

‘They Died from Misadventure and Accident’: Learning from our Missing Ancestral Failures

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Abstract

White ethnics have fashioned a valorizing narrative of hard-working ancestors playing by the rules and ‘making it.’ This narrative distinguishes between ‘us’ and parasitic ‘them’ (today’s marginalized non-white migrants) in a highly selective fashion. What if we interrogate the universality of the Ellis Island saga? Recovering stories of forgotten people, immigrant ‘failures,’ by applying Carlo Ginzburg’s microhistory approach, reveals many victims in early 1900s America. This paper interrogates these gaps in my maternal grandpa’s family, the Albanese of Newark. My grandpa had an older sister (born in Italy) only everyone swears there was no Maria, even though there she is in the 1910 census, 19-year-old lamp-factory worker. Then I discovered in November 1910, there was a horrible Aetna Lamp Factory fire, two blocks from their home. This fire resulted in 27 deaths, three months before the better-known Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. Was this why Maria disappeared? Another sister fled an abusive husband, only to be threatened with prosecution under the Mann Act for crossing state lines for ‘immoral purposes.’ Then there was brother Ben, riding freight cars for years before ending up in an L.A. flophouse. Other invisible immigrants appear in brief newspaper notices, as of a 19-year-old striker shot in the back by Pinkertons, or runaway men whose photos called out from the ‘gallery of missing husbands.’ Revealing industrial-age microhistories of loss and trauma can (potentially) resurrect empathy toward today’s migrants or remind us of the hefty blood price capitalism exacted from workers, in 1910 no less than 2023.

Keywords

Family history, industrial fires, immigration, Progressive Era

For many white Americans, a valorizing foundational myth has been created on the shores of Ellis Island. The immigration processing station where 12 million European migrants arrived, most between 1892 and 1924, has, for many descendants of these migrants, joined Plymouth Rock as the birthplace of American liberty, as Matthew Frye Jacobson has noted (Jacobson, 2006.) For Slavic, Italian, or Jewish Americans, privileging the Ellis Island saga affords a legitimacy to such white ethnics, while simultaneously effacing brutal atrocities visited on African Americans, Indigenous nations, and other non-whites (Jacobson, 2006.) If America ‘began’ with the arrival of Litvaks, Calabrians, and Ruthenians (among many other white ethnics) fleeing poverty and persecution, with these groups’ challenges and achievements front and center, enduring racism is moved to the margins, or dismissed as something for which white

ethnics bear no culpability, since ‘slavery ended so long ago,’ decades before those Ellis Island ancestors arrived.

The Wall of Ancestors unveiled on Ellis Island to coincide with the 1986 hundredth anniversary of a renovated Statue of Liberty enshrined this myth. And, full disclosure, two of my paternal ancestors can be found on the ancestral immigrant wall. Certainly, there were reasons to celebrate ancestors that did not embrace the conservative implications of the Reagan administration sponsoring the 1986 Ellis Island rebranding. Not every descendant of an Ellis Island immigrant, for example, endorsed the president’s slandering of Blacks and Latino/as as ‘welfare cheats.’ (Smith, 1992; Holland, 1993.)

Still, privileging the Ellis Island saga developed in a conservative political milieu, one that has only continued down a rightward trajectory in subsequent decades. Slavic, Jewish, and Italian forebears have somewhat ironically been deployed rhetorically on behalf of a contemporary anti-immigrant agenda. Many conservative white ethnics have fashioned a valorizing narrative of hard-working ancestors ‘making it.’ Assertions one’s forebears arrived legally, with commitment to ‘hard work’ and playing by the rules is juxtaposed to denigration of ‘those people’ whose supposed moral failings are called out for their own poverty. Too many wall-builders and anti-immigrant foot soldiers have sanctified the myth their ancestors arrived with notions of liberty, self-sacrifice, and almost innate American patriotism. This narrative distinguishes between ‘us’ and parasitic ‘them’ (today’s marginalized non-white migrants), ironically deploying some of the same epithets of laziness, violence, or cultural incompatibility with American institutions that in the early 1900s were hurled at Slavs, Italians, and others. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, restrictionists demanded that America stop the flow of immigrants they alleged were degenerating the American racial stock. Nativists such as Lothrop Stoddard warned of the ‘menace of the underman’ imperiling America; the threat that he, Madison Grant, Henry Cabot Lodge, and other restrictionists warned against came from Italians, Poles, and Jews (Stoddard, 1922; Grant, 1920; Lodge, 1891.)

Invoking virtuous ancestor, however, relies on a selective fashioning of the Southeast European immigrant, a shtetl¹ of the mind that wilfully forgets less palatable aspects of an earlier era’s newcomers, and the moral panic an ‘invasion’ of Slavs, Italians, and Jews triggered in old stock Americans. Beyond that, the standard immigrant saga is teleological – presenting a ‘just so’ narrative of linear progression toward inevitable achievement. This telling, too, omits the racialized barriers to the New Deal programs of the 1930s that enabled Slavic, Jewish, or Italian ascent out of the slums and into the allegedly preferable all-white suburbs, but red-lined any similar move by African Americans or Latino/as. (Roediger, 2005; Rothstein, 2018; Satter, 2010.)²

But neither do the Ellis Island saga sayers, the shamans of the shtetl, recall white ethnic ‘failures.’ What if we interrogate the universality of the Ellis Island saga? Recovering stories of

¹ A shtetl was a small Jewish village in the tsarist Russian empire.

² Redlining was the process by which African American neighborhoods and residents were deemed inherently bad risks and thus ineligible for federally insured home mortgages. African American neighborhoods were literally lined in red on government metropolitan maps, and Blacks and Latino/as were denied mortgages when they sought to purchase homes in suburbs, as they were deemed ‘bad risks.’ Such federal policies prevailed into the 1970s.

forgotten people, immigrant failures, by applying Carlo Ginzburg's microhistory approach, reveals many victims in early 1900s America (Ginzburg, 1993.) Mark Wyman reminds us, too, many migrants returned to their home countries after only relatively short stays in America, and that for nearly half of Italian and Slavic migrants, the Ellis Island saga was a 'round trip to America' (Wyman, 1993.) Such returnees invariably dropped off the American narrative in subsequent decades when descendants of the remainers narrated the immigrant tale.

Bruce Stave and John Sutherland, too, in assessing the immigrants interviewed for the 1930s Works Progress Administration, a federal agency of the Franklin Roosevelt administration providing, among other things, employment to writers and artists, note interviewees often recounted privation, hunger, and physical peril in the New World. One Polish Jewish interviewee in the 1930s referred to America as the 'land of false teeth and wooden legs,' since so many countrymen suffered physical disfigurement in industrial America (Stave and Sutherland, 1994, 49.) Only decades later would those who had survived mine cave-ins, diseases or factory fires – or more often, their descendants – recall industrial America through the fog of nostalgia. Earlier migrants, though, knew of the prevalence of industrial accidents such as the frequent fatal mine cave-ins recorded by a Slovak historian (Čulen, 1942.) For immigrants, living, or dying, in industrial America was no forger of virtue.

