

Chalking Back Through Time: The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire – Elissa Sampson, 2/16/10

Crossing the threshold to leave my building on a bleary March 25th morning, I felt that I had been suddenly pulled back from New York's Lower East Side of 2004 to a time and a space transformed by the demands of the dead. Chalked onto the sidewalk and literally brought home to me were the name, address, and age of someone who until that moment, had been an anonymous victim of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire which claimed 146 lives in 1911. She lived where I lived, although the address didn't exactly match mine; her building had been torn down when my building went up in 1929. But she could have been from my family or from the towns that they left behind, since, like many others, my relatives had come from Galicia to live in the Lower East Side's tenements and work in its sweatshops. It could have been the name of the mother of my elderly next-door neighbor. Instead, her mother had escaped due to her newsboy boyfriend running to the tenth floor to take her out in the nick of time. Those on the ninth floor stood no chance at all.

A sobering tale which I already knew, had in a glance flipped from abstract information to the concrete, now living legacy of a person who had died for all the wrong reasons. I've come to realize that those scrawled words that now appear for one day each year outside my door have made an even more immediate claim. By recalling the story and anonymously investing me in its retelling, as in Passover's reenactment, they have made me the fire's heir. It could have been me. I too was brought out of Egypt and the sweatshops.

Chalking of this sort almost dares remembrance to happen given the sheer ephemerality of its hold on the built environment. The transient nature of chalking is evocative of the ease in which lives were wiped out in a matter of minutes. Literally here today and gone tomorrow, it teases memory to work once its reminder disappears; at best it is a temporary intrusion, an interruption of memorialization into daily life. Perhaps as suggested by Derrida's notion of the trace, chalking stops effacement by marking that something of moment once happened, however hard it may be to visually ascertain. By providing an address, it implicitly raises the question of address and to whom it is addressed. By focusing on multiple sites and the individual names associated with those sites, the chalking literally brings home the power of an aggregation of individual voices marking a tragedy at the multiple places of entry to which they were connected. This is very different than having a number of people make mid-day speeches at the site of the fire -- which is now an NYU (New York University) building.

In this chain of retelling, the tale is never finished and each voice, including mine, starts the tale anew. Historically a poor area, the Lower East Side was home at some point to two million immigrants who lived there, if only temporarily. In 1911 it included seven hundred and fifty thousand Jews living in a neighborhood that had the world's highest population density per capita. The 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire and the 1904 General Slocum Disaster still live on in the neighborhood's social memory as critical to its immigrant

groups' American narratives. The Triangle Fire for Jews and Italians marked the entrenchment of labor politics since the sweatshops remained critical to their economic sustenance. The Slocum Disaster impelled an exodus of Germans from the northern section of the neighborhood known as Kleine Deutchland with an ensuing replacement by Jews, Italians and Slavs.

Although multiple commemorations took place in their immediate wake and these disasters are still remembered, it increasingly feels like that they are inadequately commemorated today given their past historical importance and the freshness of the lessons they continue to impart. Caused by human greed and stupidity, these were heart-breaking tragedies whose victims were women and children. Their aftermaths left living communities devastated but also galvanized public opinion that brought major social action and legal redress in its wake, not the least concerning corruption. The Triangle Fire factory had passed inspection in 1910; the General Slocum had passed a sea-worthiness test the week prior to its going up in flames. The greed that caused these deaths was well documented by official commissions. The ninth floor fire doors of the factory were locked to prevent pilferage, and the cheap, fake life boats of the Slocum were nailed to the boat's ceiling.

My sidewalk had been chalked by a small group of labor, student and other activists looking to commemorate the dead by spreading their message throughout the city, but most particularly in the Lower East Side where the vast majority of the victims resided. The neighborhood, whose Manhattan residents still earn half the average income of New York City¹, has been gentrifying with rapid changes to the built environment. These chalkings reconnect the neighborhood to its origins, even if only for a day. Given that NYU with its towering out-of-context dorms is one of the main forces changing the neighborhood into a nightlife playground, there is a certain irony that this graphic reminder of the Lower East Side's sweatshop origins comes by way of the Triangle (Asch) Building which has served from 1929 as an NYU science building. The chalking was started in 2004 by Ruth Sergel who stated to the Jewish Week "The chalk always washes away... We'll always come back next year," she promises. "That's what social justice and memory is all about. It's not like it's ever over."²

This total repurposing of a sweatshop building into the Brown Science Building is an outstanding example of what geographer Kenneth Foote calls rectification, the restamping of a site into another mold. The New York Landmarks Preservation Commission's 2003 report on the building states "After the fire, the building was repaired and returned to industrial use. In 1916, New York University leased the eighth floor and eventually occupied the entire building. The building was donated to the university in

