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JOHNSTOWN ROLLING HILL MINE

DISASTER IN JOHNSTOWN:
THE ROLLING HILL MINE EXPLOSION, 1902,
AND ITS IMMIGRANT VICTIMS

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At 11:20 A.M. on July 10, 1902, an explosion ripped through the Klondike District¹ of the Rolling Mill Mine in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. 114 men, most of whom were Polish, Slovak, and Croation immigrants, lost their lives in the explosion and the deadly afterdamp² which followed.

As rescue teams entered the mine in their search for survivors, Powell Stackhouse, president of the Cambria Steel Company which owned the Rolling Mill Mine, made an official statement. The press had gathered at the scene along with thousands of panic stricken relatives of the entombed miners:

No list of the names of the dead miners can be given, for the majority of them were foreigners and were known only by check and not by name. The only way their names will ever be known, if the bodies are recovered in time for identification, will be by their families sending their names to us.³

¹ Klondike District refers to one of three sections of the mine, the others being to Northside and the Southside districts.

² Afterdamp is the poisonous gas which forms after a mine explosion, mostly carbon monoxide. In the Rolling Mill disaster, only 7 of the 114 men were killed by the explosion, the rest by afterdamp.

³ New York Times, July 11, 1902, P. 1, "Check" refers to a metal tag pinned to the shirt of each miner which served to identify him.

The majority of the miners killed in the Rolling Mill accident came from Galicia, Austria and were Poles of peasant descent.⁴ These men had been farmers and were forced to leave the old country because of the disastrous land policies of the Austro-Hungarian government. Land was distributed unequally. The continued use of poor farming methods resulted in low productivity. A low level economy was further hampered by a high birth rate. A serious food shortage occurred which greatly affected the peasant class. From 1860-1890 the Galician population increased by 80 percent. In sum, then, the estimated total inhabitants in what was to be modern Poland doubled in the last half of the nineteenth century to about 25 million. It is no wonder, then, that about 1900, fifty thousand people starved every year in Galicia.⁵

The people who fled this situation and emigrated to America generally came from small rural villages:

A village in any of the three Polish sectors in the early 1890's with its quiet road past simple cottages might have at first

⁴Pittsburgh Dispatch, July 13, 1902, p. 1,

⁵Victor R. Greene, The Slavic Community on Strike (Notre Dame, Ind.; University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), p. 26.

looked idyllic in its rustic setting. The blue sky, the brown thatch, and the white-washed walls of the gaily decorated huts would perhaps bring to mind romantic tales of noblemen and their trusty villeins. But on a closer inspection one feature would strike one forcibly - the poverty. From any standard the peasants' material circumstances were poor and chronically so.

All peasant inhabitants in Poland were much the same: Small huts grouped along a dirt road and surrounded by mud, filth and a few stray dogs, some chickens, and a duck. The interior confirmed the exterior destitution. A hall separated two dark rooms, living quarters on the left and a combined tool shed and barn on the right. The living area was dominated by a large brick stove, which served for cooking as well as for a bed for the family in cold weather. Straw mats covered part of the earthen floor. A bench stood at one side, and the only other furniture was a table and a chest.

A crucifix hanging over the doorway and perhaps a gilded picture of the virgin above the chest provided the only interior decoration. The Slavic peasantry wore inadequate clothing. The man with large handlebar mustaches, wore no hats, but the women used their skirts and wide aprons as sacks. Most villagers had no footgear, although a few distinguished males wore high boots into which they stuffed their cotton trousers.⁶

This portrait of peasant life is valuable because it shows what the Slavic peasant left behind him when he departed for America. However, it is not completely clear that extreme poverty was the driving force which moved all immigrants to go abroad. In reality, those who immigrated were not destitute, or the "garbage of Europe," as advocates of reducing immigration were labeling them. Most Slavic immigrants possessed a high degree of literacy, and were not destitute. Many actually owned land, or their families did, and some at least were able to pay the costs of making the journey out of their own resources. Thus, extreme poverty

⁶ Ibid., 23-24.

did not force immigration. The real cause was the hope of acquiring enough income to return to Europe and buy land to support his growing family. Most immigrants intended their stay in America to be temporary.⁷

America was seldom the first choice of the immigrant. When economic conditions finally convinced the peasant that he must leave his native village to seek employment, he first wandered from place to place within his own country. However, the economy throughout Europe was in decline, and he often met with little or no success in his search for work. It was only after exhausting near possibilities that the peasant began to seriously consider a move to another country.

