

TRIANGLES EVERYWHERE

By Kimberly Wadsworth

Triangles Everywhere received its world premiere in New York City by The Metropolitan Playhouse, in June of 2007 as part of their *East Village Chronicles* short play festival. It was directed by L. Sidney Fortner. The cast was as follows:

Miriam Goldstein/Sonia Kessler: Wendy Merritt

Jennifer Midland: Shaundra Noll

Cast:

- Jennifer Midland, 30's, local news reporter; initially just there to cover a human interest story. (Note: she wears an earpiece that at times lets the cameraman feed information and comments to her.)
- Miriam Goldstein, AKA Sonia Kessler, just turned 100. She speaks with a thick Polish accent throughout. (Note: even though this is a TV interview, she should NOT acknowledge the camera before indicated in the script.)

TIME: Present.

PLACE: A nursing home in Connecticut

(The entire play consists of the interview Jennifer Midland is doing live at Goldstein/Kessler's nursing home. At rise, Goldstein/Kessler is sitting, sullen yet determined, and Midland has hit her mark and is "addressing the camera.")

MIDLAND:

Good evening; I'm Jennifer Midland with an Action-8 News live special feature. I'm coming to you from Topstone, Connecticut; where local resident Sonia Kessler is celebrating her one hundredth birthday today. *(turns to her)* Happy Birthday, Miss Kessler!

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

Thank you.

MIDLAND:

And how do you plan to celebrate? *(GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER just gives her a bemused look and a shrug.)* Well...you have plenty of time to decide that. *(she ignores another look from GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER.)* I'm sure the grandchildren and great-grandchildren will be coming to visit you today?

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

No, I have none, I was never married.

MIDLAND:

None?...well...good for you, you were a career girl instead, good for you!

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

(an odd chuckle) You could say, yes.

MIDLAND:

In fact, you were a teacher in our school system for over fifty years?

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

Yes.

MIDLAND:

(slight pause first, as she waits for GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER to elaborate) And...you taught history? *(GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER just nods; another pause.)* You must have seen a great many changes to the school system.

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

(another shrug) Sometimes things change. Sometimes they don't.

MIDLAND:

... Yes. So – tell us about your childhood, Miss Kessler; where were you born?

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

In Poland, in a small town named Kalety. My parents had a dairy business; my big brother Piotr and I helped our parents with the farm.

MIDLAND:

And when did you come to the United States?

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

It was 1910. I was eleven years old.

MIDLAND:

What an adventure that must have been for a little girl! What brought your family over to the United States?

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

My family did not come over. It was just me.

MIDLAND:

(suddenly sensing there's a bit more to this story) What brought you here alone so young?

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

Papa died when I was ten, and then so did my big brother Piotr. Mama and I couldn't even do enough for ourselves, never mind running the dairy. So she sent me to my Uncle Luboslaw who wrote her that he could get me a good job in New York. I was supposed to send money to Mama to help her save the dairy, and then, I would go home. *(wry smile)* So I really was a career "girl," like you said.

MIDLAND

What kind of job could he get you?

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

(she hesitates just a millisecond) I worked making shirtwaists in a factory. And there is something else you should know.

MIDLAND:

And what is that, Miss Kessler?

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

My name is not Sonia Kessler. My name is Miriam Goldstein.

MIDLAND:

I'm – I'm terribly sorry we've gotten *that* wrong, Miss --

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

(interrupting) No, you did not make a mistake. I changed my name long ago, and it is time to bring back Miriam Goldstein. I worked at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York. I was a survivor of the fire there, and I changed my name after.

MIDLAND:

You were – my goodness. *(to camera, consulting her earpiece)* Our producer is reminding me that the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire was in 1911; it was one of the largest industrial accidents in the history of this country, and lead to improved working conditions for factory workers. So, you were *there*, Miss Kessler? How old were you?

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

I had just turned twelve years old.

MIDLAND:

Why did they let you work at such a young age?

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

There were many young girls there. We all sewed the buttons on the shirtwaists or cut off loose threads from the older girls rushing their work, you know – the shirts were made in pieces, this girl sews the sleeves, this girl sews the collars, then I sew the buttons – my friend Sonia also sewed buttons, another girl Rebecca snipped off threads.

