

Community Center, Yonkers, New York

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Heat and smoke from a fire in the second-story auditorium spread up the two stairways and trapped 26 people in the fourth story of the fire-resistive building. Fourteen persons were rescued over fire department ladders, but the other twelve died before firemen could reach them.

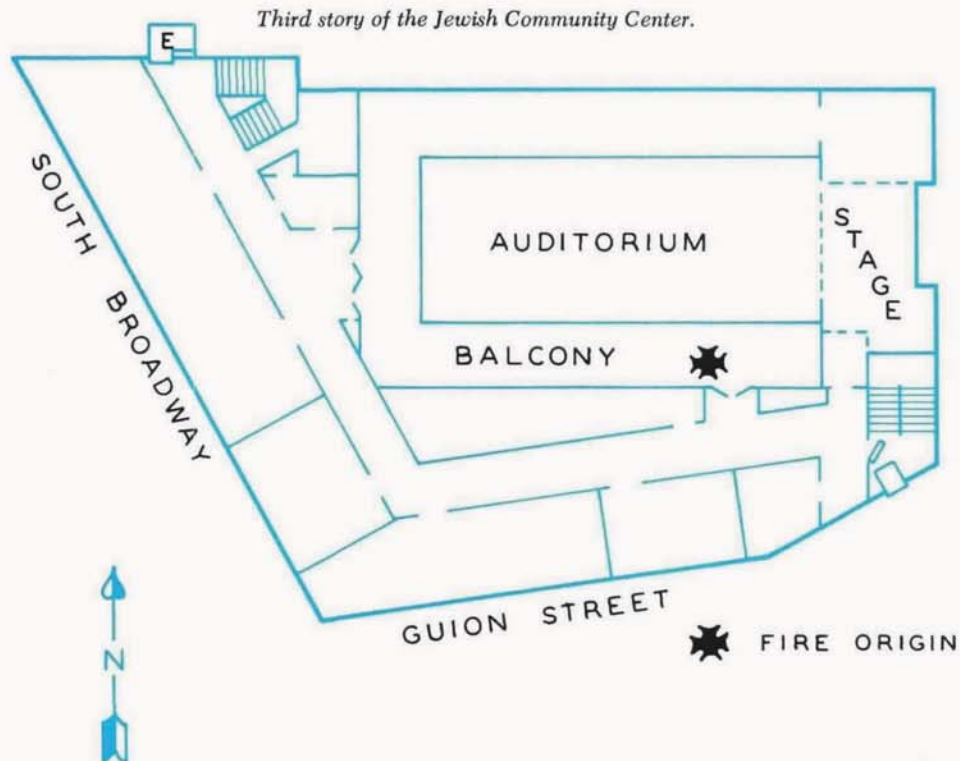
SHORTLY before 5:00 pm on December 20, 1965, a fire of suspicious origin started in the balcony of the auditorium in the second and third stories of the Jewish Community Center in Yonkers, New York.

The four-story building with basement and subbasement was of fire-resistive construction. The first-floor level was about six feet abovegrade, making the build-

The information for this report was obtained by the author, who personally visited the site.

ing approximately 4½ stories abovegrade. Although still in operation, the building was undergoing extensive remodeling. An enclosed elevator shaft had been added to the north side of the building (see the drawing below), and while the new elevator was being used by building personnel at the time of the fire, it was not yet in use for regular passenger service.

At the end of the corridor, beside the elevator, an open stairway extended upward to the fourth story.





This photo was taken looking toward the northwest corner of the building. The tall narrow structure on the left is the new elevator shaft added as a part of the extensive remodeling program that was going on at the time of the fire. Although the flames at the left seem to be coming out of the lower story of the building, they are actually coming from the second- and third-story windows of the auditorium and balcony. WIDE WORLD

At the southeast corner of the building another stairway led upward to a fifth-story penthouse. This stairway had metal swinging doors in pairs at each story and an outside exit at street level. Evidence indicates that the doors at the third- and fourth-story levels were blocked open.