Such industrial accidents rapidly negated any benefits immigrants had managed to accrue through their celebrated thrift, hard work, and law-abiding ways. Nest eggs, and lives, were wiped out in a minute by such disasters. Iconic disasters may be recalled by some Americans, with the Triangle Shirtwaist fire of 1911 in which 147 garment workers perished often cited (*New York Times*, 1911; Von Drehle, 2003.) But what is forgotten is the frequency of such accidents, that the Triangle fire was no outlier. Acknowledgment of such tragedies, too, is often framed in an otherwise valorizing narrative of what white ethnic migrants achieved despite the hazards they faced, hurdles overcome through 'hard work' and determination.

A microhistory, though, of one immigrant family might facilitate an interrogation of the universality of the triumphalist Ellis Island saga. There is no guarantee empathy for current migrants will be the end product of such a microhistory. What a colleague has aptly termed 'oppression bingo,' where the suffering (real or imagined) of one's 'in-group' negates consideration of the horrors inflicted on other marginalized groups, may win out. Still, revealing industrial-age microhistories of loss and trauma can (potentially) resurrect empathy toward today's migrants while reminding us, too, of the hefty blood price capitalism exacted from workers, in 1910 no less than 2023.³ The bulk of this article, then, offers a microhistory of an immigrant who didn't make it and is therefore forgotten: Maria Albanese, one of the lost people of Newark, New Jersey.

If you've never heard of Maria Albanese, don't worry, you're not alone. Maria Albanese was the oldest sister of my maternal grandfather, Carmen (nicknamed Charlie.) If she really existed. Over the last few years, several distant cousins and I, great-grandkids of long-departed Italian immigrants, have been working to trace our family. Through looking at the federal censuses from 1900, 1910 and 1920, as well as records from St. Lucy's Roman Catholic Church in Newark,

³ Thanks to Michael Zweig for alerting me to this phrase.

I've compiled the approximate birth dates of the ten children of Stefano Albanese and his two wives. My grandpa was the oldest son, born in 1898 in Long Island City, Queens. The 1900 and 1910 censuses listed, too, his sister, Maria, born in September 1891, the only child born in Italy.⁴

The only problem is no one in the family remembers her. Cousins swore there was no older sister, even though in both the 1900 and 1910 censuses she shows up. In 1900 the family was in Babylon Township, Long Island, where she's listed as nine years old, born in Italy. By 1910, the family was at 69 Hoyt Street in Newark, and she again is listed. This time Maria is recorded as a 19-year-old woman, again listed as born in Italy, recorded as a 'laborer, in lamp factory.' By the 1920 census she, as well as my grandfather, were not listed at her stepmother's house in Newark. But perhaps she had already married, I surmised. Nevertheless, this evidence on two different censuses indicated a Maria Albanese had been born in Italy in 1891 and emigrated, with her mother, in 1897, and a few cousins grudgingly allowed there must have been an older sister after all. Still, no one remembered her, and nobody knew what had become of this woman.

Any number of misfortunes might have befallen this missing sister, as so many laboring children, often the sole support of their families, never made it out of their teens. My Italian grandmother, for example, had a sister who died at 19 in Newark, only a year after both her parents died within a week of each other at 52 and 48.⁵ Maria Albanese might have continued as a mystery, were it not for that notation in the census, 'lamp factory worker.' Several months after revisiting this family mystery, I came across an article on the Triangle Shirtwaist fire in *Amerikansky russky viestnik*, newspaper of a Ruthenian⁶ fraternal society. The fire in which 147 garment workers had perished was scandalous national news in March 1911, so it wasn't surprising to find an account of the disaster in Ruthenian. But this article concluded by noting there had been many similar fatal fires in industrial America, and offered a list of the deadliest recent fires – including a Newark factory fire in November 1910, which had resulted in 27 fatalities (*Amerikansky russky viestnik*, 1911.)

That fire had started the morning of Saturday, November 26, 1910, at Newark's Anchor Lamp Factory on High and Orange streets. Two blocks from the Albanese home. The fire broke out when the flammable gas wicks on which a young girl was working exploded, igniting the grease-soaked floorboards of her workplace. Such accidents were so common her foreman at first ignored her cries for help. But the flames rapidly spread throughout the building, a factory that had been the scene of ten fires within the previous ten years. As would be the case four months later at Greenwich Village's Triangle Shirtwaist Company, fire doors were sealed shut, either to keep young girls from leaving for unauthorized breaks or to keep union organizers out. As the sparks from the lamp's wick ignited greasy rags and the old factory's wooden floorboards, one

⁴ 1920 U.S. census, Newark, New Jersey (E.D. 178, Reel 3), Matilda (widow of Stefano Albanese.) 666 N. Seventh Street; 1910 U.S. census, Newark, New Jersey, (E.D. 57, Reel 878), Stefano Albanese, head of household. 69 Hoyt Street; 1900 U.S. census, Babylon Township, New York (E.D. 735, Reel 1165), Stefano Albaney [sic], head of household; St. Lucy's Roman Catholic Church, Newark, New Jersey, baptismal records, at Seton Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey.

⁵ Holy Sepulcher Cemetery, Newark/East Orange, New Jersey, Giovanni, Maria, and Nancy Desiderio graves, Path K, Lot 5, Grave 7. Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars*, 101; Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*, 84.

⁶ Ruthenians are a Slavic people of eastern Slovakia and western Ukraine who worship in the Byzantine Catholic church.

can only imagine the terror of the Italian and Jewish immigrant girls trapped by the flames, barricaded on the other side of the locked fire doors. For some, this November inferno was likely not their first experience with industrial mayhem. How many had traumatically lived through one of Newark's previous industrial fires?

As journalist Mary Alden Hopkins noted in a 1911 exposé of the Newark tragedy, the High Street building was a catastrophe waiting to happen. Erected in 1855, the building had first housed a firearms manufactory, but over the years been subdivided to accommodate various tenants. Fifty years of grease and oil soaked the rickety wooden floorboards and stairs, and the narrow wooden stairway from the fourth floor was approachable only by walking around three sides of an open elevator shaft. As noted, the narrow fire door was locked during business hours, in violation of a 1904 law (Hopkins, 1911.)⁷

The four-story building had at one time housed three companies 'that kept on hand three hundred gallons of naphtha ... and two gallons of gasoline.' In November 1910 only one tenant used such material, but Hopkins noted 'this one was neatly sandwiched between two inflammable ones.' A paper-box company and machinist shared the first floor. The second-floor tenant was the Newark Paper Box Company, while on the floor above, young women, maybe Maria Albanese among them, worked at the Anchor and Aetna lamp factories; on the fourth, top floor was the Wolf Muslin Undergarment Company. Paper boxes and cotton garments produced in proximity to incandescent lamps, all housed in a greasy old substandard structure. No wonder insurers rated the structure an extra-hazard and charged its owners double the normal rates. Ten fires in ten years might have required some sterner measures (Hopkins, 1911.)