MIDLAND:

But Miss Kessler –

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

Goldstein.

MIDLAND:

Miss Goldstein, sorry, wasn't your age a problem with labor laws?

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

Oh, yes, but we worked anyway. The foreman just said that if anyone came to ask our age we needed to lie. Tell them we were teenage girls.

MIDLAND

How long was your workday?

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER

I had to be there at seven every morning, and we were done with the day at five.

MIDLAND:

What about your schoolwork? (*GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER just snorts.*) How much were you paid?

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

Five dollars.

MIDLAND

An hour?

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

A day.

MIDLAND

A day? (*GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER nods.*) You were staying with your uncle, you said; was he helping your mother as well?

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER

No, probably not. When I came home each day Uncle Luboslaw made me give him all the money and I don't know how much he ever sent her. Then after a year Mama stopped writing me letters, and Uncle Luboslaw told me she died. He still took all my money. He bought me clothes, and gave me a little each week for my lunch, but that is all. He didn't work himself, and he spent most of the money on schnapps.

MIDLAND:

Let's get back to the fire itself. After all, this was a significant moment in our country's history, something most of our viewers have only read about, but you were an actual eyewitness! (*she gets a comment on earpiece again*) Many accounts of the fire say that one of the exits to the factory was locked, and this prevented people from escaping; can you tell us anything about that? Why would they have locked the door?

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

(*snorts*) The owners of the factory were afraid we would steal a shirtwaist from them. They kept one door locked so we would all have to leave each day by the other door, and the foreman could check that we did not steal anything.

MIDLAND:

So there was only one exit –

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

Which was blocked by the fire.

MIDLAND:

What about fire escapes?

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

Only one.

MIDLAND:

And how many people were on each floor?

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

About two hundred – the girls, their foremen, one or two errand boys.

MIDLAND:

So that's about – six hundred people trying to get down one fire escape.

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

Six hundred, yes.

MIDLAND:

How did you survive the fire?

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

It was almost the end of the day. Sonia and I were rushing our last buttons – if we did them all we would get extra pay. We were on the 9th floor of the factory, and Sonia and I sat near the door to the stairs.

We started hearing people shout “fire, fire!” No one else seemed to hear; the shouts were coming through the door by us. I stole a look out the door and down the stairs, and I saw all the girls from the 8th floor running out and screaming, and smoke coming out from the floor. I tell Sonia what I see. “You go,” she tells me, “you go now. I will tell the foreman. I will see you downstairs.” So she pushes me out the door. I try to go down the stairs to Greene Street, but the fire is too hot and the smoke is too thick, and I cannot see the way down. There is an elevator, but there are so many girls trying to get on – I see one girl jump up and crawl into elevator on top of people's shoulders and heads. And the fire is coming up to the ninth floor. I look back in to our floor, and people are starting to jump up and run, and I see Sonia waving at me to “go, go! Go down!”

But there is no way for me to go down. So I go up, to the 10th floor—there are girls climbing out of the windows to get up onto the roof. I go with them. I look behind me for Sonia, but she is not there. I do not know any of the 10th floor girls, and I cannot find anyone who speaks Polish, so I cannot ask them what is happening. We look down over the edge of the roof, and we see that both the 8th and 9th floors are on fire. I was scared that the fire would take us soon. There are about sixty of us on the roof.

But the building next door is part of NYU, their law school, and on the 11th floor the teacher sees us and they find ladders to reach to us and we all climb up and into their building. They keep us there while the fire is going on – the fire is quick, it is out in only a half hour.

The teacher brought us all downstairs to the ambulances, and then I saw how bad the fire was. All the windows in the 8th and 9th floors are gone. There is smoke and ash everywhere. And all over the street – there are bodies of girls. And here and there are big holes in the street, and many holes have bodies in them – and that is when I know that too many girls could not get out, they jumped. And that is also when I know I will not ever see Sonia anymore. (*She hesitates here, slightly, from a touch of emotion.*)

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER (cont):

In the hospital they finally find me someone who can speak Polish, and they ask my name. I get the idea that I don't want to live with Uncle Luboslaw any more, so I tell them my name is Sonia Kessler – Kessler for Rebecca, and Sonia for my friend Sonia, who saved my life that day when she pushed me out the door.