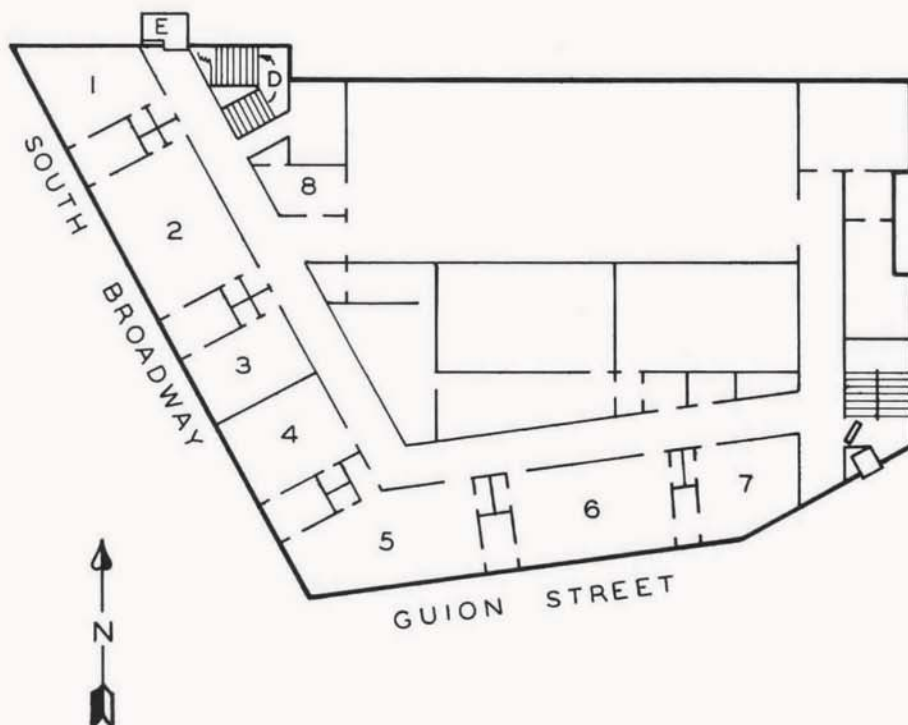
An auditorium in the second story was surrounded on three sides by a balcony at third-story level. During the remodeling, the doorways to the auditorium had been left unprotected pending installation of new doors. Apparently the doors were closed between the third-story corridors and the auditorium balcony. To cut off the balcony from the auditorium so that it could be used for other purposes, decorative polymethyl methacrylate plastic panels had been permanently installed between the columns around the auditorium side of the balcony (see the photo, next page). These were louvers above and below the panels. The contents of the auditorium and the balcony included a small supply of lumber and other construction materials, a scaffold on one side, and a number of tables, chairs, and other items. The newly installed ceiling was mineral tile in metal channels. There was no curtain at the stage proscenium, nor were there any other curtains, drops, or flies on the stage.

The four stories contained, besides the auditorium, various rooms for offices, recreation, music lessons, and other activities. At one time the fourth story had been used as a dormitory, and an interconnecting bathroom served each set of two rooms in that story.

THE FIRE

An estimated 60 to 70 persons were in the building during the late afternoon. The evidence suggests that someone, using an unidentified flammable liquid as

Fourth story of the Center.



an accelerant, set a fire at one end of the balcony beside the stage. Within a few minutes the fire had spread to involve the plastic panels and other combustibles in the balcony.

Shortly before the fire was discovered a janitor walked past the open doorways of the auditorium while he was in the second story, but he noticed nothing unusual. A music teacher in the fourth story smelled smoke and traced the odor to the third story, where he opened a closet door adjacent to the auditorium balcony and saw flames. He immediately went back to the fourth story; there, he and two other adults took refuge in a room at the southwest corner of the building (No. 5 on the drawing, preceding page).

An employee of the Center's music school was in her office in the fourth story (No. 8) when she saw smoke coming from a hole in the floor that had been made during the remodeling. She called downstairs and told officials that there was a fire. Leaving her office, she found four children in the corridor and tried to take them down the open stairway, but they were driven back by smoke and heat. She and the children retreated to a room (No. 2) at the front of the building (South Broadway), closed the door, and got out onto a wide ledge outside the windows.

Prevented from using the corridors and stairways by the smoke and heat, nine children and two adults were huddling in a small room (No. 4) at the front of the building, beside the corner room in which the music teacher and the two adults had taken refuge. A third adult, a woman who reportedly had re-entered the building to look for a neighbor's two children after leading her own out, joined the others in that room. The door to the room was open, with a chair in front of it. It can only be guessed why no one thought to close the door. Panic? Hysteria? Lack of knowledge of what to do? The room labeled No. 4 communicated with the corner room (No. 5) through the doors to an interconnecting bathroom. All twelve persons succumbed to the acrid smoke and intense heat that quickly filled the room.

Crucial minutes had passed before someone telephoned the fire department at 5:08 pm. At 5:11 pm the responding assistant chief called for a second alarm. Firemen raised an aerial ladder in front of the building to rescue the music school employee and her four charges from the window ledge and four other persons from windows at the front of the building. The music teacher and the other two adults in the corner room were rescued over an aerial ladder on the Guion Street side of the building. The firemen then moved the ladder to the window of another room



This general view of the auditorium shows the remains of the lumber and other building materials that were in the auditorium. The fire is thought to have been set at the end of the balcony to the right of the stage, where the firemen are standing.

WIDE WORLD

(No. 7) facing the same side of the building and rescued another music teacher and her pupil, who, having found the corridor charged with smoke and heat, closed the door to the room and went out on the ledge to await rescue.

The fire was quickly knocked down, and firemen wearing breathing apparatus crawled along the fourth-story corridor looking for victims. When they found the twelve in the small room, they immediately started removing them to a hospital across the street and giving artificial respiration. It was too late.

Persons who looked through the open second-story doorways to the auditorium after the fire was discovered described what they saw as "raining fire." The plastic panels were completely consumed. Polymethyl methacrylate sheets have a burning rate of 1.8 inches per minute as tested under ASTM Test D 635-56T, which is a small-scale test. There are no published results of large-scale tests. It is a safe rule to regard all large exposed areas of plastics in buildings as hazardous unless there is reliable information available to indicate that they are nonhazardous.

Almost every piece of combustible material in the balcony was consumed. The combustibles on the auditorium floor were only partially consumed. The heat rose through the two stairways, blackening walls and blistering paint throughout the upper sections of the stairways, the fourth-story corridors, and the penthouse. Outside the auditorium there was only slight evidence of fire from the second story downward, and occupants below the fourth story had little trouble getting out.