¹See <http://envisioningdevelopment.net/map> for neighborhood statistics based on 2006 census data

² Jewish Week, 03/31/06, *Triangle Fire Still Burns, From chalked names to old sheet music, stories stay alive*. Jonathan Mark, associate editor

1929 by Frederick Brown and has been used continuously as an academic building.”³ Foote describes this reaction as “the most common outcome when tragedies come to be viewed as accidents and when violence is interpreted as senseless.”⁴ Foote notes that the intent of such a transformation is to render a site immaterial to debates about a tragic event’s meaning and commemoration. This may well have depicted NYU’s initial stance concerning the building’s meaning. NYU has subsequently supported the recent New York City landmarking process for its building. It also had previously allowed the only visual acknowledgement of the Fire through the affixing of two small brass plaques, one from the ILGWU (International Ladies Garment Makers Union), and the other from the National Park Service by virtue of the building being listed as a National landmark.⁵ Despite the communal loss for the Lower East Side, the Jewish and Italian communities, and labor as a whole, what Foote describes as sanctification in which a visible memorial is inscribed in the landscape to reflect a lasting, positive meaning has not yet happened. In Foote’s depiction of this landscape beatification process, if it happens at all, the move to the sacral often occurs much later as a site’s negative associations with tragedy and violence eventually get outweighed by “positive” associations such as a community’s coming together to mourn or take action.

This still salient loss took place in less than 20 minutes, when 146 people died, overwhelmingly young women. Many jumped from the locked ninth floor after the elevator failed due to the weight of those escaping the eighth floor. The tenth floor mainly made it out to the roof. The owners, Harris and Blank were indicted for manslaughter but never convicted since, despite testimony to the contrary, the jury did not believe that the owners knew that the ninth floor door was locked. Three years later, the only compensation received was for 23 families who settled in civil court for \$75 per victim.

Adding to the public sentiment that this tragedy was both preventable and predictable were the events of 1909, when a young Yiddish-speaking immigrant named Clara Lemlich fought Samuel Gompers to show that women could lead a strike and have the stamina to stick with it. The motto of what became known as the Strike or Uprising of 20,000 was “Better to Die Fast than Starve Slow”. At the initial strike meeting at Cooper Union, Lemlich

³ The New York Landmarks Preservation Commission, March 25, 2003, Designation List 346, LP-2128, p. 1. A shift in attitude can be ascertained by virtue of NYU’s 2003 support of designating the building a New York City landmark, which requires keeping a building’s exterior historically accurate.

⁴ Kevin Foote, *Shadowed Ground: America’s Landscape of Violence and Tragedy*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1997, p. 23

⁵ N.B., I find Foote’s notion of rectification more apt than that of designation in which signage informs the viewer that a tragic and/or violent event transpired. Perhaps the two happening in one site, as they do in this instance, can be accounted for by the intertwining here of contested notions of the appropriate. The National Park Service plaque is from 1991; the ILGWU plaque from 1961.

also took a oath swearing that her right arm should wither if she should forsake the strike⁶, thereby combining Jewish collective memory with the strike's call for unity. The Triangle Shirtwaist Company was one of the strike's first targets and the strike then spread throughout the industry including to Philadelphia and Baltimore. Buoyed by public support despite over 700 arrests and thirteen weeks of no pay, the strikers reached agreements with 75% of the shops for better wages and working conditions before the strike fizzled out. A year later the Uprising inspired the 60,000 male workers of the Cloakmakers Union to call a general strike. But the largest ladies garments sweatshop, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory which made women's blouses, had not agreed in 1909 to improve working conditions.⁷

Gender was key to the organization of the garment trade and its unions, with lower-paid women (often greenhorns) working primarily in the ladies garment trade which allowed for the rise of a select number of women labor leaders in the ladies garment unions. Men worked as higher paid laborers in both mens and ladies garments, e.g., as pressers, and dominated the labor movement. Gender also played a major role in the aftermath of the Triangle Fire. Women and children were often the focus of labor reform and seen as representing the most vulnerable in the sweatshops and factories.⁸ Earlier, by virtue of its victims being immigrant women and children on a church Sunday school outing, the General Slocum Disaster had similarly underscored the impact of a corrupt system on those seen as least able to protect themselves. After the Triangle Fire, Fire Chief Croker issued a statement urging "girls employed in lofts and factories to refuse to work when they find [potential escape] doors locked." At Cooper Union, a banner stretching across the platform said: "Locked doors, overcrowding, inadequate fire escapes....We demand for all women the right to protect themselves."⁹

