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# Out of the Flames

How one brave girl survived the Triangle factory fire—a terrible tragedy that changed America forever

SEPTEMBER 2019 ([HTTPS://ACTION.SCHOLASTIC.COM/ISSUES/2019-20/090119.HTML](https://action.scholastic.com/issues/2019-20/090119.html))

| By Kristin Lewis

## **Before You Read:** Check out our Background Builder slideshow



Art by Gary Hanna



Preview this article's **VOCABULARY**

### **Launch Slideshow**

Flames clawed at her back. Black smoke filled the air. Waves of red-hot fire spread across the room.

It was March 25, 1911. Seventeen-year-old Katie Weiner was trapped on the ninth floor of a burning building in New York City.

Moments earlier, fire had broken out at the factory where Katie worked. Now the flames were spreading with lightning speed. Katie had to make a terrible choice.

She could stay and die.

Or she could dive into a moving elevator and hope to survive.



Art by Randy Pollak



**PAUSE AND THINK:** Why was Katie's life in danger on March 25, 1911?

## A Place of Hope

Earlier that morning, Katie had walked through the streets of the Lower East Side. She lived in this New York neighborhood with her mother, brother, and sister.

Katie was headed to the Triangle Waist Company. She and her older sister Rose, 23, worked there making women's blouses. Like many teenagers in 1911, Katie did not go to school. She had to work to earn money to help her family.

Almost everyone on the Lower East Side had come from another country. Katie's own family had moved to New York City from Russia. To them and many other **immigrants**, America was a place of hope. It seemed that anyone who worked hard could get ahead.



**PAUSE AND THINK:** Why didn't Katie go to school?

## Triangle Waist Company

Katie felt lucky to have a job at the Triangle Waist Company. It was one of New York's largest clothing factories.

Along with about 500 other workers, Katie spent 10 hours a day, six days a week making shirtwaists. These popular blouses had made the owners of the factory—Max Blanck and Isaac Harris—very rich. But workers like Katie made only about \$8 a week. That's about \$200 in today's money.

At the time, many factory bosses made employees work hard and paid them little. These factories were called sweatshops—and they felt like prisons. Talking and laughing were not allowed. Bosses shouted at workers. And doors were locked to keep people from taking breaks.

Fires were also a major problem in **garment** factories. In fact, there had been several small fires at Triangle. Luckily, these had happened at night, when people weren't working.

A fire during the day would be a disaster. Workers were packed closely together. And there were only two narrow staircases leading to the street. A quick escape would be impossible.

City officials had reported these unsafe conditions. But Blanck and Harris did nothing.



**PAUSE AND THINK:** What made working in the Triangle factory dangerous?





Bettmann/Getty Images (Shirtwaist); Courtesy Cornell Kheel Center (Max Blanck & Isaac Harris); Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo (Sweatshop)

### **The Shirtwaist Kings** (*left*)

The woman in the photo above is wearing a shirtwaist. These women's blouses were as popular as jeans are today. Max Blanck and Isaac Harris—the owners of Triangle—were known as the Shirtwaist Kings.

### **Sweatshop Workers** (*right*)

In the early 1900s, many teen girls and young women had to help earn money for their families. They often worked long hours for little pay in clothing factories called sweatshops.

## **Frantic Workers**

At about 4:45 p.m. on March 25, Katie was putting on her coat and hat. She couldn't wait to leave the noisy factory and get home. But at that very moment, a bin of fabric on another floor burst into flames.

Instantly, the flames spread to the tables. Frantic workers threw buckets of water. The water did nothing to stop the blaze.



Lewis Wickes Hine/Library of Congress/Corbis/VCG via Getty Images (Lower East Side)

The fire kept growing. And within minutes, Katie heard the screams.

She looked for her sister, Rose, but could not find her. Choking on smoke, Katie rushed to the window. She stuck her head out to breathe in fresh air. “Fire!” she shouted.

There had never been a fire drill at Triangle. So no one knew what to do. Katie rushed to one of the two staircases. When she got to the door, it was locked.

Precious seconds ticked by. And the giant fire only grew.

### Coming to America

From 1830 to 1940, 40 million immigrants came to the U.S. Many made a new life in New York City. The Lower East Side—the neighborhood where Katie lived—is shown here. It became home to many immigrants who lived in apartment buildings called tenements.

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**PAUSE AND THINK:** Why did Katie have a hard time trying to escape the fire?



