. May, *Unprotected Labor: Household Workers, Politics, and Middle-Class Reform in New York, 1870–1940*, s. 75.

²⁶ *100,000 Crowd to See Bodies at the Pier*, "The New York Tribune", New York, 27 March 1911, s. 1.

On March 27, The Tacoma Times issued an article in which future proceedings were revealed:

Whitman and his assistants are examining the 50 witnesses of the holocaust. (...) As a possible explanation of the fire's start, it has been learned that the employees of the Triangle company habitually smoked cigarettes and threw the stubs carelessly about²⁷.

The paper gives also new number of casualties, claiming that *to the 142 dead are added 14 injured in the hospitals, five of whom are expected to die²⁸.*

However, eye-witnesses, as well as the survivors claimed that the building had not enough exits:

According to the description given by the two girls, the door to the Washington Place stairway was always kept locked, while before the other stairway was a wooden partition, with an opening only wide enough to allow two girls to pass at once when the door was not closed²⁹.

Such condition made it impossible for the factory workers to evacuate in times of danger and was the direct cause of such a huge number of casualties.

On April 9, The Tacoma Times published a photograph of the only fire escape in the premises. The paper says:

The iron shutters on the windows which led to the small, flimsy fire escape opened outward so that a girl on the fire escape landing could not reach the fire escape without closing the door behind her³⁰.

The escape landing was not enough to give the workers any possibility of leaving the place. Many people fell from it and lost their life. The author continues commenting on the state of the stairways:

Students of the New York university, who stood during the progress of the fire at the very window from which the photograph was taken, declare that none of the girls reached safety from the fire escape, which was only a cheap, flimsy contraption, installed to comply technically with the law³¹.

The final conclusions drawn were as follows:

The investigators found evidence that the doors at the exits swung inward, crumpled fire escapes in the air shaft, one fire escape blocked by the iron shutters when opened in the air

²⁷ *Criminal Action to Follow Fire Horror*, "The Tacoma Times", Tacoma, Washington, 27 March 1911, s. 1.

²⁸ Tamże.

²⁹ *Girls Swear Door Locked, Another Block*, "The New York Tribune", New York, 29 March 1911, s. 1.

³⁰ *Only Fire Escape in New York Sweatshop Fire was a Fire Trap*, "The Tacoma Times", Tacoma, Washington, 4 April 1911, s. 7.

³¹ Tamże.

*shaft, an empty water tank on the roof and the practice prevalent among the cutters of lighting cigarettes a few minutes before quitting time*³².

All of that triggered the situation and made the tragedy likely to happen.

To poor conditions of the premises and lack of proper emergency exit signs should be added: *Greater number of employees were [original spelling-auth.] unable to speak English yet there were no Yiddish or Italian directions*³³. This clearly suggests that the majority of the workers of Triangle Shirtwaist Factory were uneducated female immigrants, who had difficulty reading in English.

Soon the authorities drew conclusions and made an attempt to find the responsible for the tragedy:

*Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, proprietors of the Triangle Waist Company (...) were indicted to-day. There are two indictments against each of the men, charging them with first and second degree manslaughter*³⁴.

The company owners were accused of murder and the press left no trace of solidarity with the two.

Ultimately, factory owners were fined for wrongful deaths, not murder. However there were numerous witnesses claiming that locking the exit doors was a common practice, the two men were claimed not guilty of murder. As the press articles say:

*But the verdict of the jury does not render Harris and Blanck immune from further prosecution for what Assistant District Attorney Charles F. Boswick described as 'one of the worst crimes in history' in his summation*³⁵.

It indicates that several more trials were to come since the victims' relatives sought justice.

After the accident, several changes in US construction law were implemented:

*It is the hope of all the public spirited men- encouraged at the time by an unrelenting campaign (...) who were instrumental in obtaining better state laws and more efficient local regulation for the protection from fire of the workers in lofts and factory buildings that their success so far has reduced to a minimum the chances of another wanton destruction of human life*³⁶.

³² *Not a Chance for the Girls*, "The Yakima Herald", Yakima, Washington, 29 March 1911, s. 6.

