

WORK POETRY / POÉSIE DE TRAVAIL

Nine Workers Died

Gerald Tulchinsky

IN THE EARLY AFTERNOON on 20 January 1950, nine of the eleven workers at Phillips garment factory – located in a sub-basement at 447 Richmond Street, West, in Toronto, and owned by Philip Chikofsky – died as a result of burns or smoke inhalation in a flash fire.

The blaze started as a result of a short-circuit in a cloth-cutting machine; the fire ignited the layers of highly flammable cloth and adjoining racks of finished suits, dresses, and other merchandise. Only two of Chikofsky's workers, who included his eighteen-year-old son, Sidney, escaped by running out the entrance. The others succumbed to the flames while attempting to climb through a window, but it was securely barred. The two back-door emergency exits were blocked off by a plywood partition and sealed shut by heavy iron bars, large draw bolts, and padlocks.

Of the nine workers who perished, six died screaming and clawing frantically at the barred window: Philip Chikofsky, his son Sidney (who managed to exit the building, but returned with a fire extinguisher, losing his life trying to save others), Wilfred Gutzin, Isadore Singer, Rosa Annie Kitts, and Bluma Eichenbaum. Three others – Priva Naiman, Abraham Weizberg, and Clara Singer – died in hospital a few days later. Meanwhile, Toronto's mayor, Hiram McCallum, immediately ordered an inquiry into the tragedy and a survey of fire hazards in the garment district. The chief coroner for Ontario, Dr. Smirle Lawson, chaired the proceedings and described the Chikofsky factory as "a death trap of the worst kind ... it's incredible to me that human beings should have to work in such a place."¹ One veteran garment worker commented, "There are plenty of factories like that one. And if they [the authorities] don't put the clamp on them, there will be plenty of funerals too."² Although sealing

1. *Toronto Telegram*, 23 January 1950.

2. *Toronto Telegram*, 21 January 1950.

off emergency exits violated municipal regulations, police turned a blind eye to such closures, and representatives of three insurance companies admitted to refusing to accept risks in the garment district unless ground level windows and doors were sealed, to prevent theft, or unless burglar alarms were installed.

At the inquiry, Joe Salsberg, Labour-Progressive member of the Ontario legislature for St. Andrew and a veteran of Toronto's garment sweatshops since 1916, challenged the faulty machine theory. He indicated that the fire could have resulted from as yet unexamined factors and hinted at possible fault. While deeply regretting the tragedy, the jury found no fault and concluded that the deaths resulted from a flash fire "of unknown origin at a cutting bench, which ignited highly flammable celanese cloth."³ The jury also deplored the absence of proper, regular inspections and urged the city to establish systems of rigorous, routine inspections designed to avoid such tragedies in garment and similar small factories in the future. A committee of the Toronto city council advanced a series of "opinions," concerning safety "in factories, where dangerous or hazardous businesses are conducted." These views indicated that "... all entrances and exits to factory buildings ... should remain unlocked and unobstructed during occupation of the premises."⁴

Meanwhile, the victims of the fire were quickly buried and the Toronto Jewish community responded moderately to the plight of the families who had lost kin in the blaze. The Cloak Manufacturers' Association raised some \$2,500 for a relief fund, and the local branches and New York headquarters of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union contributed \$3,000.

Since the tragic incident, the once-burgeoning and numerous small clothing firms that made Toronto one of Canada's major clothing centres have mostly disappeared as production has shifted overseas. But devastating fires are still a prominent feature in the garment industry. Victims still become trapped inside unsafe buildings, where they burn or choke to death while the factory owners do nothing and generally get away without being charged with any crime. The Toronto fire is a reminder not only of the famous Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire of March 1911 in New York, with its 146 deaths (mostly young immigrant women), but also of the more destructive recent fires at two factories in Bangladesh where, once again, workers perished behind locked doors.

3. *Toronto Star*, 11 February 1950.