With over 100,000 mourners marching at the funeral for the seven unclaimed bodies, the fire remained in the public eye as an indictment to what had previously been viewed as a well-known fact of life. Even Tammany Hall paid attention. A nine-member NY State Factory Investigating Commission headed by Al Smith was appointed to investigate and instigate change in the state's labor laws and building code, ushering in what has been called the 'Golden Era of Remedial Factory Legislation.' The Commission visited sweatshops and held public hearings that mesmerized New York, proposing over 50

⁶ Psalm 137:5, King James Bible: If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning

⁷ The New York Landmarks Coalition Report, 2003, p. 1, March 25, 2003, Designation List 346, LP-2128. "In the autumn of 1909, Triangle fired 150 union sympathizers. This led to a strike by approximately 20,000 shirtwaist workers, 4/5 of them women, in New York City, Philadelphia, and Baltimore-- the first large-scale strike of women workers in the country. After thirteen weeks the strike ended. While many employers signed favorable contracts with the ILGWU, Triangle workers received only small wage increases and did not receive union recognition and better safety conditions."

⁸ Vulnerable and least well paid, thereby seen as undercutting wages for men.

⁹ Douglas Linder, 2002, website:

<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/triangle/triangleaccount.html>

pieces of legislation, of which 36 were passed. The chief investigator was Frances Perkins, who was an eyewitness to the Fire. After serving as FDR's Secretary of Labor and the nation's first female cabinet member, Perkins gave a speech on the Triangle Fire's 50th anniversary where she explained the legislation by stating "We all felt that we had been wrong, that something was wrong with that building which we had accepted or the tragedy never would have happened. Moved by this sense of stricken guilt, we banded ourselves together to find a way by law to prevent this kind of disaster."¹⁰ Perkins was also explicit in looking at the impact of the Fire on national legislation by stating that the New Deal began on March 25, 1911.

The citywide day of mourning called for by the ILGWU happened in 1911. The 36 laws passed in the first three years after the fire are still on the books. For many years, garment trade labor union commemorations of the survivors and victims were in order. Tammany Hall, until then a primarily Irish affair, extended the reach of its Lower East Side Fourth Ward organization to include Jewish and Italian voters as it made its peace with labor and the Reform movement on factory issues.

On the Triangle Fire's 50th anniversary the ILGWU and the NYC Fire Department obtained permission to stage an annual commemoration at the building site. Fire survivors play a part in the ceremony as well as Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Perkins. The ILGWU also put up a plaque just above street level which stated "out of their martyrdom came new concepts of social responsibility and labor legislation that have helped make American working conditions the finest in the world."

And 90 years later? The ILGWU's successor organization, UNITE, along with the NYC Fire Department show up at the NYU building for an hour of commemoration marked by speeches by labor leaders, industrial safety experts and family members. These are followed by fire truck ladder demonstrations (in 1911 they could only reach to the sixth floor), and the reading of victim names by students. It is held on an agreed upon date that is not the exact anniversary of the fire. But no memorial stands either in nearby Washington Square Park where many had once gathered to protest and mourn, or at NYU which is all business as usual in its Brown Science building.

And 99 years later? Now Workers United¹¹ stages the annual commemoration and we've also moved fully from the last of the survivors to familial and virtual heirs. It is agreed that the revamping of Washington Square Park will have information about the Fire included with other historic tripods. NYU has agreed to host the Triangle Fire families for the March 25th 2009 commemoration and is helpful in other ways. The chalking started by Ruth Sergel¹² has morphed into the **Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition** which also honors the

¹⁰ Frances Perkins, Address, 50th Anniversary Memorial Meeting, March 25th, 1961

¹¹ In 2004, two unions, UNITE and HERE combined, ergo UNITE HERE! Subsequent splits/mergers have led to Workers United

¹² On Triangle Fire chalking 2009 see Sergel's

<http://www.streetpictures.org/news/2009/03/27/chalk-2009/>

victims with associated commemorative activities that bring their legacy into view, including a program at the local activist Judson Memorial Church. Social memory has certainly lived on in the ethnic communities associated with the tragedy. Sergel stated in an interview in the Jewish Week that “as a Jewish New Yorker you just grew up with stories of the Triangle fire. I’ve always been haunted by it.”¹³ The Coalition, now a more official affair with representation that includes city historic organizations, was started in 2009. Its goals are listed here.