On November 26, the consequences of free-wheeling capitalism and benign neglect came home with a vengeance. Sadie Hampson, one of 200 young girls working in the ratty old building early Saturday morning, was busy 'flashing filaments' at Anchor Lamp. Six days a week she placed carbon filaments in a vacuum pump, removed the air, injected gasoline vapor into the tube, and flipped an electric switch to carbonize the filament. Repeat hundreds of times a day. This time, Sadie later related to a coroner's jury, 'There was a flash of fire in my face, and I screamed.' The scream alerted her foreman, who came running. With the flames rapidly spreading, he threw a bucket of sand on the flames. When that didn't stop the fire, he told other workers to get more sand. No one called the fire department, even though a station house was right across the street. This neglect had become standard practice at Anchor, where those ten previous fires had also gone unreported. Hopkins noted 'If they called in the firemen the fire would go on the records of the Fire Department.' But 'the building already had a bad name,' and rather than run the risk of

⁷ Much of my account of the Newark fire is based on Hopkins. See, too, *Newark Evening Star*, November 26, 1910, 1, 'Find Bodies in Factory Ruins;' *New York Times*, November 28, 1910, 'The Newark Disaster;' *New York Times*, February 23, 2011, 'In Newark, Wrestling a Fatal Fire from Oblivion' by Peter Applebome; Kiley Bense, 'No One Was to Blame,' <https://lookingbackward.substack.com/p/newark-factory-fire-1910>; 'High Street Inferno Took 27 Lives But Helped Bring Reform,' Newark Public Library, <https://knowingnewark.npl.org/high-street-inferno-took-27-lives-but-helped-bring-reform/>; 'We Never Forget, the Labor Martyrs Project,' <https://weneverforget.org/tag/newark-factory-fire-of-1910/>; Guy Sterling, Newark fire centennial, <https://guysterling.wordpress.com/high-street-fatal-fire-1910-2010-centennial/>; New Jersey Jewish Times, 'Centenary Events Recall Newark Fire,' <https://njewishnews.timesofisrael.com/centenary-events-recall-newark-fire/>; Gordon Bond, 'Newark's 1910 High Street Factory Fire,' <https://gardenstatelegacy.com> (all accessed February 23, 2023.)

punitive city action or even higher insurance premiums the company sought to handle the disaster itself. ‘When a factory has the habit of incipient fires, it is just as well not to advertise the fact,’ Hopkins sardonically noted. Whether alerting firemen to the hazard would have done any good was debatable. Fires at this particular factory and throughout the city were common – and overlooked by the Newark Fire Department and officials more interested in attracting businesses to their city than protecting Italian, Slavic, and Jewish workers who toiled in such factories (Hopkins, 1911.)

Ad hoc sand bucketing proved futile, and a girl was finally sent across the street to the firehouse. All that came was one fireman with an extinguisher, which did nothing to stop the blaze. Finally, a general alarm was called. By this point most of the workers from the lamp factories, as well as the first and second floor businesses, managed to flee the inferno. But the 116 women in the fourth-floor garment loft were not so fortunate. The forelady unlocked the door to the stairs, allowing some workers to escape, but either the door slammed shut or someone relocked it. By this point the flames were already consuming the stairs and the wooden platform to the only fire escape. Hopkins relates ‘Probably from the moment those hundred and sixteen girls looked up from their work and knew they were trapped on the top floor, fifty feet from the ground, with the fire below them, they were in the grip of fright.’ The wooden platform to the one inadequate fire escape that still would have left them far above High Street ‘fell to the floor like paste-board.’ A few girls reached the red-hot iron rungs of the fire ladder only to see it collapse under the weight of a crush of panicked girls (Hopkins, 1911, *Newark Evening Star*, 1910a.)

As would occur even more horrifically four months later at Triangle Shirtwaist, the Newark garment workers facing incineration jumped from the burning building, four stories onto High Street, and the sickening thud of women hitting the pavement was a nightmare onlookers would remember for sixty years or more. Hopkins recounted, ‘One girl struck a tree, and was dead before she reached the ground. One girl broke her ankle on the steam pipe. Another came down astride the steam pipe. Another caught by her cheek on the open picket gate and hung until the picket broke. But the things that happened are too horrible to relate’ (Hopkins, 1911.)

Indeed, they were. Leaping girls broke their backs, others were impaled on the spikes of an iron fence, and one girl bounced against a brick wall. As Peter Adey has noted, in Newark the deadly fence was ‘intended to keep workers in and others out, just as they were in the Shirtwaist Fire’ (Adey, 2022, 12.) Other leaping girls were reported ‘crashing through the roof of a lower building’ or crashing through the pavement (McKeon, 1911, 535; Duchez, 1911.) Such a gruesome spectacle attracted a huge crowd watching in agony the ‘many windows, each window jammed with girls.’ The building’s engineer Lorin Paddock, managed to get to the fourth floor, and tried to get a girl, Mildred Wolters, to jump to a ladder that only reached the third floor. The girl jumped into the thick smoke, missed the ladder and fell to the ground. Paddock later learned she had died. Skimping on safety had lined the pockets of a few fat cat capitalists, but it was the garment workers who paid the price (Hopkins, 1911.)

The crowd on High Street would never forget the sight of girls plummeting to the pavement. Among the crowd was my grandfather, then-12-year-old Charlie Albanese, stunned by the disaster only two blocks from his home. If indeed his sister Maria worked in the building, he no doubt was doubly terrified. But family tragedy or no, memory of the Newark fire never left him.

When I started looking into this tragedy and speculating this might be the reason for Maria's non-appearance in family memory, I shared the story with my brother. He related something I had never heard. 'When I was very young,' he wrote, 'Grandpa Albanese told me that when he was 12 or 13, he witnessed a horrible fire at a factory where many girls burned to death. And he said he remembered that a big fat man caught two girls in his arms when they jumped from a window. ...I figured it was [the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire.] ...Then many years later, I read about the earlier fire in Newark, and it made sense that this was the fire Grandpa told me about.'⁸

As High Street, site of the inferno, was only two blocks from the Albanese apartment, this had to have been the fire Charlie recalled more than 60 years later. And journalist Hopkins did indeed relate in *McClure's Magazine* engineer Paddock ran and caught girls who had leaped from the fourth floor before they could hit the ground; even though the girls were saved Paddock dislocated his shoulder and passed out (Hopkins, 1911.)

