

"A Slavic Inferno"

Baltimore Tunnel Explosion, 1919

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Young Jim Gillespie, in East End, Wilkes-Barre, heard his father downstairs preparing to go to work at the Baltimore Colliery. Although it was early morning, the sun was streaming in Jim's bedroom. The school year was coming to an end, but on this June 5th summer morning, Jim remembered he had not been in school the previous day and needed a written excuse from home about that absence. He jumped out of bed, but his father had already gone out the kitchen door. Undaunted, he ran down to the kitchen in a moment and opened the kitchen door, yelling, "Dad, Dad, I need an excuse." Jim's dad returned patiently, complied with his son's need and started once more for work.

As he hurried to the mine, he was aware that the delay in writing the excuse might have caused him to miss his ride into the mine. For the working miner, there are two ways to enter a mine. The first is by cage, or crude elevator, that plummets hundreds of feet in seconds. The second is by way of a slope. Men sometimes walk down the slopes, but usually, especially in a deep mine where the slope was long and distant, they would pile into empty cars being hauled into the mine at the beginning of the work day. Frequently, the day's supplies, including blasting powder, were loaded on the cars with the men.

When Mr. Gillespie got to the mine, a trip loaded with men and powder was disappearing into the earth. He had missed his ride into the mine. He was very upset. He would have to wait for the next trip. Within moments, an explosive blast shook the mine and the whole East End of Wilkes-Barre trembled. The trip of coal cars that Jim's father had missed was loaded with men; several of the cars were loaded with boxes of powder for the day's mining. Inexplicably, the powder had ignited, setting off an explosion that killed 92 men. This disaster, fifty years after the one at Avondale, and twenty-five years after the Irish tragedy at Pittston's Twin Shaft, showed again that despite progress and improvement of safety regulations, mining remained a dangerous,

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deadly industry.

The horror of the explosion and fire was vividly described by three survivors. One was Jacob Milz, an elderly tracklayer employed for over 40 years in or around the mines. On the morning of the disaster, he rode into the mine on the first car behind the motor (engine) pulling fourteen coal cars carrying 150 men. After the explosion, Milz escaped injury by jumping from the first car and crawling on his knees 200 feet into the mine, into an area known as the G vein, a clear section with good circulating air. As he described his experience, his underplayed heroism became apparent:

"I really don't know what happened until the trip came to a stop. ... I had about three miles to go when the trip stopped. All the working men (in the cars) were in good spirits and they talked, laughed and joked with each other. Presently the trip stopped and everything seemed to be enveloped in a smoky haze. In the rear, I heard men coughing, then suddenly shrieking and groaning. Every second the smoke became more dense. Agonizing shrieks were heard on all sides and the men in the car with me started to climb out. My throat was parched. I coughed and sputtered and clambered over the cars. In my anxiety, for everybody was scrambling to get out first, I fell, but I quickly regained my feet and started through the tunnel. The tunnel was full of smoke. I couldn't see and I dropped to my hands and knees. I really can't say now how I managed to escape all that. All I remember is that I kept crawling for the longest time till I reached the G vein. It seemed to me like years, and from every part came loud shrieks of agony and pain. When I reached G vein several had gotten there before me. My throat and lungs cleared and no one spoke. Solemn silence reigned for a few minutes when I jumped up and said, 'Come on boys, we boys have work to do.' I don't know how many were there but there wasn't one slacker in the crowd. All of them jumped to their feet, discarded coats and hats, tied handkerchiefs around faces and nostrils and we started the work of rescue. I don't want any credit for my part. I thank God that I am safe and my heart goes out to the unfortunate comrades of mine that lost their lives. If I have saved a single life, I feel repaid a thousand times because God in all his infinite mercy saved mine. I don't know how many men I helped carry out but I worked hard for the longest time and then I weakened. I am not a young man any more and the bodies of the men were heavy."

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While the interview with Mr. Jacob Milz described some of the terror, it remained for Mr. John McGroarty to provide

more details of the Baltimore Tunnel tragedy. He was the motorman driving the engine into the mine of the Baltimore Tunnel. He testified before the Chief of the Pennsylvania Bureau of Mines, Steward Button, and several inspectors of the department and officials of the Delaware and Hudson Coal Company. McGroarty stated that he had taken the fourteen car trip loaded with 150 miners only a short distance into the mine, the last car being only about 175 feet from the entry, when he was stopped by four men exiting. The four men said the trolley, conductor of electricity for the engine, had fallen from its bracket and should be repaired. McGroarty and his brakeman, James Kehoe, uncoupled the engine from the fourteen cars and informed the men they would have to walk in. McGroarty and Kehoe then drove the engine alone about 50 feet and found the fallen bracket. They were just about to inform the switchman to turn off the electricity so they could repair the bracket when they saw a sheet of flame and a cloud of smoke behind them. About two minutes had elapsed between their uncoupling of the motor and their observation of flame and smoke.

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Obviously from the recollection of Jacob Milz some of the men had not yet left the cars. As reported, Jacob Milz in one of the front cars crawled to G vein. McGroarty, Kehoe, and the four exiting men immediately ran back to help those seared by the flames or choked by the black smoke. The rescuers carried man after man back to G vein. All worked feverishly with handkerchiefs over their mouths and nostrils. Once, almost overcome, McGroarty dipped his face in the small stream running along the tracks. Later he collapsed completely and did not recover until he awoke in a hospital bed.

