

Memory Work: Creating the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Memorial

BY ROB LINNE

The consequential Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911 should not be forgotten, nor should the young Jewish and Italian immigrants who suffered horrific deaths due to workplace negligence. Their tragedy brought an entire city together in mourning, galvanized a nascent labor movement, spurred historic legislation to protect workers' safety and rights, and ultimately laid the basis for the New Deal economic justice reforms.

A permanent memorial to honor the victims as well as signify the weight of the historical moment is now rising at the former factory site in lower Manhattan at 23 Washington Place. Designed by Uri Wegman and Richard Joon Yoo,

the memorial begins as a stainless-steel "ribbon" descending from the ninth floor—where most of the workers perished—down to street level where the viewer's attention will be focused on the names of each of the victims.

From the earliest stages of planning, the names have been a touchstone, treated with care by those working to make the dream of a proper memorial a reality. The juried competition for the memorial design required the names be a focal point, and even the discussion of which font would best communicate the power of the names was intentional. (The final choice for typeface Khula was created by designer Erin McLaughlin.)

The individual identities of the victims had largely been forgotten for decades as their unique life stories melded into a composite narrative of Triangle Factory Fire victims. David Von Drehle addressed this erasure in his seminal 2004 work, *Triangle: The Fire that Changed America*. Von Drehle combed multiple archives, including historical newspapers and coroner's reports, in order to paint fuller pictures of the individuals involved, and he reconstructed a list of all the then-known victims.

Since the 2004 list was published, the names have returned a sense of agency to those who perished. Each year at the commemoration, school children read the names and then a flower for each Triangle worker is laid at the base of the site of the Triangle Factory, which is now the New York University Brown Building. Participants in Ruth Sergel's *Chalk Project* spread across the city to chalk each worker's name in front of the building where they lived. And "The Remember the Triangle Coalition" parades shirtwaist "kites"—with each name sewn onto a sash—at various city parades and events.

While the focus on the names has enlivened commemoration efforts, the list has continued



At street level, the memorial will focus the viewer's attention on the names of each of the victims.

to be revised. Amateur genealogist Michael Hirsch updated the list via new archival research—including union records, census documents, and death certificates—to identify the previously unnamed victims as well as to correct some errors. Hirsch's list, now housed in Cornell University's Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation & Archives, became widely regarded as the most comprehensive at the time.

As fabrication of the memorial grew closer to reality, board members of the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition, the organization driving the project, prioritized accuracy regarding all text on the permanent memorial, as it will be set in stone and metal. Board members Suzanne Pred Bass and LuLu LoLo, along with Mary Anne Trasciatti, researched each of the names using birth certificates, marriage licenses, and earlier sources. They also reached out to descendants.

This labor of love evolved into a remarkable transnational project in memory work. With text in English, Italian, and Yiddish, this representation of the diversity of New York City workers at the turn of the century presented unique challenges, but also opened doors to enlightening discoveries and collaborations. For example, Ester Rizzo, author of *Camicette Bianche* (*White Blouses*), shared her research into the home origins of Italian workers at the factory and exchanged documents such as Italian birth certificates, marriage licenses, and town records.

This dive into international documents revealed inaccuracies in previous lists, such as misspelled names or inaccurate birthdates, but also opened important discussions on representation, the "Americanization" of names, and even how to group the names in order to best narrate the story.

For example, the Italian tradition of married women using family names on documents researched was much discussed. After thoughtful deliberation, researchers made choices about grouping family members in a way that best tells their stories: Three sets of married sisters will be grouped together by their family names so their relationships will

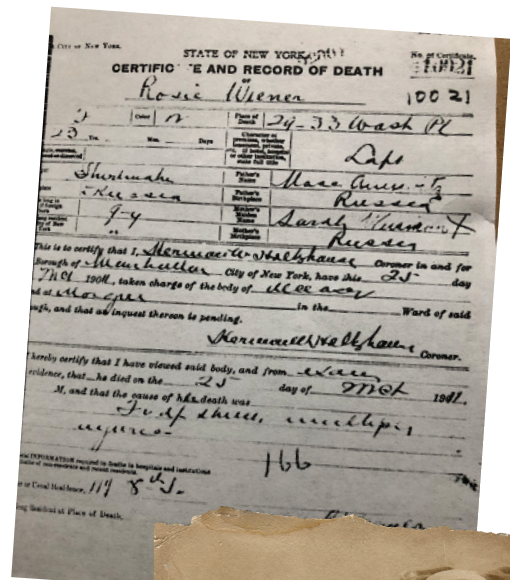
be obvious; other married Italian women will be grouped by their married names, in part so one mother (Caterina Maltese) will be adjacent to her daughters.

The choice to include ages on the memorial was made in part to tell the story of young lives lost way too early. Several ages are different from ages listed on the earlier Kheel list. Some were corrections based on more reliable resources such as birth certificates from country of origin. Others differ because researchers opted for precision and made the decision to list the ages as of March 25, 1911, rather than by generalized year as earlier lists had calculated.

Many of the workers had different names listed on various documents. Researchers made every effort to track down the name the individual would have been known by at home, and names or spellings preferred by living family members were always respected. For example, one worker had been listed as Jenne Franco on the Kheel list, but living family members requested that her traditional name, Concettina Franco, be used. Celia Eisenberg's family requested the name her family would have known her by: Celia (Civia) Eisenberg.

The archival work began as due diligence, checking for misspellings or inaccuracies on previous lists. But many fascinating conversations grew out of the process and the permanent memorial, scheduled for completion in the fall of 2022, will forever be a better representation of the workers, sisters, mothers, brothers, and neighbors lost on that fateful day. ■

More information can be found at rememberthetrianglefire.org.



Rosie Wiener was one of the young women who perished in the Triangle fire.

COURTESY OF SUZANNE PRED BASS