Sadly, 27 girls from the Wolf garment shop were not so lucky; eight died in the flames, the rest after they leaped. Other bodies, though, were not recovered as the flames caused the building to collapse; some corpses were unidentified, and other victims may have perished afterwards from injuries. The *Newark Evening Star* for days after the inferno reported human remains badly mangled and burned were recovered from the third and fourth floors of the collapsed building. The bones were so badly charred, the paper reported, it was unlikely some victims would ever be identified (*Newark Evening Star*, 1910d.) While the casualties occurred in the fourth-floor garment shop, and not in the lamp factory where the blaze began (and my great aunt may have worked), and thus I am no closer to finding out whatever happened to the sister no one remembers, the 27 victims certainly once had families who mourned them, and maybe descendants who chose to forget an aunt who died too young, an ancestor they never knew.

Even if Maria survived this fire, the trauma may have haunted her. A Slavic girl who survived told Hopkins months later she was still having nightmares about the fire. 'Something in my head turns round with me,' she said. 'I get hot in my head. If there is a sound in the night I scream. I think my bed is breaking, and such nonsense' (Hopkins, 1911.) Even the families of the martyrs likely were plagued by such nightmares. The *Newark Evening Star* noted while the factory collapsed police had all they could do to keep the crowd at bay. 'Relatives and friends of those employed in the building fought like wild animals to gain admittance, but police and firemen forced them back to fall moaning and crying on pavement and sidewalk' (*Newark Evening Star*, 1910d.) Similar scenes were reported at the morgue and city hospitals to which victims were brought, with the paper noting the cacophony of 'foreigners' crying out in various languages for news of their loved ones (Bond, *Newark Evening Star*, 1910b.) In that 'bedlam,' was my grandfather one of the 'foreigners' shoved away from the scene; did his father rush to Saint Michael's Hospital for news of his daughter?

The 27 recorded casualties were those who had been trapped in or jumped from the fourth-floor garment factory. The fire had rapidly spread upwards to the garment lofts, through the open elevator shaft, consuming the grease-soaked floors and piles of garments. As the *Daily People*,

⁸ E-mail from Michael Zecker, June 12, 2022.

newspaper of the Socialist Labor Party, asserted, Newark was ‘the latest illustration of how wantonly the members of the working class are sacrificed on the altar of capital for profit’ (*Daily People*, 1910.) Even our underwear is seeped in blood.

While it’s likely that Maria Albanese – if she was employed on High Street – escaped along with most of the lamp companies’ employees, the *Evening Star* noted human remains were so badly burned even on the third floor that ‘there is every indication that more bodies, or the remains of bodies, rest in the hills of mortar, brick and charred beams within the blackened walls of the building.’ The paper added ‘Even more saddening is the practical certainty that it will be impossible to establish the identity of any bodies that may be unearthed’ *Newark Evening Star*, 1910d.)

Was Maria Albanese among them? I don’t know. But even if she hadn’t been a victim on November 26, imagine having to go back to work next Monday in some equally hazardous sweatshop, another fire-trap every bit as bad. Day after day, year after year. Wondering when you’d be next. The sweatshops of Newark offered no guarantees, and the High Street disaster loomed over the city’s workers for years to come.

Others – can we call them the lucky ones? – leaped from the flames and walked away with ‘only’ a broken arm, burns to the face, and those lingering nightmares that Slavic girl recounted to Hopkins. How many lives were shortened because of what they suffered that day, or a day less spectacular in its sweatshop miseries? Did some workers at Wolf or Anchor expire later from their wounds? Could that have been my great aunt’s fate?

The horror of the disaster was made apparent in the magazine *The Survey*, which ran a graphic (in every sense of the word) diagram of the fire, showing women leaping from fourth-floor windows and the shabby interior of the building, where ‘girls jumped over tables to reach the window.’ Other girls were shown impaled on the iron fence or splayed lifeless on the sidewalk (McKeon, 1911.) The fire was international news, with a similar illustration appearing in Paris’ *Le Petit Journal Supplément Illustré*. In this illustration firemen with a net vainly look skyward as women plunge to the ground, while another fireman leads a prostrate woman from the scene (*Le Petit Journal Supplément Illustré*, 1910.) Closer to home, on the very day of the fire, the *Newark Evening Star* published an illustration of a weeping factory girl throwing her hat to the ground as she jumped. ‘How Many Young Girls Leaped to Their Death?’ the paper asked (*Newark Evening Star*, 1910c.) Although such diagrams and illustrations were abstractions designed to elicit pity, the generic leaping girl had a name, a brother, a story. Were these effaced by families (like the Albanese clan?) too grief-stricken to remember?

In the fire’s immediate aftermath, the *Newark Evening Star* provided faces and family sorrow to humanize the victims. Photographs of the dead girls were published, some smiling, others indicating serious young women, many of whom already were the sole breadwinners of poor immigrant families. Stories in the paper offered a few especially tragic vignettes. Frances Kastka was a widow supporting her mother and young children, living in Austria-Hungary with their grandmother. She had hoped to earn enough money to send for her family. Kastka, also spelled Kunseka elsewhere in the paper, had boarded with another immigrant employee of Wolf Muslin, who had also died (*Newark Evening Star*, 1910g.) Equally tragic was the story of Theresa

Totarelli (or, Tortarella, or Tartaglia, as the paper variously spelled it. Even fire victims' true names were quickly effaced.) Her children, ages 10, 6 and 4, wanted to know when mama would come home, and what was in the 'big box' in their living room over which grandparents and neighbors wept. The children had already lost their father, who, although said to be 'living somewhere in Chicago,' had abandoned the family. 'In three years she has not heard from her husband.' Theresa's body was the last to be identified. Her father, a cobbler, had brought another body back from the morgue, only to realize this was not his daughter, as this body wore earrings, and Theresa had had none. He went back to the morgue and found the correct one, his daughter, whom he identified by metal supports he had added to the soles of her shoes. A second daughter, Maria Daniano, also at first looked likely to expire, but was, the paper noted, recovering from her burns at Newark City Hospital (*Newark Evening Star*, 1910h; Hopkins, 1911.)

Three sisters, Dora, Minnie and Tillie Gottlieb, died in the fire, but seven sisters and brothers, as well as their parents, remained to mourn them. The paper noted the father walked his neighborhood in a daze, repeatedly visiting the graves. Their mother had previously been hospitalized, and the family was afraid to tell her about Millie, Dora and Tillie, the oldest of whom was only 29, fearing she would die if she heard the news (*Newark Evening Star*, 1910e, 1910j).

A hundred years later, retired *Newark Star-Ledger* reporter Guy Sterling (with whom I worked during my former journalism career), was determined the victims would not be forgotten. He led a campaign culminating in a memorial to the fatalities being placed on the factory site on the disaster's hundredth anniversary. The marker notes dozens were injured in the blaze, nameless, faceless victims. Again, I have no proof Maria was working there that November morning. But even if Maria didn't perish in this fire, or wasn't even employed at Anchor or Aetna, did some similar fate befall her? And do the descendants of the siblings of Mildred Wolters, only 16 years old, and the Gottlieb girls have phantom aunts the bulk of the family is certain never really lived? And who remembers those who were 'only' injured that day or any other day, in any of America's countless sweatshop cities? Would that memorial, to the faceless, nameless victims to the slower, no less lethal rapacity of capital, have to be several hundred miles long, longer perhaps than all the country's war memorial tolls? Who could count the names?