4. *Toronto Telegram*, 14 February 1950; W. J. Scott, Fire Marshal, to C. R. Magone, K. C. Deputy Attorney General, 14 February 1950, Attorney General Central Registry Criminal and Civil Files, RG 4 32, b225419, file 19/1950 – A.O. Klein, Esq., K. C. Assistant Crown Attorney, Toronto, Ontario, Re: Factory Fire – Toronto (Fire Marshal), Archives of Ontario, Toronto, Canada.

Philip Chikofsky's Possibilities

I came to this country a poor little boy
 To make my way in my own employ
 In the clothing trades, in Yiddish called shmattas.
 Though this business is rife with awful tragedias
 Like overruns, strikes, unseen costs
 Making profits disappear like spring frosts
 As I now struggle producing coats and dresses
 Cheap for working gals who wear their tresses
 Long these days. But the length is short
 Just below the knees, à la sport
 Not like last year's wear.
 This business is like climbing a tree
 We never know what will be.
 New York dictates and we must follow,
 Climbing up as if in a hollow
 Up there to the top, non stop,
 Non stop.

My factory at 447 Richmond St., West

I rent part of this basement for my factory
 But I worry about theft, naturally.
 It happens often and insurance companies
 Insist that the emergency exits be locked
 So I've padlocked those doors and
 Sealed the windows.
 I'm now free to focus on dealing
 With my designs, hopefully appealing.
 Then I'll get renown
 Among buyers arriving from country and town.
 Here it's the mass buyers, known for rough dealing.
 Renown for Phillips Garment
 No less, for Phillips Dress.

Wilfred Gutzin

I am one of eleven hands working here
 In this sub-basement factory, near
 The front of the building where I operate a Singer.
 And I sigh

Hoping that my four sons
Won't have to do such runs
And I look across at sweating mates
Doing the same at non-union rates
Working in season desperately long shifts
Producing these stylish "gifts"
And my fingers hurt, my eyes water
All of us hurt, we so hurt.

Fire and Smoke

Sparks fly off the cutting machine
Igniting the textiles, their sheen
Erased in flaming fire
The cutting table suddenly a pyre
With smoke, choking
The workers groping
For exits from this scene
But windows are barred, and back exits padlocked
And the fire and smoke
Are all astoke.
Workers fall one by one;
Now their lives are undone.

The Dead

Chikofsky, the owner himself and
His son, Sidney, who had escaped through the entry door,
But returned heroically with fire extinguisher
Only to succumb.
And
Isadore and Clara Singer, Holocaust survivors,
Leaving four year old daughter, Ann, now
Orphaned, and
Rosa Annie Kitts, and
Abraham Weizberg, and
Priva Naiman, and
Bluma Eichenbaum, and
Wilfred Gutzin,
Have all gone down.
Choking their last and burned
To death.

The Inquiry

Up and at 'em, Jaybee Salsberg:
"Why was the fire and smoke so devastating?"
"The cutting machine was faulty?"
"The celanese textiles were too flammable?"
And the sealed windows and doors
Prevented escape.
This practice is now universal, down here you say.
"Criminal," you say.
Salsberg is irate, in a real state.
"We cannot wait to enforce safety rules."
Up on his feet, Joe's at white heat
And he'll take no guff
His words are rough.
Because workers died, burned and choking
For want of an unlocked exit.

REVIEW



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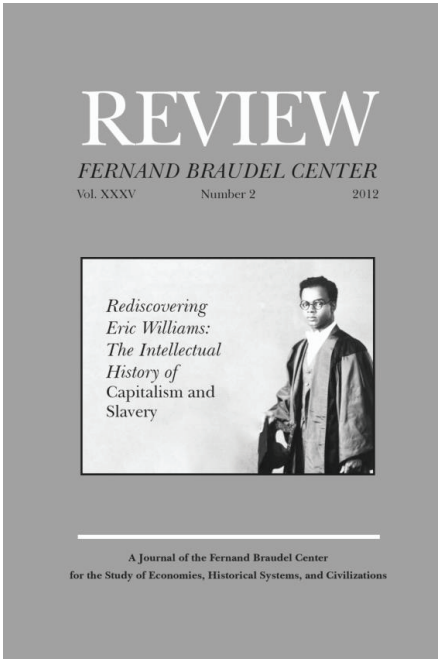
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