Most immigrants who arrived in the United States had some prior knowledge of what to expect. The information which they received came from letters written by those who had emigrated earlier to America. The immigrant letter from America to the old country was not just a letter home, but indeed a social obligation. Polish villagers regarded mail as communal, not individual, property, and when the letter arrived, it passed quickly from hand to hand through the village.⁸

⁷Ibid., 30

⁸Ibid., 27-28.

The immigrant letter provided its recipient with the most reliable description of life in America, giving details of wages and working and living conditions. Names of contacts, directions, and quite often tickets were included. The immigrant letter provided the greatest inducement for the Slavic peasant to set sail for America.

III

Johnstown at the turn of the century was a community of 35,936; 7,318 were foreign born.⁹ Cambria Steel Company was the city's largest employer with a work force of approximately 12,000 in its mills and mines. The company was also the area's largest employer of immigrant labor. Since its success in breaking a mining strike in 1873, Cambria Steel hired only non-union workers and promptly fired any man who spoke of unionization. The company found that the immigrants were willing to accept work in non-union mines since they had come from lands where labor organizations were considered revolutionary.¹⁰ Most immigrants had also

⁹U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900: Population, Vol. I, p. 472

¹⁰U.S., Congress, Senate, Report of the Immigration Commission, Immigrants in Industry: Bituminous Coal Mining, Sen. Doc. 633, 61 st Cong., 2nd Sess.

exhausted the small funds they had brought with them, and were obliged to accept work immediately and without question about wages and working conditions.

The hours worked by miners in the Rolling Mill mine varied greatly, as did the wages which they received. The immigrants usually worked as pickminers, a job which often required the miner to lie on his back, hours at a time, digging coal by hand. The Rolling Mill mine operated on ten-hour shifts, six days a week. Since they were paid by tonnage, the miners were not restricted to a regular ten-hour work day and could work shorter or longer hours if they so desired. Johnstown miners received about 33¢ per ton; each miner could produce approximately 3 tons of coal each day.¹¹ Miners were paid twice a month, in cash. Only a part of the total wages earned were actually paid to the miners because of deductions taken from the gross earnings. Credit at the company store, and the cost of equipment such as picks and shovels, accounted

¹¹ Interview with Mr.---, (July 12, 1979). Now 91, he began to work in the Number 1 Mine of Cambria Steel Company in 1905.

for the miner receiving less money on pay day.¹² Cambria Steel miners often had to supply their own timber to use for holding up sections of the mine's ceiling.¹³

Cambria Steel Company also operated a mutual fund to which every employee was obligated each month to contribute one dollar of his earnings. Under this program, the company agreed to pay \$1,000 for each employee who met death at work, or while on his way to or from his place of employment. This money was to be distributed among the heirs of the deceased worker. The victims of the Rolling Mill explosion were enrolled in this insurance policy.¹⁴

¹² By strict definition, Cambria Steel Company did not have a company store. This would have been illegal under Pennsylvania law. However, the city's largest department store was operated by a stock company whose stock was owned by the steel company. Employees could purchase from this store and have their accounts sent to the company's paymaster. No obligatory patronage existed, and numerous other stores located in Johnstown.

¹³ --- interview.

¹⁴ Marshall G. Moore, "The Mine Explosion at Johnstown," Journal of the Franklin Institute, CLVIII, (August, 1904), p. 95.

Accidents were common in the Rolling Mill mine. The miner worked in constant fear of explosions, poisonous gases, cave-ins, and other mishaps which could kill or maim. The mines led all other departments of Cambria Steel in the number of serious injuries each year.¹⁵

The Polish and Slovak immigrant miners worked long hours, at low wages, with no hope of any meaningful improvement in their employment status. All positions of authority were reserved for native born men, or English-western European immigrants who had lived in the United States for many years and had received citizenship. All foremen and bosses in the Rolling Mill mine were of English and Welsh origin. These earlier immigrants generally regarded the newer arrivals as inferior and spoke of them in derogatory terms.¹⁶

¹⁵ U.S., Congress, Senate, Reports of the Immigration Commission, Immigrants in Industry: Iron and Steel Manufacturing, Sen. Doc. 633, 61 st Cong., 2nd Sess., 1911, Part 2, Vol. 1, p. 383, here after cited as Immigrants in Iron and Steel.

¹⁶ --- interview.