MIDLAND:

(earpiece again) Over 140 young women died that day. What happened to you after the fire?

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

I told them at the hospital that I was an orphan. There were many people trying to find their families, and for a time I worried Becky Kessler's father would want to see me, but he did not – I heard that someone found her body, but her family never came to get it from the morgue. A synagogue on Stanton Street heard my story and they found a family to take me in; they were a good family, they helped me get back into school and I took care of their little boys. I was good at helping them with schoolwork, so I decided to become a teacher myself. When I was old enough I moved here to Connecticut and got a job in a town where there were Polish children. I have lived here ever since.

MIDLAND:

What a remarkable story, Miss Kessler.

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

Miss Goldstein.

MIDLAND:

Miss Goldstein, I'm sorry.... *(gives her a brusque little pat; she's preparing to wrap up)* Thank you so much for sharing your story with us, and have a happy birthday, on behalf of all of us at --

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

(Interrupting) I'm not finished. *(MIDLAND tries to speak, but GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER goes on)* I was a teacher for 50 years, but I always remembered what the factory was like. I remembered sewing button after button after button. I remembered how long I worked each day, and how many other girls also had to work. When I was staying with the new family I read about the trial after the fire, and how everyone said that things for the factories would change. And I kept reading about factories all the time I was a teacher. And I am telling you my story now because – *(here, GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER turns to the camera herself.)* I need to ask, did people learn *nothing?*

MIDLAND:

...Miss Kessler?

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

(back to MIDLAND, with emphasis:) Miss Goldstein. My name is Miriam Goldstein. That was the name I had in the factory. All of us had names in the factory. We were *people*. Everyone only knows Sonia was a dead factory girl – *I* know that she liked opera and she was teaching me English. People only know Rebecca Kessler was a dead factory girl – *I* know how she made fun of the foreman and made us all laugh at lunch. I know the real names and the stories of so many of the girls.

MIDLAND:

We really need to wrap --

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

Nobody else knew these things. And nobody cared. If people could buy their shirtwaists, it didn't matter how the shirtwaists were made. And so then the company could build a factory with only one fire escape and could lock the door because if we were just factory girls, they didn't care.

MIDLAND:

(to producer) Marty, are we still on, or --

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

And people still don't care. When I was there the factory girls were all Poles and Italians, and now they are all Mexicans and Chinese - but they are still people. And people still just want their blue jeans or their suits or their tee-shirts from Wal-Mart, and they do not think that a person has to make each and every one of them. And they do not think that person who made their tee-shirt has a name, and a story, and a life they are trying to lead, and they do not think if that life is hard.

And so you have places where the owner walks around in his underwear and tries to get the girls to have sex with him, or where the machinery is old and breaking but instead of fixing it they make the girls sew by hand, or places in basements because the owners do not want people to see the girls working, and nobody cares, because they just want their tee-shirts. Just like they just wanted their shirtwaists. I have read that there are thousands of clothing makers in New York, and more than *half* of them are places like Triangle. My friends died, I almost died, in Triangle, and everyone said that things would change, but people wanted their shirts again, and so nothing happened and now there are Triangles everywhere. I am telling you my name because if people forget their tee-shirt was made by a girl, with a name, then all those girls who died, died for nothing. *(she starts to get up.)*

MIDLAND:

...It's understandable you'd be personally concerned, but there's been great advances in labor laws since --

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

(a challenge to MIDLAND) Who made your suit?

MIDLAND:

Pardon me?

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

Your suit. Who made your suit?

MIDLAND:

I...I think it's Donna Karan, but...

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

That is not what I asked. I didn't ask the name of the company. I am asking the name of the girls who sat and sewed your suit together. A group of girls did that. What are their names? Who made your suit?

MIDLAND:

I'm... afraid I don't know.

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

(disapproving) Of course you don't. *(she struggles to her feet and starts to walk out.)*

MIDLAND:

...Miss Kessler, I --

GOLDSTEIN/KESSLER:

(with icy dignity) My name is Miriam Goldstein. I told you that. *(she leaves, MIDLAND looking after her helplessly; she turns to camera to sign off.)*

MIDLAND:

...This is Jennifer Midland for Action 8 News, from the home of Miriam Goldstein. *(lights out.)*