The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in Manhattan was the most fatal industrial disaster in New York City history.

Women in the needle trades performing work in a textile factory.

MENDING AN INDUSTRY

Italian Women Needle Workers and the First Italian Local Union

"Girls were burning to death before our very eyes. They were jammed in the windows....one by one, the jams broke. Down came the bodies in a shower, burning, smoking—flaming bodies, with disheveled hair trailing upward. They had fought each other to die by jumping instead of by fire.... These fire torches, suffering ones, fell inertly, only intent that death should come to them on the sidewalk instead of in the furnace behind them."

~ Eyewitness William G. Shepherd on the scene in New York City, March 25, 1911

BY MILES RYAN FISHER

They died because the owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory had locked the exits, an unfortunately common practice to prevent workers from taking unauthorized breaks and to reduce theft. This made the building a veritable firetrap. Of the 146 victims, 123 were women and 23 were men. Many of those women were young immigrants who came from Italy in search of a better life, the oldest known victim being 43-year-old Providenza Panno and the youngest being fourteen-year-olds Kate Leone and "Sara" Rosaria Maltese.

In the early 1900s, Italian women immigrants often became needle workers because the urban garment industry offered quick entry into the workforce. New York City had become the center of the international garment industry, and many Italian women already possessed needlework skills when they arrived from Italy. They had cultivated it for their dowries and also to earn wages from it if necessary. Some had even entered into factory work in Italy while their husbands worked in the United States, earning higher wages and sending money back home where prices were cheaper. New York factory owners grew wise to this and lured these women over by offering higher wages than what was possible in Italy, though the wages were still very low.

Because of the boom in the garment industry, Italian women started

Ruins from the Triangle fire.

New York garment workers parading on May Day ("International Workers Day" on May 1). Purita is Italian for "purity." (Library of Congress)

Immigrant women (and many times, their children) often performed needle work from their home in New York's Upper East Side. (Library of Congress)

Women picket during a garment workers strike in 1910 known as the "Uprising of the 20,000." (Library of Congress)

Artist Ernest Fiene's mural that juxtaposes the Triangle fire and exploited labor with the worker protections developed by unions and New Deal legislation. Completed in 1940, the mural is in the auditorium of Manhattan's High School of Fashion Industries (HSFI), originally known as the Central High School of Needle Trades.

immigrating at a much higher rate in the early twentieth century. In the 1880s, they represented just 17% of Italian immigrants. By 1900, that rose to 38%, and after World War I, the number of women immigrants eclipsed that of men. And once women arrived, they tended to stay. While sixty percent of Italian men repatriated to Italy in the early 1900s, just twenty percent of women did so.

While men were given the higher skilled occupations that involved tailoring, cutting, and pressing, women were relegated to more unskilled work in spite of their ability. Still, many Italian women were tied to the garment industry, whether that meant working in factories or doing piecework from out of the home. They worked as tailoresses, dressmakers, and seamstresses. But they weren't the only women immigrants in the garment trades. Up until they became the majority ethnic group in the 1920s and 1930s, the garment industry was dominated by Eastern European Jews.

The immigrants from Southern Europe, Eastern Europe, or Russia were met with disdain. Noting that "the Italian or Greek or Jew … [has] a place a little higher than that of the Fiji islander, but far beneath that held by the most depraved English-speaking tramp that was ever kicked off a freight car," the *Boston Herald* in 1919 summarized the attitude of the native-born: "The foreigner, in short, is a wop, a sheeny, or a Polack."

This attitude reflected how the workers were treated, exploited for their labor. As one Italian immigrant sewing-machine operator reflected:

[W]orkers spent long hours in the shops in those days. They worked from eight in the morning to six o' clock at night, all day Saturday, and sometimes even on Sundays. They had no breaks and were given three-quarters of an hour for lunch. If they went to the bathroom, the boss kept count of how long they took. If they took too long, he would go to the bathroom door and knock … They were not allowed to talk or laugh.

In order to perpetuate these conditions, employers used the workers' different ethnicities to their advantage, playing them against each other to prevent collective action. However, because of their similar circumstances, different ethnic groups bonded. Italians found a place with Jews because of the working conditions both groups endured in the needle trades as well as

the way they were marginalized, even disparaged, by society at large.

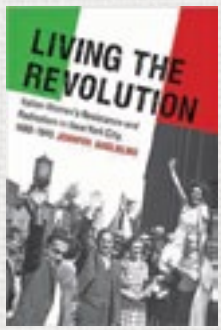
The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU)—one of the first unions to have a mainly female membership—formed in 1900. They led one of the movement's formative strikes—the 1909 "Uprising of 20,000" shirtwaist workers—which fought for improved working conditions and made the ILGWU the third largest member of the AFL just a year later. Italian women started to join the movement.

Then the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire happened. The tragedy involved the very hazards that the 1909 strike had highlighted, from locked exits and neglected fire escapes to practical fire safety. But it was the reported sight of bodies falling from the factory windows—which were located on the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors of the building—and the sound of them hitting the cement that created a hardened resentment.

The anger that this tragedy provoked helped fuel a movement against the appalling labor conditions. Many Italian women were now convinced of the necessity to unionize. Tens of thousands joined the ranks of the ILGWU, and the ensuing decade witnessed repeated strikes. Although not all of them were successful, one important thing to arise from the collective action was the very first all Italian local union.

In 1919, Italian women formed the Italian Dressmakers' Local 89 in Manhattan. Their foothold in the labor movement grew more substantial, and by the 1930s, Local 89 was the largest local union in one of the most powerful international unions in the country.

As they fought for safer work conditions and fair wages in the garment industry, Italian women proved themselves to be pivotal to the labor movement. And it was through their collective action that they mended an industry that had for so long taken them for granted.



For a complete historical perspective of the struggles and accomplishments of Italian women in the needle and textile trades, read Jennifer Guglielmo's impressive book, *Living the Revolution.*

MEN OF THE CLOTH REVIEW

BY KATHLEEN SPALTRO

My maternal grandfather, Lucio Salvucci, was a custom tailor of men's suits. Tailor's chalk, wax chalk, a red pincushion fat with pins, a measuring tape, enormous bobbins of thread, heavy shears, green quilted padding, a button tin, a heavy-duty Singer treadle sewing machine—all of these evoke his memory to his grandchildren.

Lucio learned his trade in Lazio but plied his trade in Philadelphia. "Grandpop made my First Holy Communion suit," my first cousin Mike remembers. "The suit was beautiful, and, of course, it fit perfectly. My father was excellent in sewing; I assume Grandpop taught him." My Uncle Edward went to school in Philadelphia but also learned the trade; in Italy, Grandpop had learned the trade rather than go to school.

Men of the Cloth, a documentary about Italian master tailors directed by Vicki Vasilopoulos, emphasizes how the painstaking process of learning the craft of being a master tailor consumes many years of devoted effort. As the film stresses, custom tailoring is "not easy to learn. The craft is unbelievably difficult." The documentary examines the careers of three master tailors in Italy and America as they kept alive a Renaissance-born craft threatened by industrialization and the dominance of ready-to-wear clothing.

This excellent film describes the process of apprenticeship as well as the steps taken in tailoring a man's suit. Tailoring demands a passion for excellence, a sense of beauty, a respect for tradition. A good custom tailor is an artist because art adds to training in a skill both human intelligence and human intuition. A sculptor chisels marble to realize a vision of the human form; a master tailor cuts cloth to enhance the human form. Tailors learn to "take a shapeless piece of cloth and drape it beautifully" with "heart and feeling in your fingertips."

Men of the Cloth available on DVD
Details from http://menoftheclothfilm.com/