³³ Tamže.

³⁴ *Jury Indicts Two for Factory Fire*, "The Washington Herald", Washington, DC, 12 April 1911, s. 1.

³⁵ *Harris and Blanck Acquitted by Jury*, "The New York Tribune", New York, 28 December 1911, s. 1.

³⁶ *Asch Building Fire Helps to Better Laws*, "The New York Tribune", New York, 25 March 1912, s. 5.

The Factory Investigating Commission was gathered to give verdict on the state of law and its implementation in sweatshops in the area. It was organized on August 17th, 1911³⁷. The Organization *was required to report to the Legislature on or before the 15th day of February, 1912*³⁸. The Commission investigated into the matters inextricably linked with public safety, fire regulations and drills, construction of factories (like the existence of stairways), but also sanitary conditions (for instance, ventilation and working hours) and occupational diseases (for example lead poisoning)³⁹. Several examples of law infringement were revealed. For instance the Commission stated that

Chiefs of the Fire Departments in nearly every city testified that fires in factory buildings would be reduced by 50% if provisions for the removal of rubbish, the protection of gas jets and the prohibition of smoking were enacted and were promptly and fully complied with

which was clearly the case in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire⁴⁰. A set of drills that were necessary to practice calling for help in case of fire were proclaimed. The grave matter that the Commission pointed out was that

*at present there is no method by which every manufacturing establishment may be located, and its existence brought to the attention of the authorities. At present, any person who has the necessary capital or credit may build, lease, or hire any ramshackle building, engage as many workers as he can crowd into his premises, and work them under any conditions. The very existence of this establishment may not be known to the Labor Department, until it is discovered by accident*⁴¹.

The outcome of the fire was that

*after the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, Rose Schneiderman helped organize members of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and led them in strike in 1913. She fought to outlaw sweatshop labor where workers were exploited and endangered*⁴².

That feminist and labor activist, born in near Chełm in the Kingdom of Poland, who migrated to the US with her parents as a child, participated in the so called “Uprising of the 20,000”, the New York shirtwaist strike that took place in 1909 that was the first step in acquiring more privileges by the factory workers. Numerous bills were passed to regulate labor and one of them was the so-called “54 hour bill”. It said: *All female employees (...) under the compromise measure are limited to nine hours per [per – auth.] day and not to exceed 54 hours per week*, which was a huge leap towards labor regulations⁴³.

³⁷ *Preliminary Report of the Factory Investigating Committee*, New York, 1912, s. 14.

³⁸ Tamże, s. 14.

³⁹ Tamże, s. 15–16.

⁴⁰ Tamże, s. 39.

⁴¹ Tamże, s. 129.

⁴² R. Worth, *Workers' Rights (Open for Debate)*..., s. 80.

⁴³ *Women to Work 60 Hours in Texas Mills*, “El Paso Herald”, El Paso, Texas, 3 February 1915, s. 1.

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OBRAZ POŻARU W FABRYCE „SHIRTWAIST FACTORY” W NOWYM JORKU 25 MARCA 1911 R. W LOKALNEJ PRASIE

Na przełomie XIX i XX wieku, warunki pracy były przedmiotem gorącej debaty społecznej w USA. Niestety, nie najlepsze uwarunkowania przyczyniały się do występowania licznych tragedii, między innymi poważnego i tragicznego w skutkach pożaru w Shirtwaist Factory w Nowym Jorku 25 marca 1911 roku. Zdarzenie to miało miejsce w tak zwanym Asch Building przy Greene Street i Washington Place i przyciągnęło uwagę nie tylko mieszkańców Nowego Jorku, ale także całego wschodniego wybrzeża USA. Artykuł przedstawia szczegółowy przebieg wydarzeń poprzez analizę doniesień prasowych i głosów opinii publicznej zawartych w czołowych dziennikach, jak również skutki pożaru w postaci zmian prawnych wprowadzonych po tragedii.

Słowa kluczowe: Historia USA, XX wiek, przemysł.

Keywords: US history, 20th century, labour.

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