

Seven children die in New York house fire

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23 March 2015

Fire tore through a single-family Brooklyn home Saturday, killing seven and critically wounding two others. The seven dead were all siblings, aged 5 to 16.

The two injured survivors of the blaze, Gayle Sassoon and her 15-year-old daughter, Siporah, are being treated at separate area hospitals for severe burns and smoke inhalation. They were able to escape by jumping from second floor windows. Siporah also suffered broken bones from the leap.

It was the deadliest fire in New York City since 2007, when 10 West African immigrants, including nine children, died in their sub-standard Bronx home.

Fire Department officials believe Saturday's fire began in the kitchen just after midnight. It spread across the unoccupied first floor and up an open stairwell, engulfing the upstairs bedrooms, where the seven young victims were trapped by dense smoke and raging flames.

A witness reported seeing the mother, charred and blackened after barely escaping herself, screaming "save my children, save my children." Flames rising high from either side of the house made rescue impossible.

Desperate cries of "mommy, mommy, help me" from inside the burning building went unanswered. After bringing the blaze under control, firefighters entering the house could do little beyond recover the lifeless bodies of three girls and four boys.

Fire officials attributed the cause of the fire to a hot plate presumably keeping prepared food warm for the Sabbath. The Sassoon family, like many of their Midwood, Brooklyn neighbors, are Orthodox Jews who observe traditional rules forbidding them to turn on appliances during their day of rest.

Fire safety experts caution against the dangerous practice of leaving electric and gas burners operating unattended. Nonetheless it is common in some Orthodox communities to use hot plates or stoves to

keep stews and other meals warm throughout the evening of the Sabbath and into the next day.

The investigation into the fire continued over the weekend. The Fire Department of New York Commissioner Daniel Nigro reported that the initial search did not uncover any evidence of smoke detectors on the first and second levels, only in the basement. The Sassoons had moved into the century-old house two years ago.

"To hear a smoke detector two floors below is asking a lot," Nigro noted.

According to a report by the American Red Cross, seven people on average die in house fires in the US every day. Many of these are caused by the use of unsafe heating methods in the face of rising and unaffordable gas and electricity costs.

In the case of the horrible tragedy on Saturday, it appears that the main issue is that of fire detection and prevention—first, the ease with which malfunctioning cooking or other equipment can start fires that spread very quickly through homes, particularly older structures; and second, the absence of sufficient smoke alarms to warn residents when a fire starts.

In media commentary on the New York fire, these questions have been treated as matters of individual responsibility. Yet the real issue is the absence of social infrastructure and services to ensure that all residences are adequately equipped with the most modern prevention and detection technology. In fact, many homes do not have even basic smoke alarms, or else have smoke alarms that do not work.

The National Fire Protection Association released a report last year that found that, between 2007 and 2011, 60 percent of all fire deaths were in homes that either did not have an alarm or had an alarm that failed to operate.

The WSWWS spoke Sunday with friends and neighbors at the scene of the fire.

Yechiel Asia, a student at a nearby yeshiva, offered his condolences. “I didn’t know the family, but the community grieves for them. Now, our hopes go out to the remaining family to survive this terrible tragedy, and make it through this ordeal.”

“I want to thank the fire department,” he added. “There were nine ambulances from here and over 100 firefighters here fighting the blaze. They did everything they could.”

Judy Benatar passed by the burnt out house with her two children, Tina, 12, and Eli, 14. “The funeral is today so things are still very fresh and raw,” she said. “The family, friends and community will be in mourning. I took my kids out to see the house, show them how real it is and teach them about fire safety. This could happen to anyone.

“The children go to school, and some of them were in my niece’s classes,” she explained. “My niece spoke to one child on Friday, and as they left each other they said ‘I’ll see you tomorrow.’ To see the aftermath, it is a continuing big tragedy.”



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