Jim Kehoe, the brakeman, related the most horrible story. He told of fighting the choking smoke and instead of dragging men toward G vein, worked toward the entrance. He came upon the area of the mine cars closest to the dynamite car and found men "being roasted alive." He tried to pull one out and skin and clothes together pulled away from the body. He continued toward the entry, fell over the body, yet alive, of a well-known amateur baseball player, Jim McCloskey, who was frightfully burned, with his tongue so swollen that he could not talk, although he made an effort to do so. He said he took hold of him and attempted to carry him out but he was unable to proceed with him. He said the man was near death but had enough strength to give him his brotherhood book and papers in it. At this point McCloskey became delirious and grabbed Kehoe by the throat and it was with considerable effort that he was able to pry the man's fingers loose. After freeing himself he again made an effort to get out of the place, when he came to a heap of dead and

dying men, piled four feet high, many of them with their clothes on fire. He crawled around them and in doing so his shirt caught fire. This he jerked from his body, and soon began to inhale fresh air, and yelled to those ahead of him asking how far he was from the mouth of the tunnel. A voice answered, 'not far' and with a superhuman effort he reached fresh air and safety."

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The same reporter described Kehoe's exit as seen by those outside: "Kehoe came reeling out of the tunnel naked to the waist while startled men stood looking at him in fear. He screamed to them to go inside and help with the work of rescue and when he rushed back in they followed him and the work of bringing out the dead and dying started in earnest, and it was not long before all were removed."

Late in the evening of June 5, 1919, additional facts emerged surrounding the disastrous trip which had started into the mine early that morning at 6:50 a. m. The creek running along the track was deemed to be two feet deep. Many of the victims, either seeking refuge from burns, or perhaps blown into it, had drowned. Bodies were piled high in the water.

Two days after the tragic disaster, Saturday, June 7, Steward Button, Chief of the Pennsylvania Department of Mines, called a conference at the colliery. Button announced an investigation by national mine experts plus a special committee of local mine inspectors, chaired by Joseph J. Walsh. After the conference, Button released his findings and a list of possible causes of the explosion. The exact cause of the explosion was never determined. Speculation pointed to the ignition of the powder by a short-circuited wire, a miner's crow-bar touching an overhead wire, or a spark from one of the open-flame lamps still being used. The latter was discounted by the investigators. A number of defective cans of powder were found in the colliery storage houses. Seven cans of unexploded powder were inexplicably in the front cars of the trip. The conclusion was that the cans which had exploded also were defective. The public was appalled and shocked by the accident, especially by the transportation of men and explosives together.

In reviewing the possible causes of the accident, testimony revealed that in August 1918, the union had won the right for miners to be transported into the mines. The miners seeking this transportation were pursuing a grievance which had plagued mine workers for generations. They often had to walk treacherous miles underground before arriving at their place of work. The company responded by agreeing to provide one trip of cars for the men each morning. However,

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it was stipulated that powder was to be transported only in the last car with the car directly in front of the last to be unoccupied.

The devastating explosion of the Baltimore Tunnel of the No. 5 Colliery of the Delaware and Hudson Coal Company came during the peak year of anthracite production. The 92 men killed were among 556 other men killed that year when nearly 100 million tons of anthracite were mined. The 92 men killed were predominantly Polish, Lithuanian, Slovak, and Russian, with a smaller number of Irish, Welsh, Scotch and English, a direct reflection of the ethnic changes which had occurred over the years in the anthracite region.

Words and picture stories of 1919 portrayed the poignant sorrow and cruel ravages of the calamity. Especially vivid was the picture of a common funeral Mass at St. Mary's Polish Catholic Church on Park Avenue, Wilkes-Barre, with rows of caskets in the aisles. Many of the victims were buried in a common grave in the parish cemetery in the Georgetown section of Wilkes-Barre Township. The widows, children, sweethearts, neighbors, and friends of these victims suffered no less than survivors of other disasters; however, the financial suffering was mitigated by payments in the form of workmen's compensation. The work of John Siney, Terence Powderly, John Mitchell and many other men of social-consciousness had established a workmen's compensation fund, as well as greater justice in pay and working hours. Too, on the scene, the Salvation Army and Red Cross were visible, offering some measures of relief. In addition, the investigation following the disaster was evidence of a more civilized concern. In fact, accounts of the investigations of the mining disaster reveal that by 1919, the unions as well as the state tried to supplement workers' compensation with additional relief.

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Nevertheless, despite the industrial growth of the nation between the post-Civil War era and the post-World War I era, and despite a more sensitive and responsible society, the miner was still at the mercy of explosions, falling roofs, methane gas poisoning, and other lethal threats. If a miner managed to survive these threats and hazards, he still lived with lungs so filled with silica that there was no easing of his long last mile. Death at an early age came from anthra-silicosis, called black lung by most miners.

The Avondale Disaster in 1869, had inspired Terence Powderly to become the national leader of the Knights of Labor.

The Twin Shaft disaster of 1896, helped to set the stage for the emergence of a new force on the labor front, the force embodied in John Mitchell and his work in the United Mine Workers Union. After the Baltimore Tunnel Explosion of 1919, a new figure appeared on the labor scene. His face was to appear over and over in newspapers and magazines and newsreels for the next thirty years; the face was that of John Llewellyn Lewis.