The Coalition is spearheading educational, commemorative, and memorial activities that promote active social engagement. In concert with organizations and individuals across the city, we are creating a living memorial to remember not only the people who died but the powerful social conscience and action that their deaths inspired. The Coalition supports:

- The creation of innovative participatory activities, to build the muscles of active social engagement.
- New collaborations between communities
- Establishing a permanent memorial¹⁴

So how is it that almost a hundred years later we are moving from the transient spontaneity of chalking to the desire for a “permanent memorial”? In his studies of tragedies, Foote also pays attention to the slow, continuous emergence of retrospective meanings which allow lessons to feel vital today and inspire new forms of commemoration. Despite the general equivocation that he notes about inscribing sites of labor history, this overall process seems to be working in favor of coming to terms with future memorialization of the Triangle Fire particularly since it never really died in public memory. This can be seen in the periodic outcroppings of articles over the years in venues such as the New York Times, the Jewish Week and the Forward, the perseverance of labor ceremonies, and the marking of the death at age 107 of the last survivor.¹⁵ The Fire’s most direct legacy, as seen in 36 pieces of legislation, lived on although commemorations had clearly started to lessen with time which in turn inspired the yearly chalking. As the 100th anniversary approaches, something now “is in the air”, if not quite yet at NYU’s building, including films, children’s books and art exhibits. Cornell’s Labor Center which has recently put up a website, explains that “The site was originally inspired by, and was a response to, a steady flow of requests for information on the Triangle Fire

¹³ Jewish Week, 03/31/06, *Triangle Fire Still Burns, From chalked names to old sheet music, stories stay alive*. Jonathan Mark, associate editor. The sanctification that Foote describes as consistent with tragedy befalling tight-knit ethnic communities has not happened yet through changing landscape, rather it stays alive in social memory. Some of the sheet music invokes the sacrifices of the Second Temple.

¹⁴ <http://rememberthetrianglefire.org/about/>

¹⁵ See multiple websites, films, books and articles from the last decade such as *Triangle: The Fire that Changed America* by David von Drehle (2004), Ric Burn’s episode on the Fire in his New York documentary, a forthcoming documentary by Roy Campolongo, Alex Szalet’s 2005 film on Clara Lemlich, *A Strikeleader’s Diary*, and Doug Linder’s website:

<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/triangle/triangleaccount.html>

that the Kheel Center was receiving from middle and high school students.”¹⁶ NYU seems poised on the brink of change with its Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development assigning *Triangle*, a novel by Katharine Weber, as required new student reading.

In broadening its goals, it is apparent that the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition is looking for renewed activist engagement in an age where global and local sweatshops are common. The creation of a “living legacy” of social conscience is combined with the desire for permanent memorialization for those whose death is a testament to the consequences of employer greed.

Foote notes that “memory provides an important bond between culture and landscape, because human modifications of the environment are often related to the way societies wish to sustain and efface memories”.¹⁷ His stress on landscape “as a durable, visual representation,”¹⁸ makes the Coalition’s goal of a permanent memorial understandable even if it is the performative, rupturing, aspects of chalking that create a visceral impact. The Coalition’s different types of commemoration can be seen as a palimpsest whose layers of meaning teach different types of lessons. Retrospective meaning, according to Foote, often occurs when a community wants to celebrate its origins or an event is viewed in a more positive light. Here arguably it is the positive look at the legacy of New York’s response in creating the first labor and industrial safety legislation which accounts for the increase in attention to the Fire. This has resonance for those who believe that labor conditions today show the continued need for labor and safety laws, locally and globally. Conversely, the continued passing of time increasingly points up that these most innocent of victims have yet to be deemed worthy of a permanent memorial. The lack of permanent memorialization is becoming increasingly salient to the victims’ virtual heirs in the ethnic, labor, immigrant, fire-fighters, building and industrial safety, historic preservationist, and feminist communities. 9/11 and the pending centennial of the Fire have brought these issues to the fore.

The lessons have shifted: as Ric Burn’s documentary of New York implies, this tragic event is now seen again as pivotal in interpreting the city’s labor, industrial and immigrant history and in having brought New Yorkers together to meet the most urgent social justice challenge of their times. The pre-eminence of the city is solidified by its humane response to the conditions that its industrialization had engendered. As the rise of Frances Perkins and the ensuing national New Deal labor and industrial safety legislation show, it is the entire nation that learns from New York’s lessons.

¹⁶ Cornell University’s Kheel Center exhibit: <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/>

¹⁷ Kevin Foote, *Shadowed Ground: America’s Landscape of Violence and Tragedy*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1997, p. 33

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 33

NYU will likely need to make some choices in the near future. If previous decisions detached blame from the site, it seems likely that future events will look to re-mark the site and/or nearby Washington Square Park, which already has a modest beginning along these lines. NYU need not fear that moment since it could also provide it with the opportunity to memorialize its law students and professor who helped the 10th floor workers flee over the roof to NYU's Law building. Nor should New Yorkers fear coming together once again to remember this loss and to think of the implications for today of the larger fight for human dignity that was waged as its result.

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