Sterling, though, was determined to remember Mildred Wolters, Teresina Tartaglia (as the memorial that now stands in Newark has her name), and the Gottlieb sisters. Historian Gordon Bond says Sterling tracked down the burial sites for as many victims as he could. The Gottlieb sisters' graves were in Newark's Grove Street Cemetery and Sterling 'returned on the Sunday between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur in the hope that perhaps surviving family might show up.' No family did, but Sterling continued his vigil for the martyred garment workers (Sterling, 2010; *New Jersey Jewish Times*, 2010.)

By the 21st century Newark is receding into the embers of time, at least the city of thriving Jewish and Italian communities and hundreds of industrial workshops, so maybe by now no one would remember Aunt Minnie, Aunt Tillie, even if they had had long and happy lives. But as with Maria Albanese, maybe survivors remembered too much. Into their 80s or 90s, maybe no surviving Gottlieb brother or sister showed up because they *had* to forget. Forget her laughing youthful face (like Maria Rizzolo, whose haunting, happy photo was one the *Newark Evening*

Star ran after she'd already burned or was crushed to death.) It had to be effaced by grieving children and brothers and sisters, if they were going to carry on. Maybe not only the fire escapees had nightmares of burning and trauma. A younger brother, 12, watching the plunging bodies, the crushed disposable factory parts splayed up and down High Street, maybe he had to forget Maria. Maybe Charlie like one of the seven other Gottlieb sisters who beat the odds in November 1910 had to pretend his sister had never existed. If he held onto her name would he crash through the sidewalk like one of those who ended up in Mullin's morgue? Never speak of her again or his heart would crumble into ashes like a rickety lamp factory sweatshop.

Journalist Hopkins wrote in the fire's aftermath city residents were confident "something" was going to be done. The culprits were to be brought to justice" (Hopkins, 2011.) Indeed, in the days after the tragedy the *Newark Evening Star* reported officials vowed they would get to the bottom of the crime (*Newark Evening Star*, 1910d, 1910f, 1910i.) The *New York Times*, too, argued "that the place was a fire-trap many persons must have known. The whole State of New Jersey has been stirred to indignation," with a coroner's inquest and governor-appointed commission looking into who was responsible for the disaster. "Obviously the stable door is now to be securely locked" (*New York Times*, 1910.)

But a few months later, the door flew wide open. As Bond notes, "Stunningly, the coroner's jury could find no legal nail upon which to hang an indictment of anyone" (Bond, 2010.) City building code officers said all they could do was tell the owners to install a fire escape; they said they were powerless to see if this order had been followed. No one, too, was held culpable for the locked door that blocked the only exit from the fourth floor. City officials said laws passed by the Legislature meant the state Labor Department was responsible for workers' safety, not the city. The companies renting the workspaces at High Street said it was the property's owners, not they, who had to see about the building's safety. In the end, the jury glibly exonerated all concerned. In the case of Carrie Robrecht and the other girls who died in the blaze, the jury said they "came to ... death by misadventure and accident caused by a fall ... and not as the result of the criminal act, either of omission or commission, on the part of any individual or individuals, whether as private citizens or public officials" (Hopkins, 1911.) In industrial America, Newark was just one of those things. Accidents happen. See you at work Monday morning, bright and early. Maybe.

That no one was held accountable must have infuriated the Albanese and Gottlieb clans, but the non-*mea culpa* astounded even middle-class professionals. Engineer Peter Joseph McKeon wrote in the magazine *The Survey*, "Thus, private responsibility is left to run in a vicious circle and those concerned shift it about among themselves." McKeon warned "the Newark casualty" was also connected to "the New York dangers," as the metropolis contained hundreds of buildings in at least as shoddy a condition as High Street (McKeon, 1911, 537.)

Four months later, an even greater horror, the Triangle Shirtwaist fire, resulted in 147 deaths, but again, no one was held criminally liable. The *Literary Digest* commented the devastated building "was a veritable fire-trap, tho not worse, perhaps, than hundreds of other buildings in the city." It was noted the staid *New York Tribune* had commented regarding the "not guilty" verdict, "The monstrous conclusion of the law is that the slaughter was no one's fault, that it couldn't be helped, or perhaps even that, in the fine legal phrase which is big enough to cover a multitude of

defects of justice, it was ‘an act of God!’ This conclusion is revolting to the moral sense of the community’ (*Literary Digest*, 1912.)

The socialist press was even more vehement in denouncing the Newark and Triangle Shirtwaist verdicts. The Socialist Labor Party paper the *Daily People* referred to ‘Newark’s fire horror’ as the latest example of the ‘ever present and great risk of working class under capitalism’ and was sure ‘This holocaust upon the altar of commercialism furnishes another lesson to the working class’ (*Daily People*, 1910.) The owners of Wolf, and then Triangle Shirtwaist, had rung a few extra bucks out of a few extra bodies, writer Louis Ducheze argued in the *International Socialist Review*. After the Triangle Shirtwaist disaster he noted ‘Investigations since the horror have shown that there are more than 10,000 buildings in the city equally as dangerous as was the Asch building. A fire such as took place had been predicted several times since the Newark, N.J., massacre a few weeks ago. It didn’t come as a great surprise. Nor will others that are sure to follow come as a surprise’ (Ducheze, 1911.) As we’ll see, Newark suffered many other fire catastrophes in the following years. And, with no union protection and with families to feed, surviving workers at Wolf Undergarment were in a perilous position even if they were luckier than the Gottlieb girls. The *Newark Evening Star* reported Wolf offered employment to surviving Newark employees in his New York factory, which he assured them was safe. He even offered a dollar a week above their pay for car fare to Manhattan (*Newark Evening Star*, 1910k.) It was unrecorded whether any scarred survivors of High Street took Wolf up on his offer.

If he knew of Wolf’s magnanimous offer, the socialist journalist Ducheze, though, was likely unimpressed. In recounting the legal exoneration of Triangle Shirtwaist’s owners, he incredulously asked, ‘Violations of the law? Yes, enough to hang half a dozen rich exploiters and politicians. But these men won’t hang.’ Recounting the Greenwich Village scene where terrified girls leaped from the ninth floor and ‘plunged through pavement,’ Ducheze snarled, ‘Everything was insured but the slaves’ (Ducheze, 1911.) Another *International Socialist Review* article, ‘God did it,’ vehemently rejected the exoneration of Triangle Shirtwaist’s owners by ‘a New York jury composed of capitalistic cockroaches.’ To the canard the fire was ‘an act of God,’ the writer demanded, ‘Hasn’t God any manhood at all? How long will He allow Himself to be made the goat for capitalist crimes?’ (Russell, 1912.)

