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## THE SPITZ TAKE: Echoes of circus tragedy

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From the rubble emerged stories of heroism. Stories of lives lost. Stories of lives forever changed that day.

In many ways, it was similar to the scene at the finish line on Marathon Monday, the Station nightclub fire and other tragedies in recent memory.

There was also a difference.

"After it happened, no one talked about it," Pauline Slopek said of the 1944 Hartford circus fire that killed 168 people and injured more than 700.

"The city and state were so horrified, they wanted to put it under the rug," the Ashland resident said.

It wasn't something her family talked about, either.

Even though her mother suffered third-degree burns that day. Even though Slopek, her twin sister Charlene, and two neighbors were hustled to safety by Slopek's father. Even though it was a day that changed the way Slopek viewed crowds, fire and exit signs.

"They never talked about it," she said.

"It was an incredibly hot day," she recalled of July 6, 1944. Her father had the day off from work at Pratt & Whitney, an aircraft manufacturing firm in East Hartford, and the family traveled from Middletown for a carefree afternoon during World War II.

"For my father to use the gas, which was rationed (due to the war), to go to the circus was a big deal."

Her parents left their 3-month-old baby with neighbors, and took the neighbors' children to the circus along with the 6-year-old twins.



PHOTO/ COURTESY PHOTO

The 1944 Hartford circus fire killed 168 people and injured more than 700.

"It was a three-ring circus. We really couldn't see the third ring very well," but the location of their seats saved their lives, Slopek said.

"The cats had finished in our area and the flying trapeze artists had started their ascent to the top of the tent when we turned around due to a bad smell ... The fire started right behind us. The whole tent behind us was in flames."

To keep it waterproof, the tent's canvas had been coated with 1,800 pounds of paraffin wax dissolved in 6,000 gallons of kerosene, according to reports.

"The fire was burning really fast and heading toward the top of the tent. My dad grabbed three of us," but her sister was overcome by smoke, and their mother couldn't carry her. "Dad told her to drop her through the bleachers and he caught her," then rushed the four children outside, through a nearby exit. "I can remember him saying very sternly, 'Stay here. Don't move.'

"He turned to go back for my mother," who managed to make it out on her own, even though she was badly burned. "Everyone was going the other way. They thought they could outrun the fire. He grabs her, he grabs us, and he takes us across the street, first to a house, then he decided the best thing to do was get out of town.

"There was a man in the house who was bleeding very badly. When he jumped from the bleachers, he had landed on a Coke bottle.

"Right next to us (in the tent) was a section reserved for wounded veterans. Each had an attendant with them. Every one of them got out, but they had to hold (the soldiers). They wanted to go back and help."

Slopek doesn't remember exactly how her father got them back to the car, only that as they were driving out of Hartford, "we saw the elephants, nose to tail, being walked away. I don't think we ever thought of looking back at the circus tent.

"My father drove like hell back to Middletown. I think he was hoping to get stopped by police to get help" for her mother. He stopped at the Middletown police station to tell them about the fire, she said, and after dropping the kids off with the neighbors, he took his wife to the hospital.

"She had on a straw hat. The hat was not burned. The top of her head was. The dress wasn't burned. Her back was." But it was her mother's arm that was so badly burned she would need skin grafts.

"She was hospitalized for quite awhile. My Nana came to stay with us," and even after her mother was released from the hospital, she needed help with caring for the baby at home because of limited use of her arm.

"She was told to bowl so as not to lose the use of her arm. She bowled for many, many years."

Her mother's scars were a reminder of the day. There were more painful reminders as well.

"The little girl who sat in front of me in school, she and her whole family died. One of my best friends was very badly burned."

For Slopek, other reminders are her "terrible fear of fire," the need to locate the exits everywhere she goes, "I don't like crowds," and "I hate sitting in the middle of a row. I have to be on

the end."

For Connecticut, the fire led to a ban on circuses in Hartford and other parts of the state for many years.

Five officials and employees of Ringling Bros. were charged with involuntary manslaughter. Four were convicted but pardoned shortly thereafter. The circus paid almost \$5 million to victims and families.

There are conflicting stories about what actually started the fire. A man in Ohio, who had been a roustabout for the circus in Hartford, confessed in 1950, but investigators had doubts about his story.

A girl, known as "Little Miss 1565," was a victim whose identity remained a mystery for decades and, despite eventually being identified as Eleanor Cook, there are still disputes about who she really was.

And while many survivors didn't want to relive that day, a number of books have been written about it. Slopek feels Stewart O'Nan's "The Circus Fire: A True Story of an American Tragedy" is the best.

In 2002, plans began for a memorial to the victims. Slopek was among those attending the dedication ceremony in 2005.

"In my parents' era, I don't think people would go to something like that.

"Now we're more open ... You need the support of others. ... There is value in being with others who know what you're talking about."

There is value in the memorial tributes and in sharing our grief and our triumphs, as Boston has done in the wake of the Marathon bombings.

"Very much," Slopek said.

And there is value in vowing next year's Marathon will be bigger and better than ever, even as we vow to never forget what happened here in 2013.

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