The Granger Collection, New York/The Granger Collection

**The Destruction**

This photograph shows the inside of the Triangle factory after the fire. It destroyed all three floors of the factory and killed 146 people.

**Trapped in the Blaze**

Those inside Triangle had only seconds to make life-or-death decisions. Many chose to jump from the windows rather than die in the fire. It was a deadly 95-foot fall to the sidewalk.

But Katie saw one last chance: the elevator.

During a fire, heat can damage elevators. Passengers can get trapped. At the time, elevators had to be operated by people. Elevator **operator** Joseph Zito knew the risks. But he wanted to save as many workers as he could. He took the elevator up and down, again and again. With each trip, he did not know if he would survive.

This time, Katie joined a group of workers pushing their way inside the elevator. But Katie couldn't fit. As the elevator left, she knew it wouldn't come back. The fire was now too strong.

So she dove.

Reaching out, Katie grabbed the cable that ran up through the elevator car. She landed on the heads of the workers inside and rode to safety.



**PAUSE AND THINK:** What did Katie have to do to get to safety?

**Lasting Change**

The Triangle fire burned through the factory in 18 minutes and killed 146 people. Most of them were teenage girls and young women. Nearly all of them were immigrants.

Katie was lucky. Diving into that elevator saved her life. But sadly, Rose did not survive.

As news of the fire spread across New York, people were **outraged**. How many workers would still be alive if the door hadn't been locked? If the owners had held fire drills?

Blanck and Harris were never found guilty of any crime. But because of the Triangle factory fire, laws were passed to make factories and offices safer. People fought to protect workers and give them basic rights.

For the survivors of Triangle, life was never the same. But many went on to live full lives—including Katie. She married and had a son. And she lived to see how the awful events of March 25, 1911, helped create lasting change in America.



**PAUSE AND THINK:** What changed as a result of the Triangle factory fire?

## Background Builder



# SCHOLASTIC ACTION

# BACKGROUND BUILDER

You're about to read "Out of the Flames." Here are a few things you need to know before you read. The words in **bold** are words that are important to know.



**Launch Slideshow**

## ACTIVITY: Finding text evidence

You've just read "Out of the Flames". Now do this activity to help you better understand the article.

**Tip:** *Text evidence means details in a story that support an answer, or show that it is true.*

**What to do:** Use text evidence—or details from the article—to answer the questions below. We did the first one for you.



WS Collection/Alamy Stock Photo

### **Fighting Back**

After the fire, a funeral parade was held. People marched to honor the victims and bring attention to unsafe working conditions.

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1

How did Katie's family feel about coming to America?

**HINT:** *Look for the answer in the section "A Place of Hope."*

Answer: Katie's family saw America as a place where hard work could get them ahead.

2

How much did Katie work, and what did she earn?

**HINT:** *Look for the answer in the section "Triangle Waist Company."*

3

What did factory bosses do that made workers' lives difficult?

**HINT:** Look for the answer in the section "Triangle Waist Company."

4

Who died in the Triangle factory fire?

**HINT:** Look for the answer in the section "Lasting Change."

**Think About It!** What do your answers tell you about the people who worked in sweatshops?

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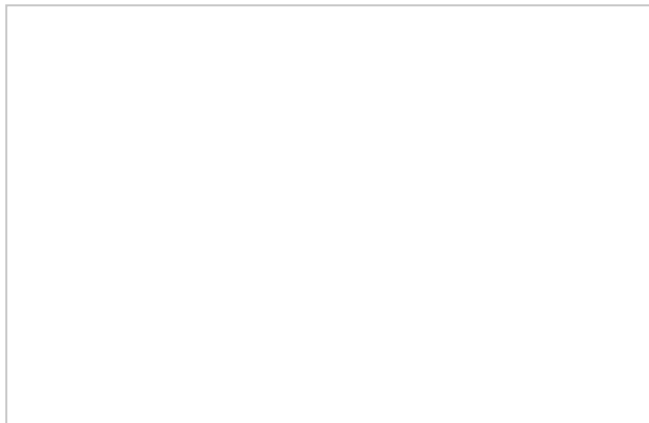


**NONFICTION FEATURE**

### **Behind the Scenes: Out of the Flames**

Author Kristin Lewis shares how she researched and...

## Leveled Articles (2)





NONFICTION FEATURE

## Higher Level: Out of the Flames

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NONFICTION FEATURE

## Lower Level: Out of the Flames

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