Because of the difficulty in organizing the immigrant miner, the United Mine Workers virtually ignored the Rolling Mill disaster, or spoke of it only as an example for the need of the coal miners to unionize. Speaking from Wilkes-Barre where he was engaged in a great anthracite coal field strike, union president John Mitchell made only one reference to the Johnstown tragedy:

The frequency with which they happen is a strong argument for more stringent laws regulating the ventilation of gaseous mines. If mining companies would exercise more care in protecting the lives of their men in the mines, instead of trying to reduce the cost of production, the occupation of a miner would not be so hazardous.¹⁷

In Pittsburgh, the district head of the United Mine Workers placed the blame for the disaster not only on the mine owners, but also on the immigrant workers who accepted the dangerous working conditions and showed little desire to unionize:

As long as they import foreigners by the hundreds, dump them into the mines without

¹⁷ Johnstown Daily Tribune, July 12, 1902, p. 6.

any instruction or training, and run along on the theory that the mine boss, who gets his certificate from the State, is wholly responsible for the lives of hundreds underground, we will be greeted every few months by the news of these appalling disasters.

Don't they understand that when they put a dozen untrained, ignorant foreigners, newly imported, into a mine such as Cambria, they put the lives of every miner employed there at the mercy of the newcomers? The Dispatch this morning told the story of how some Hungarian boy - who probably could not speak English, laughed when reprimanded, several days ago, for throwing a lighted and unprotected torch along the roof. The boy did not know any better - but the company should have known better than to place hundreds at the mercy of his ignorance.¹⁸

18

Pittsburgh Dispatch, July 12, 1902, p. 3

IV

The foreign population of Johnstown tended to concentrate in various sections of the city according to nationality. In these ethnic communities, the immigrant could share a religion and language with others of his own native country. A sense of security was derived from this environment and helped the newcomer to adjust to a different way of life.

The majority of the miners who lost their lives in the Rolling Mine disaster, resided in the fourteenth, fifteenth, and sixteenth wards of the city. The population of these sections was comprised almost wholly of Polish and Slovak immigrants. Those homes which were located on a hillside overlooking the city, were referred to contemptuously by natives in the area as the "Foreigners' Roost."¹⁹

Housing in the foreign sections of the city was inferior to that of the native-born residents:

The prevailing type is a block of from two to six frame houses, each home having two rooms on a floor.

The rooms are generally about 12 by 12 feet, each having one or two windows of double

¹⁹Pittsburgh Post, July 13, 1902, p. 3.

sashes of medium size. In none of these houses is there a water-closet, dry closets from 10 to 13 feet away being universally used. In most instances running water is furnished in the room used as a kitchen, but hydrants, used by several groups in close proximity, are the source of supply for many. In a few instances wells have been found which contain impurities of all kind.

One of the rooms on the first floor is generally used as a kitchen, dining and living room for the use of the family. The second-floor rooms are usually occupied by boarders. When over 6 boarders occupy a single room, part use of the beds during the day and part during the night, to correspond with the work on night and day shifts. The greatest congestion exists, the number of laborers more than taxing the housing capacity. Congested conditions are more prevalent among the Croatians, Serbians, and the Macedonians. The Slovaks

live under less crowded conditions than any of the other southern European races.²⁰

The majority of the immigrants in Johnstown did not own their own homes, but instead boarded with those of the same nationality who did. Slavic groups traditionally had the highest percentage of home ownership. Once the decision had been made to remain in America, the first goal was to buy a house - the ultimate in social and economic security.²¹

About half of the Polish and Slovak homeowners took in boarders. The usual price paid by boarders was two to three dollars per month, which included lodging, heat, light, cooking, and washing. Usually, the wife of the head of the family, or a woman employed as a housekeeper purchased all the food needed from day to day for the whole establishment. At the end of each month the total cost was calculated and divided by the number of adult male members, each man paying his own share.²² Under such a boarding system

²⁰ Immigrants in Iron and Steel, p. 403

²¹ Caroline Golab, "The Impact of the Industrial Experience on the Immigrant Family," in Immigrants in Industrial America 1850-1920, ed. by Richard L. Ehrlich, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1977), p. 32.

²² Immigrants in Iron and Steel, p. 408.

as many as 20 men, sleeping 6 to a room, could be accommodated. One boarding house on McConaughy Street in the fifteenth ward lost all of its 15 boarders in the Rolling Mill explosion.²³

The Slavic immigrants were devout Roman Catholics and established a number of churches in the immigrant section of the city. In addition, to providing the usual services such as christenings, weddings and funerals, a church also served to unify and organize the Slavic community by sponsoring various social activities. At these events, people used the opportunity to meet and discuss common problems and concerns.