Likewise, the New York socialist paper *The Call*, spared factory owners and their enablers no venom. ‘There are no guilty. There are only the dead, and the authorities will forget the case as speedily as possible,’ the paper predicted. While the Triangle Shirtwaist fire has survived in working-class memory, that horrific blaze already was consigning the Newark fire to amnesia. More pointedly, *The Call* asserted,

Capital can commit no crime when it is in pursuit of profits. Of course, it is well known that those who were killed in the Triangle disaster are only part, and a small part, of those murdered in industry during the passing year. There were only 147 incinerated and mangled. But there were thousands of others who met a similarly agonizing fate during the year of 1911. The whole capitalist system is based upon such unspeakable systematic murder, and those who defend the capitalist system defend those murders. (*Literary Digest*, 1912.)

Hopkins noted some officials also were stunned and ‘told indignantly of conditions they were powerless to change.’ Newark Fire Chief Asher warned, ‘There’ll be a worse holocaust than this one in Newark yet. I can name a hundred factories worse than this one was’ (Hopkins, 1911.)

In New Jersey the High Street disaster loomed, always an unanswered warning. ‘They died by accident and misadventure,’ and other misadventures quickly followed. Only a week later flammable disaster threatened the disposable people of Newark. When a fire broke out in the basement of a barber shop, the *Evening Star* reported a ‘tenement panic’ when frightened women sought to leap from building apartments. The paper said the blaze wasn’t dangerous, but women with infants in their arms were about to leap when drop-ladder fire escapes malfunctioned. Firemen rescued them with their ladders ‘and carried the crazed ones to the street.’ The implication seems to have been some irrational hysteria afflicted the women, who, the paper noted, were mostly ‘Hebrew, Polish, Slavish and other nationalities.’ In 1910 such immigrants were often derided by middle-class nativists as irrational, and the short item on the harmless cellar fire seems to have followed suit. Of course, such women knew all too well many of their peers could quickly perish in such fires; jumping first might not have seemed all that irrational a week after the Wolf building went up in flames (*Newark Evening Star*, 1910l.)

No lasting reforms were enacted in Newark, and ‘the altar of capital’ that the *Daily People* decried was fed by more victims in the following years. In 1915, fire consumed the George Stencil Company, which manufactured leather for automobile seats in a highly flammable process. Two Newark firefighters were killed in this blaze, which it was later determined could have been prevented if management had installed a sprinkler system. More lethal was a 1918 fire at the American Button Works. Seven girls, a man and a boy died as the firm crowded 200 workers into the ancient building to meet a government contract. As historian Charles Cummings notes in a newspaper column preserved on a Newark Public Library website, ‘Like the High Street fire, little attention had been paid to fire safety.’ The National Furniture Company was likewise completely gutted in a 1920 fire (Knowing Newark.)

Newark never outgrew its infamy as a city plagued by disastrous fires. Is it worth mentioning that only a few weeks after they moved in 1970, my Albanese grandparents’ old S. Eighteenth Street tenement burned to the ground, thankfully with no loss of life. Did Charlie, though, then think back to the far more infamous blaze he had witnessed as a 12-year-old boy?

Rather than directly address dangerous and oppressive sweatshop conditions, in the aftermath of High Street and Triangle, progressive writers advocated better-designed fire escapes, mandatory fire drills for factory employees and other tinkering around the edges of industrial capitalism. Moreover, when they wrote of such measures, even well-meaning middle-class reformers often lapsed into blaming the hysterical immigrant women for their own plight, much as the *Evening Star* derided panicky Slavic and Jewish women, the ‘crazed ones’ who threatened to jump from a burning tenement. Adey has recently written of the way falling, or leaping, women were consistently blamed for their plight due to their irrational actions. This blame-the-victim mentality was evident when the Newark coroner’s inquest cited the ‘maladaptive’ behavior of garment workers, but this has continued into the 21st century, when the mass deaths at Bangladesh’s Rana Plaza garment factory fire in 2013 was partly attributed by commentators to the panic of teenage female workers (*New York Times*, 2013; Long, 2014.) Likewise,

Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg commented after the London Grenfell Towers fire in 2017 that tenants did not use ‘common sense,’ implying their deaths were partly their fault (Proctor, 2019.) Adey powerfully links the enduring ‘aesthetics of erasure which silences a classed, raced and gendered politics which has served to render certain subjects and bodies as not only victims, but culpable.’ Indeed, following the jury’s exoneration of the Triangle Shirtwaist owners, Adey notes one juror told the *New York Times*, ‘I can’t see that anyone was responsible ... it must have been an act of God. ... I think that the girls, who undoubtedly have not as much intelligence as others might have in other walks of life, were inclined to fly into a panic.’ The panicky factory girl was in need of improvement, not the fire-traps in which she worked. In our age, we have outsourced such cavalier conditions to the so-called ‘Third World,’ but in 1910, Newark and Greenwich Village were the Third World, where Italians and Jews were dismissed as ‘gross little aliens.’ Newark back then was where ‘responsible citizens’ blamed disposable people for their forgettable deaths (Adey, 2022.)

Writers for the progressive magazine *The Survey* argued for better fire escapes, construction of fire walls, and mandatory fire drills, and no doubt they were well-intentioned in advocating such measures. But unlike in the socialist press, *The Survey* gave little consideration to whether the sweatshop and its substandard wages and working conditions themselves needed eradication. Only better fire safety measures were offered so that the next invariable conflagration might be less lethal. Consulting engineer Peter Joseph McKeon saw the Newark fire as ‘a challenge to public opinion throughout the metropolitan industrial district,’ not as a wider indictment of systemic industrial conditions. Likewise, engineer H.J.F. Porter said ‘the fire wall is an essential,’ which perhaps it was, but he was silent on whether eradicating sweatshop conditions at large might also, to Maria Albanese, be essential (McKeon, 1910; McKeon, 1911; Porter, 1911a; Porter, 1911b.)

In articles by engineers in *The Survey*, the irrationality of the immigrant woman worker could be controlled by Progressive expertise; professionals would fix her. Nothing was said on the quotidian miseries of capitalism, only the need to mitigate large-scale, embarrassing disasters. The ‘ignorance as to how to escape, impulsive efforts to get out’ by factory girls caused many of the factory ‘panics,’ engineer Porter argued (Porter 1911a.) McKeon also related a story of excitable Italian men who had to be physically restrained by firemen to prevent mass panic (McKeon, 1910.) There was almost something intrinsic to such workers’ irrationality in these accounts. When immigrant workers’ ‘impulse’ to flight was blocked in poorly designed factories, Porter wrote, they ‘become panic-stricken.’ He also argued the women who jumped out of windows were the ‘surplus people above the capacity of the stairways.’ Southeast European immigrants were often portrayed by restrictionists circa 1910 as ‘swarming’ and ‘invading’ the country, a menace in need of strict control. Here casualties at Newark were rendered ‘surplus people,’ again, disposable (Porter, 1911a; 1911b; McKeon, 1910, 1911.)

