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Poletown Becomes Just a Memory : GM Plant Opens, Replacing Old Detroit Neighborhood

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DETROIT — Four years after the bulldozers swept away much of Poletown, the furious residents are long gone, the prayer vigils and the protests are over and the Cadillac, Buick and Oldsmobile luxury cars are finally starting to roll off the assembly line.

Where the rows of old narrow streets in the long-decaying Polish neighborhood in Detroit's inner city once stood, General Motors has built one of the largest and most highly automated car plants in the nation, one that will eventually employ 4,500 workers and 260 robots to spew out 60 of GM's most expensive models every hour.

The Poletown plant, the first new assembly facility to be built in Detroit in more than 50 years, will finally reach full production on one shift sometime within the next few weeks.

And while the plant isn't likely to employ quite as many workers as initially promised because of its increased use of robots, and while only one of the many supplier plants expected to cluster around it has so far moved in, the city and GM have still lived up to their commitment to place one of the nation's biggest industrial projects in one of the country's most desolate inner cities.

That simple fact, officials of both GM and Detroit hope, should bring to an end the controversy that has swirled around the Poletown project since it was launched in 1980.

Everyone Uses New Name

Now, GM has christened the new facility the "Detroit-Hamtramck" plant (it straddles the border between the two cities) and is hoping that Poletown, its more widely used name and one fused with emotion here, fades from the public's consciousness.

"Everyone here in the plant calls it Detroit-Hamtramck, not Poletown," plant spokeswoman Robin Pannecouk insists.

Father Joseph Grzyb, the Polish immigrant pastor of the struggling St. Stanislaus Catholic Church, located on the edge of the neighborhood that wasn't razed for GM, can attest that Poletown, the neighborhood, has already been reduced to little more than a memory. The 68-year-old priest says that the GM plant has not yet helped reduce crime in the area or reversed the rapid loss of population that Poletown has suffered. The daily influx of the plant's current work force of 3,000 has had little visible economic effect on the area beyond the factory's security fences.

"At least half of my parishioners now come from the suburbs," he says. "They all used to live here, and want to stay with the church, but they have moved out of the city. You can buy a relatively decent house down the block from my church for \$2,000 or \$3,000, because nobody wants them. Anyone who can afford to move out to a safer area does so."

Still, it was the promise of thousands of jobs and a revitalized economy for a city in the midst of a devastating recession that prompted Detroit Mayor Coleman A. Young to arrange for the city to buy up 1,500 homes, businesses and churches and relocate 3,400 people to make room for GM.

The new plant was to be the replacement for Cadillac's ancient Clark Avenue plant on the other side of Detroit, the only other GM assembly plant in the city, and Young wanted to make sure that Detroit didn't lose yet another major employer to the suburbs or the Sun Belt when the Clark Avenue operation shut down. The Poletown location would also make use of the razed site of Chrysler's old Dodge Main assembly plant, which had employed many of Poletown's residents before it closed in 1980.

But the GM plant needed much more land than did the old Dodge facility, and the neighborhood that once housed so many Dodge workers had to come down.

So the city invoked its right of eminent domain over the Poletown neighborhood by declaring that building the plant and creating jobs in Detroit was in the public interest, and it began to buy out the residents and raze their homes.

Elderly Residents Fought

But Young hadn't reckoned on the fierce battle that many of the elderly residents would wage in an effort to save their beloved Poletown. Although most of the younger Polish families had long since moved out and the area was fast becoming a dangerous slum, many first- and second-generation Polish-Americans had spent most of their lives there, raised their families there, worshiped in the Catholic churches there and wanted to die in their homes there.

Soon, with the help of staffers from Ralph Nader's Washington office, a few dozen of the older residents began to hold protest meetings, picket GM, file lawsuits against the city and gain nationwide attention for their cause.

They were especially traumatized by the idea that the city would tear down a Catholic church to put up an auto plant. As a result, they focused their fight on a campaign to save the Immaculate Conception Catholic Church, where the pastor, Father Joseph Karasiewicz, led a band of old parishioners in a long and emotional sit-down protest in the basement of the church. Karasiewicz tried to save his church against the wishes of his superiors in the Archdiocese of Detroit, who had agreed to the church's demolition because of its dwindling congregation.

Finally in July, 1981, a year after the Poletown project had first been announced, the Detroit Police Department staged an early morning raid on the church and hauled off a dozen protesters. Soon, the church's demolition was under way and the fight to save Poletown was effectively over.

Population Scattered

Now the people of Poletown—the elderly Poles who had lived there for decades as well as the Albanians, Latinos, blacks and other groups that had moved in more recently—have scattered throughout Detroit and its suburbs.

Many are actually happy to be out. A survey by the University of Michigan found that most of the elderly residents of the area felt that they had moved into new homes that were better and in safer neighborhoods than Poletown had been. Most also seemed satisfied with the amount of money the city had paid to buy their old homes and help them move.

(The Young Administration has never said exactly how much the city has spent to buy the property, but Mel Ravitz, a city council member and a longtime critic of the Poletown project, said the cost could run as high as \$200 million once all of the pending lawsuits filed by property owners are settled.)

But while they wouldn't want to go back, the majority of the Poletown residents surveyed by the university still expressed "disappointment about losing their old homes, friends and neighborhood."

And for some, the bitterness over the demolition of Poletown is still there, just beneath the surface, and it still runs deep.

Feel Safer Now

Walter and Josephine Jakubowski, who helped lead the fight to save the Immaculate Conception Church, are finally growing accustomed to suburban living. Both in their 70s, they feel safer now than they did in Poletown during the last few years they lived there, and they are closer to their children and grandchildren, who had earlier abandoned the inner city for the suburbs.

Sitting comfortably in the living room of their ranch-style home in Shelby Township, Mich.—bought partly with money they received from the city of Detroit as compensation for their old house in Poletown—Walter, now 78, talks happily about how nice the suburbs are, especially compared to Detroit. "You can't beat this place," he says. "This neighborhood is beautiful. It's like a park."

But he and his wife will never forgive GM or Mayor Young for what they did to Poletown, even though its heyday as a vibrant ethnic neighborhood had long since passed by the time it was demolished. The Jakubowski's had been one of the last holdouts in their neighborhood, and when they finally, grudgingly moved out in November, 1981, their home was one of only three or four still standing.

Now, the spot where Walter Jakubowski lived for 70 years is part of the plant's parking lot. "I call myself an exile from Poletown," says Walter, a 78-year-old Chrysler retiree.

Roots Were There

"People ask why we fought," Josephine says. "It's because our roots were there. My church was there, and we were like one big family in our parish," she adds. "And we lost all of that. GM to me is the mark of destruction."

But Willy and Ethel Feagan, a black couple who ran a small repair shop in predominantly white Poletown, have lost more—the disruption to their business caused by the move out of the old neighborhood has brought them to the brink of financial collapse.

The Feagans have been entangled in governmental red tape and financial confusion ever since the city helped them move to the east side of Detroit. And now, with business way down at their new shop, they are worried that they might soon lose their new home.

"This whole move has been nothing but a source of financial trouble," Willy Feagan says. "Our other place was beautiful, we could make a living there," he adds, noting that Poletown enjoyed a unique kind of racial harmony among its residents and merchants. "But here, we've lost our old clientele and business isn't as good. Things have not been the same since we left," he adds.

"They'll never know how much they hurt us."