

## Letter to Michael and Hugh

(1)

### About the Author

*Pauline Newman was born in Lithuania around 1890 and moved to the United States in 1901. As a young teenager, she became employed at the Triangle Factory. She was no longer employed there by the time of the fire, but she wrote the following description of working conditions at the factory and why workers endured the indignities. Factories like these were not uncommon during this time of industrialization. The letter is to her nephews.*

(2)

Dear Boys:

It is the month of May, 1951 ... I am beginning to realize that time is passing swiftly and that ... I shall not be with you much longer ... I am therefore, going to try and tell you a story—my own story ...

(3)

[A] relative of mine who was employed by the now infamous Triangle Shirt Waist Co. ... got me a job with that firm ... Since the day's work began at seven thirty it meant that I had to leave home at six forty ... The day's work was supposed to end at six in the afternoon. But, during most of the year we youngsters worked overtime until 9 p.m. every night except Fridays and Saturdays. No, we did not get additional pay for overtime. At this point it is worth recording the generosity (sic) of the Triangle Waist Co. by giving us a piece of apple pie for supper instead of additional pay! Working men and women of today who receive time and one half [or] double time for overtime will find it difficult to understand ... that the workers of those days were evidently willing to accept such conditions of labor without protest. However, the answer is quite simple—we were not organized and we knew that individual protest amounted to the loss of one's job. No one in those days could afford the luxury (sic) of changing jobs ... Therefore, we were, due to our ignorance and poverty, helpless against the power of the exploiters ... I will never forget the sign which on Saturday afternoons was posted on the wall near the elevator stating—"if you don't come in on Sunday you need not come in on Monday"! ...

### What's going on?

(4)

My job, like that of the other kids was not strenuous (sic). It consisted of trimming off the threads left on the shirt waists by the operators ... Hundreds of dozens of shirtwaists were carried from the machines to the “children’s corner” and put into huge cases ... These cases were used for another purpose which served the employers very well indeed ... [These] cases were high enough and deep enough for us kids to hide in, so that when a factory inspector came to inspect the factory he found no violation of the child labor law, because he did not see any children at work—we were all hidden in the cases and covered with shirt waists! Clever of them, was it not? Somehow the employers seemed to have known when the inspector would come and had time enough to arrange for our hiding place.

(5)

[T]here were conditions of work which in our ignorance we so patiently tolerated such as deductions from your meager wages if and when you were five minutes late—so often due to transportation delays ... there was the constant watching you lest you pause for a moment from your work ... You were watched when you went to the lavatory and if you ... stayed a minute or two longer than ... you should have you were threatened with being fired ... The deductions for being late was strictly (sic) enforced because deductions even for a few minutes from several hundred people must have meant quite a sum of money. And since it was money the Triangle Waist Co. employers were after this was an easy way to get it. That these deductions meant less food for the worker’s children bothered the employers not at all ...

(6)

As I look back to those years of actual slavery I am quite certain that the conditions under which we worked ... were the acme of exploitation perpetrated by humans upon defenceless (sic) men women and children—a sort of punishment for being poor and docile. Despite these inhuman working conditions the workers—including myself—continued to work for this firm. What good would it do to change jobs since similar conditions existed in all garment factories of that era? There were other reasons why we did not change jobs ... One gets to know the people you work with ... You have a feeling of belonging which helps to make life in a factory a bit easier to endure ...

**What’s going on?**

**How does this relate to what you have read already?**

(7)

One evening I was walking home from a long day's work ... The sights were familiar, the usual sighns (sic) of poverty and all the resulting misery ... As I saw the little children playing in the gutter, the men and women looking tired and drab, the dark and filthy tenements I thought—dear God, will this ever be different? When I got home I sat down and wrote:

*While at work I am thinking only of my own drab existence. I get discouraged and a bit low in my mind—every day the same foreman, the same forelady, the same shirt waists, shirt waists and more shirt waists. The same machines, the same surroundings. The day is long and the task tire-some. In despair I ask—“dear God will it ever be different?” And on my way home from work I see again those lonely men and women with hopeless faces, tired eyes; harrassed (sic) by want and worry—I again ask “will it ever be different?” ...*

(8)

[When] it was done I decided to send it to the Forward. Of course I did not expect it to be accepted or published ... But, I did want to express my feelings and get them down on paper. There was satisfaction in doing just that. I posted the article and did not give it another thought.

(9)

A few days later ... as I was approaching the Triangle factory I noticed a number of my fellow workers holding the Forward and pointing to something, and when they saw me they all shouted congratulation ... for my piece was published! I could hardly believe it! But there it was, my name and all. This I believe was one of the highlights in my life ... Encouraged by the success of my first attempt to give expression to my thoughts and feelings I tried again and again and each time my articles and stories were ... published ... In a small way I became the voice of the less articulate young men and women with whom I worked and with whom later I was to join in the fight for improved working conditions and a better life for us all ...

(10)

*Newman became an activist and organizer for the union, serving in several public offices. She led a long, productive life working to provide a positive answer to her question, “Will it ever be different?”*

**What’s going on?**

**How does this relate to what you have read already?**

**What is the overall message of the passage?**

**What questions do you have?**