Because the city school system provided no special programs for immigrant children who came from non-English speaking homes, the church assumed much of the responsibility for their education. St. Stephens Roman Catholic Church held classes five days a week, with the sisters and the priest serving as instructors.

The parish priest held the most respected and influential position in the immigrant community. In his role as spiritual leader, he became familiar with every member of his congregation. Cambria Steel called upon the priest of each immigrant church to

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Johnstown Daily Tribune, July 12, 1902, p. 8.

identify the dead miners at the Rolling Mill mine.

Every Slavic priest sought to increase the number of his parishioners. A large membership provided the money and labor needed to build a permanent church building. To achieve this goal, the priest wrote letters to Europe encouraging immigration. In Johnstown the Polish priest from St. Casimirs with the consent of his congregation, made an arrangement with Cambria Steel whereby the company deducted a dollar from the wages of every Polish catholic on regular paydays. "The result of this policy was one of the finest immigrant church buildings in the city, and the willingness of the company to aid was compensated by certain services on the part of the priest in securing labor when called upon."²⁴

Most of the Rolling Mill victims were members of St. Mary's Greek Catholic, St. Stephen's Catholic, or the newly constructed St. Casimir's Polish Roman Catholic Church. Father B. Dembinski, the priest at St. Casimir's said in a statement to the press:

Over 40 members of my church were killed in the disaster in the mine. Most of

²⁴ Immigrants in Iron and Steel, p. 454

these men were my best parishioners, being thrifty, provident, God-fearing men who were pillars of strength to the congregation. The catastrophe has just about wiped out two societies conducted in connection with the church, St. Casimir's society and St. Martin's Beneficial society. For the funeral of each one of the dead men a \$50 benefit will be paid out of the fund, and in addition an assessment of \$2 will have to be collected from each member.²⁵

Many immigrants in Johnstown belonged to mutual aid societies which provided assistance for members and their families in case of sickness or death. Members of the Polish Benefit Society paid 50 cents a month in dues, and could receive \$5 a week in sick benefits. When a death occurred, one dollar was collected from each member to help pay the funeral expenses. In nearly every case a mutual aid society began at the same time as or very soon after the organization of a church. Memberships

25

Pittsburgh Post, July 13, 1902, p.3.

were usually identical and the priest often served as the society's treasurer. As in the case of the church, mutual benefit societies also served as social organs of the community, sponsoring activities which brought immigrants together.

V

Almost the total population of the Slavic community in Johnstown consisted of unskilled laborers and their families. Polish and Slovak immigrants, being recent arrivals to the city, had not yet had sufficient time to become established in higher levels of employment. No Slavic professionals resided in the community, and only a few immigrant-owned businesses existed. Slovaks usually ran these enterprises.

The family structure of the Slavic community reflected that of the old country. The family existed as a unit, and all members were expected to make a contribution. The community judged an individual by the reputation of his family, and the family reputation depended on the actions of its individual members. This placed pressure on each member to always act in the best interest of the family.

Slavic society emphasized marriage as being essential to preserve the family and to assure the success of the individual. A belief prevailed that those who did not marry would waste themselves in a meaningless and disorderly life.²⁶ 48 of the 83 Polish and Slovak miners killed at Rolling Mill were married. The wives of many had not yet come from Europe.

In the Slavic household the husband held the position of undisputed head of the family and principal wage earner. A division of labor existed between the husband and wife. The duty of the husband to support the family through outside work, while it coincided with the responsibility of the wife to remain at home and do the housework. Slavic women seldom accepted employment outside the home. In the eyes of the community this would be an indication that the husband could not support his family.

Children usually quit school at an early age, girls to help with the housework, boys to enter the mills or mines. Since all members of the family were expected to make a contribution, the employment

²⁶ William I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, The Polish Peasant in Europe and America, Vol. I, (New York, N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1918), p. 113

of the children were socially acceptable. Most wages earned by the immigrant child were turned over to the parents. Boys often worked at the same jobs as their fathers.

VI

The general attitude of native-born Johnstown residents toward the immigrant, mixed indifference and ignorance. Eastern Europeans lived in a section separate from the native-born. Native Americans could know practically nothing about immigrants beyond what they read in the paper, and the slightest contact they had with a few individuals hired as servants or washerwomen.²⁷ Information about the immigrants obtained from the local newspaper often was distorted or erroneous since news about the foreign section of the city often presented mainly face value as a curiosity.