Porter continued in this vein. ‘The daily press recently told how fifty girls became hysterical and several fainted in a shirt factory,’ he wrote, ‘where a newspaper blazed up from a spark from an electric motor, and many women were trodden down in a senseless panic ...’ Immigrant workers, as with those fleeing Newark’s burning tenements, were invariably ‘hysterical,’ ‘senseless.’ Even those who escaped a factory fire were described by Porter as ‘nervously shocked.’ Female

workers had, Porter argued, a ‘tendency to faint or stampede,’ which fortunately a rationally designed fire drill could correct. He deplored the behavior of workers during another fire, one where he claimed workers ‘were in no danger whatever,’ but where directionless employees ‘became panic stricken. Several were seriously injured and considerable property was destroyed before they could be controlled.’ Control of the irrational, unruly worker before all else seems to have been Porter’s goal. Indeed, he contrasts this lamentable destruction of ‘considerable property’ (and some worker injury, but this by the by) with another factory, where an expert’s fire drills had been introduced and all employees evacuated the building within five minutes. ‘This was the net result of system and order,’ Porter proclaimed (Porter 1911a, 1911b.)

Such articles discussed ‘the way some of the problems presented by factory fires can be met’ although the solutions offered were only tinkering around the burnt edges of capitalism. Maybe end sweat shops? Of course not! Better ladders, rational fire drills for ‘hysterical’ Italian and Jewish girls! The plans were a ‘rationalization’ of the ‘ordered’ sweat shop, not its abolition.

It is evident McKeon and Porter were appalled by sweatshop hecatombs and were anxious to improve conditions. It is just their ethnic, gender and class assumptions blocked any large critique of capitalism. So, too, they relied on moral suasion to convince the factory owner it was ‘clearly in his interest to effect a prompt escape from the building.’ Porter urged employers to consider their ‘moral responsibility’ to lessen fire hazards in the sweat shops, something that as a bonus would prove a ‘paying investment for the employer.’ Further than that he could not go (Porter 1911a.)

Hitting the moral center of a factory owner may be aiming for a very tiny target. What if it’s only Jewish and Italian immigrants who die? Or African migrants in a substandard Bronx apartment building in 2022? Or Bangladeshi sneaker makers in 2013? Can a factory owner or realtor be convinced it’s worth his time or expense to protect them? In 1910 the outlook was grim. Especially when so many replacement parts, rational or not, were arriving daily at Ellis Island, coming to the factory gate on the very next boat. And while a fire drill at High Street would have been nice, an industrial engineer somehow in 1910 could never quite design a living wage. In 2013 in Bangladesh he still can’t manage the task.

The profit mongers try to control ‘irrational’ us, then dispose of us, again and again. Recovering our immigrant ‘disappeared,’ those who didn’t make it, may suggest the new proletariat and valorized immigrant ancestors have more in common than we care to acknowledge.

All these stories of gritty Newark have brought me no closer to finding my aunt. But if Maria didn’t perish at Anchor or Aetna, there were other ways she could have disappeared, dropped through the cracks in the triumphalist immigrant saga. In 1915, not that far from Newark, a young Ruthenian immigrant, John Sterančak, decided along with hundreds of other employees of the Rockefeller oil-refining works in Bayonne that he had had enough. They went on strike for higher pay and safer working conditions, not least protective gear and shorter spells at their dangerous tasks. Ironically, the first Slavs had arrived in 1883 in Bayonne as strikebreakers, but by 1915 they realized what a lousy deal they’d been handed in industrial America, and sought power in a union. Since temperatures soared above 150 degrees in the oil stills Slavic workers cleaned, temperatures so high they could only stay in the stills for three or four minutes at a time,

and since they only received \$2.50 a day for such hazardous work, who could blame them? (Dorsey, 1976; Bukowczyk, 1984; Burke, 1941.)

Apparently, Rockefeller could. As was typical, his company deployed armed private ‘detectives’ to break the strike. Historian John Bukowczyk writes that ‘for ... four days, Bergoff’s private army of so-called ‘nobles’ terrorized strikers by sniping at pickets and launching armed sorties into the assembled crowds. No fewer than five strikers died and several more sustained gunshot wounds before the corporate reign of terror at the hands of Bergoff’s ‘armed thugs’ finally subsided’ (Bukowczyk, 1984, 67.) Among them was the 19-year-old Ruthenian refinery worker John Sterančak, whose confident, cocky photo was reproduced in *Amerikansky russky viestnik*. The Ruthenian paper had already decried the company thugs for shooting into a pro-strike crowd leaving a meeting at Bayonne’s ‘Greek Catholic Hungarian-Ruthenian church,’ which ‘brutal attack infuriated the people so much that, whether one was a striker or not, they all abused the thieving ‘Pinkertons’ [sic].’ Standard Oil was condemned for recruiting these ‘detectives’ ‘from among the lowest and most morally degenerate people’ (*Amerikansky russky viestnik*, 1915a.)

All the forces of ‘respectable’ society were deployed against the strikers. The *Bayonne Evening Times* masthead proclaimed Bayonne ‘the peninsula of industry,’ so it’s no surprise its ‘advice to honest workingmen’ was obey Rockefeller, stop striking, don’t listen to outside agitators and work harder. Eighty-four hours a week cleaning oil stills at 150 degrees evidently wasn’t hard enough work. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, Carlo Tresca, and other Industrial Workers of the World organizers were prevented from speaking even though they had rented Mydosh’s Hall for a meeting. Mydosh and his son were beaten by the ‘nobles’ for good measure. The *Bayonne Evening Times* flatly declared, ‘No Meeting Will be Allowed Anywhere.’ Hired thugs made sure of that (Flynn, 1915.)

A different take on the strike appeared in the Ruthenian-language *Amerikansky russky viestnik*. It was the murder of their countryman Sterančak that really infuriated editors. ‘This paper is not in a position to describe the grief and sorrow of the father and mother of the young and already dead John,’ the paper said, ‘because everyone knows how they would have felt if their 19-year-old son had left this world with such an unexpected death.’ But the paper went beyond personal condolences and condemned ‘such a continuation of greedy capitalism’:

A man who works hard and makes millions for the capitalists, sees that he is wronged in his hard work; he sees that he is treated like a slave. He asks for a raise because he knows he deserves it, and he asks not to be enslaved by a ‘foreman’ or some other ‘boss.’ When a hard-working person sees that he cannot get by peacefully, he goes on strike and wants to claim his rights. And then what will he get? He gets a bullet to his raised head ...