The daily Johnstown paper, along with several local banks, established relief funds to aid the families of the miners who were killed in the Rolling Mill mine. These organizations collected over \$2,000, mainly from individual donors. No non-Slavic church

27

Immigrants in Iron and Steel, p. 387.

involved itself in any fund-raising program or offered aid.

When Johnstown's native population did have occasion to think about immigrants, they usually reflected considerable prejudice. Here is a letter from the daily paper:

Sir: As an old reader and friend of "The Tribune," allow me to suggest that the display in the window of "The Tribune" office of the two dinner buckets found in the Rolling Mill mine, with their contents, is not pleasing to the miners in this city who are American citizens as against (he meant, "as compared to") those who are foreigners. We do not object to the display of the buckets, but the exposure of their contents seems to be a reflection on the fare enjoyed by all those who work in the mines. How the Slavs are accustomed to eating dry bread and a piece of bologna, but the Welsh, Americans, and English folks employed in the mines make excellent wages, the most of them, and are able to enjoy an abundance of substantial, wholesome food.

I hope "The Tribune" will make amends for the impression received, whether justly or otherwise, from the window display.

A Miner

(The contents of the dinner buckets were exposed in the "The Tribune's" window display with the purpose of showing first, that the men had not eaten their noon meal when the disaster occurred; that the buckets, food and all were found, just as represented in "The Tribune's" newscolumns, by the reporter who went through the mine with Superintendent Robinson, and to give an idea of the statement that a trail of dinner buckets marked the flight of the dying men from the Klondike. Far be it from "The Tribune" to give even the slightest ground for anyone to think that an aspersion on a noble class of men was intended. - ED.)²⁸

²⁸Johnstown Daily Tribune, July 6, 1902, p. 5.

-23-

The problem of how to distribute rightfully the relief funds, together with over \$3000 found on the bodies of the Rolling Mill victims, proved to be a source of frustration to city officials.²⁹ Mayor John Pendry, besieged by numerous, often conflicting claims for money, came to the conclusion that "those foreigners may have depths of sympathy unknown to us, but they certainly show a desire for money that is not suggestive of sorrow."³⁰ A prominent physician who attended a meeting called to consider offers of aid from other cities, believed that such contributions were not necessary:

I know the majority of the families who lost a member are now in better financial condition than before his death. Hundreds of them are only waiting for the insurance to be paid them to go to the old country, where they can live for the remainder of their lives in opulence.³¹

²⁹The coroner reportedly found \$764.40 on the body of one miner.

³⁰Pittsburgh Post, July 15, 1902, p. 15.

³¹Ibid.

The native population of Johnstown did not understand the immigrant. He was disliked in Johnstown for the same reasons that he was disliked in other American cities. The immigrant was viewed as a transient who entered the area, stole jobs from its native-born residents, then returned to his former country. Between 40 and 60 percent of Polish immigrants to the United States, did in fact return to Europe.³²

In Johnstown the immigrant sought employment in unskilled occupations which native-born did not enter. The expansion of the local steel industry created a situation in which jobs were plentiful. Actually, a little competition existed between the immigrant and the native-born residents for employment.

Since most immigrants hoped to return to Europe, they made little effort to be naturalized, despite the encouragement by the immigrant churches to do so. Of the 83 Polish and Slovak miners killed at Rolling Mill, only 2 were American citizens. Native-born residents believed that the immigrants' reluctance to become citizens proved that they cared little about America or Johnstown, and would not make good citizens.

32

Golsb, "The Impact of the Industrial Experience," p. 7.

VII

Within four days of the explosion, the Rolling Mill mine resumed normal operations. Damage to the mine itself amounted to less than \$1,000, and other immigrants soon replaced the miners who had been killed.

An inquest found that the disaster was caused by an unnamed miner who had carelessly, and in violation of company rules, used an open lamp in a section of the mine known to be dangerously gaseous. The miners had been repeatedly warned about the hazard of using open lamps, and danger signs, printed in each language used by the miners, were posted throughout the gaseous section. The inquest found the Cambria Steel Company to be innocent of any acts of negligence.³³

Today the Rolling Mill disaster is all but forgotten in Johnstown. The sealed mine entrance covered by vegetation, stands unnoticed along the

³³U.S., Department of the Interior, Bureau of Mines, Annual Report of the Inspector of Mines for the Sixth Bituminous District of Pennsylvania, for the Fiscal Year Ended December 31, 1902.

(Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1903), p. 614.

freeway which passes through the city. McConnaughy Street, where many of the miners lived, and the Cambria Steel Company for whom they worked, no longer exists. Even their tombstones at St. Stephen's cemetery have disappeared.