‘That’s how the well-known multi-millionaire Rockefellers carry on and do business,’ the paper added, condemning their recent bloody suppression of the coal strike at Ludlow, Colorado. Of the gangster tactics of corporate strikebreaking, the paper declared, ‘That should stop once and for all’ (*Amerikansky russky viestnik*, 1915a, 1915b.)

But of course it didn't. In the Passaic textile strike of 1926-27, my paternal grandparents and their parents (the Slovak side) faced down tanks and teargas deployed to make sure America could be made safe for wage cuts and the speedup (Zumoff, 2021.)⁹ Memorial Day Massacre. River Rouge. Harlan County. How many teen-aged uncles-to-be were cut down in such moments of corporate terror? And in Bangladesh, the families of the Rana Plaza victims – will they soon only vaguely remember a sister or aunt who burned to death so Wal-Mart could peddle cheaper goods? Can remembering, linking our industrial tragedies, our sweatshop disasters to *their* sweatshop disasters, begin to build empathy, and more important, solidarity? Is this a naïve hope?

In Hudson County, does anyone remember John Sterančak, shot in the back, or are there descendants of the surviving Sterančak clan who swear there never was a brother John, just like my aunt Maria was never recalled? Did the Rockefellers steal more than a safe, decently paid job from the Ruthenians; was the memory of an uncle taken from them, too? At least there is a photo of John, as cheerful as those garment girls like Maria Rizzolo mourned for a few days in the *Newark Evening Star*. For those who can read Ruthenian, in *Amerikansky ruscky viestnik* here's proof for any Sterančak wondering, yes, Uncle John briefly was real. Shot down by the thugs in a 'strašna bitka' ('horrible battle'), but a question mark no more.

There were other ways an uncle or aunt could vanish in industrial America. As Irving Howe and Elizabeth Ewen have noted, immigrant newspapers often featured a 'gallery of missing husbands' (Howe, 1976; Ewen, 1985.) So, too, did *Amerikansky ruscky viestnik*. In December 1916 Katharina Leško implored anyone who had news of her husband, Vasil', to contact her. He had left Dobromir, Galicia, for Passaic in 1914, and since then she had had no word from him and didn't even know if he was alive. Recall even one of the Newark fire victims, Theresa Tartaglia, had been abandoned by her husband. In the same issue of the *Newark Evening Star* as accounts of the fatal fire, a story ran of Alice Carrigan, who was struggling to provide for her children after her husband abandoned his family. Alice knew he was still in the city as she subsequently saw him on a trolley, but he had run away before she could speak to him (*Amerikansky ruscky viestnik*, 1916; *Newark Evening Star*, 1910m.)

As Kim Moody has documented, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries working-class men were extraordinarily itinerant, making it difficult to establish sustainable unions in hard-rock mining, lumbering, and other professions (Moody, 2019.) Itinerancy was a recognized fact of working-class life, with the Newark city directory listing men such as my grandfather, Charlie Albanese, as 'in USA – inquire at 666 N. Seventh Street,' his stepmother's address. (After his father's death, Charlie roamed the country, as did his brother Ben, who rode the rails throughout much of the 1920s before resurfacing in a Los Angeles flophouse. Another brother stayed in New Jersey and did quite well, opening a bakery and food-service company, which is why he was remembered as 'Tony Cakes.')

In South Philadelphia, too, itinerant immigrants retained contact with kin who kept boarding houses to which they periodically returned when work was slack in distant mines or steel mills (Zecker, 2010, 25, 74.)

⁹ The speedup was the process by which textile manufacturers 'sped up' mechanized looms or required workers simultaneously to tend greater numbers of looms at the same time.

Roaming and disappearance was less frequent for women, but not unheard of. On my Slovak side, ‘Bad Gizella,’ who was recalled as ‘boy crazy,’ left home in the ‘Roaring Twenties,’ never to be heard of again. Several decades earlier, the middle-class press was full of sensational accounts of ‘white slavery’ in the Jewish, Italian, and other immigrant communities (Turner, 1909; Keire, 2001.) Perhaps ‘Bad Gizella’ was a ‘fallen woman’ of a different kind than the leaping girls at Wolf and Triangle Shirtwaist.

Of course, gender oppression guaranteed women all too readily were tagged as ‘fallen’ if they resisted patriarchal control, as Mary Odem and Jessica Pliley note (Odem, 1995; Pliley, 2014.) Another Albanese sibling, Great Aunt Lucia (Lou) in the ‘20s fled an abusive husband with her daughters. The husband hired detectives (offering their services in between shooting striking Slavs, no doubt), who tracked Aunt Lou to California, where she was living with a man who would soon become her second husband. Bay Area newspapers, though, published lurid accounts of the beautiful woman and older man who might be facing Mann Act charges for crossing state lines for immoral purposes. Fortunately, the California DA declined to prosecute, and Aunt Lou escaped her violent first husband. Other immigrant women were often not so lucky (*San Francisco Examiner*, 1929; *Oakland Tribune*, 1929.)

There were many reasons, then, that working-class immigrants could have gone missing – certainly deliberate family abandonment among them, but also industrial accident or fleeing a violent marriage. These missing husbands, sisters and aunts do not fit neatly in the grand immigrant narrative of upward mobility and progress.

And what happened to Maria Albanese? I’d like to hope there was a happy story for her, something less horrific that explains her absence in memory and photos. Perhaps she got married, moved to Chicago, rooted for the Cubs, and had a long and happy life. (Although being a Cubs fan and having a happy life don’t seem to go together, and for my Brooklyn Dodgers-loving grandpa this might have been the family scandal that dared not speak its name.) Maybe that’s why no one remembers her. I’d like to think she was one of the lucky ones who beat the odds in industrial Newark.

I’d still really like to find Maria Albanese. I wish I’d known this back then so I could have talked about it with Charlie Albanese, who saw that fat man catching those terrified burning girls, and maybe prayed that his sister was safe. I wish I could have asked him about it, and heard about Newark’s disposable people. I think he would have understood.

Author Bio

Robert Zecker is a professor of history at Saint Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia, Canada, where he teaches courses in race, immigration, social movements and U.S. history. His research includes immigration, radicalism and the popular culture of immigrants on the left. He is the author of many articles in journals such as the *Journal of American Ethnic History*. He is the author of four books, most recently ‘*A Road to Peace and Freedom: The International Workers Order and the Struggle for Economic Justice and Civil Rights, 1930-1954*’ (Temple University Press) and has a chapter, ‘Spotlight on Jim Crow’: Radical Immigrant Papers Cover

Race and Civil Rights,’ in *Immigration and Exile: The Foreign-Language Press in the U.K. and U.S.*, forthcoming from Bloomsbury. Before entering the academic racket, Bob was an ink-stained wretch foisting journalism on an unsuspecting public in his native New Jersey.

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