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John Saber, one of the last residents of Poletown, sits on the front steps of his home on Kanter Street in 1983.

## Auto plant vs. neighborhood: The Poletown battle

By Jenny Nolan

In 1981, General Motors and the cities of Detroit and Hamtramck collaborated in a grand plan to bring industry back to what was perceived as a dying city, to add to the two cities' tax coffers and to keep the automotive business centered in Detroit.

In the process, the city lost a neighborhood, the Catholic Archdiocese lost the faith of some of their flock and 4,200 people lost their homes.

At the tail end of the once promising urban renewal movement of the 1960's, Detroit had not seen much improvement. Neighborhoods had been razed for expressways, or for 'new development' which never materialized. Stores and shops were closing down at a rapid pace, churches were losing their congregations to the suburbs, and industry was turning elsewhere, moving out to the far suburbs where space was not at a premium and crime and crumbling infrastructure were not issues.

And then General Motors and Detroit Mayor Coleman Young hatched a plan: If the city would get the land, the auto company would build a state-of-the-art plant, crossing the border with Hamtramck, employing 6,000 people and providing a glittering example of what the auto companies and their suppliers could do in the city of their birth.



**A rose stuck in the fence outside Immaculate Conception Church is all that remains of a 1981 protest vigil as workers continue to dismantle the Poletown landmark.**

At first glance the project seemed brilliant. In 1979, the old Dodge Main plant in Hamtramck had closed and that city lost \$1.7 million in tax revenue. Hamtramck was happy to join in the deal. But there were obstacles in Detroit -- 1,300 homes, 140 businesses, six churches and one hospital lay in the path of the proposed plant.

The neighborhood adjacent to Hamtramck's southern border was, like Hamtramck, home to Poles as well as Albanians, Yugoslavs, Blacks, Yemenis and Filipinos. But some families had been there for generations, since the influx of Polish workers to the auto plants in the 1920s and '30s, and even before. Some of the first Polish settlements in the city in the 1870s had been in this area. It was the home of the original St. Mary's College and Polish Seminary at the corner of St. Aubin and Forest. It was the original location for the International Institute. St John the Evangelist Catholic Parish had been founded there in the 1890s, Immaculate Conception Parish in 1918.

Many homeowners agreed at the outset to sell their homes to the city and leave their crumbling neighborhood. The old workingmen's houses, once solid, were losing mortar or siding. Blight was already driving residents north in the city and to Warren and Sterling Heights.

Buyout prices for the homes started at \$6,000 and averaged \$13,000. Residents were eligible for up to an additional \$15,000 for the difference in price of their new home and their buyout price. Another \$3,500 could be available for moving by a certain time, and tax differences. Not everyone was satisfied with the offers, though.

John Saber, a retired photographer who had lived in his home on Kanter Street for 46 years, was offered \$15,000 for his home, but refused, suing the city for \$15 million. Acting as his own lawyer, he claimed damages for, among other things, destruction of a miraculous apparition on

his window sill, his 'prize' cats being eaten by dogs abandoned by departing neighbors and an art studio that he would have built on the empty lot next door.



**Marian and Abe Faur move out of their Poletown home on Sargeant Street in 1981.**

Resistance began to build as some residents took in the scope of the project. There were lawsuits and sit-ins and demonstrations.

Opposition to the plan was centered in Immaculate Conception Roman Catholic Church. The Archdiocese of Detroit went along with the city's plan and had agreed that the two Catholic churches in the way of the project (Immaculate Conception and St. John the Evangelist) would be sold to the city, and the parishes combined with other nearby parishes. Cardinal John F. Dearden made the decision early in the planning stages of the project.

He could not have been expecting such resistance from a mild 59-year-old pastor, and his few parishioners. The Reverend Joseph Karasiewicz led his flock in their protest against the taking of the land and the razing of the church. Raised in nearby St. Hyacinth's mostly Polish parish, Father Karasiewicz had attended St. Mary's Polish Seminary. He defied his Cardinal and fought to keep the Church open for his faithful.

The parishioners' letter-writing campaign lured a national power hitter: Ralph Nader. Joining forces with the Poletown Neighborhood Council, Nader's Raiders began a public relations war against General Motors and the city of Detroit. Nader called Coleman Young a "petty dictator." Young called him a "carpetbagger from Washington" and claimed he had a "psychotic hatred of GM."

His press releases, cranked out from the basement of Immaculate Conception, brought national attention to the dispute. The New York Times, Washington Post, L.A. Times and CBS News all came to town to do stories on the sacrifice of a neighborhood to a corporate giant.

But another Poletown group, the Citizens District Council, supported the plan. Gary Campbell, a Poletown resident and bar owner, accused the opposing group of calling secret meetings with Nader and Gray Panther leader Maggie Kughn and then presenting opinions of a small minority as if they represented the entire neighborhood.

The City Council of Detroit was in almost unanimous agreement with Coleman Young on the issue. Only Kenneth Cockrel voted against the October 1980 resolution authorizing acquisition and demolition of the properties.

Publicity notwithstanding, the Archdiocese stood firm on the church closing. While the Rev. Karasiewicz's parishioners were passionate, they were few and declining in numbers. A news article of the time placed the number of worshipers at a normal Sunday Mass at around 30.

Eventually time ran out for the protesters. Wayne County Circuit Court Judge George T. Martin rejected arguments that the condemnation proceedings were illegal. The Michigan Supreme Court, in a 5-2 decision in March of 1981, ruled that Detroit could clear the whole site for GM.

The last official Mass in Immaculate Conception was in May of 1981. A 29-day sit-in at the Church came to an end on July 14, 1981. Police forcibly evicted 20 people from the church and arrested 12, only three of whom were from Poletown. Much of the opposition to the project seemed to come from outsiders. One of the protesters complained that "if you had to rely solely on these residents here, the area would be gone by now."

The wrecking ball finished its work on July 16 at 3 p.m..

A year later, bitter residents told a News reporter they were not reconciled to their move. Ann Locklear said she had "lost my faith in the Church, the city and General Motors.

Walter Jakubowski said: "They destroyed our roots, our home, everything.



**John Saber stands guard in front of his home on Kanter. He was one of the last holdouts, suing the city for \$15 million.**

Louise Crosby's husband George became depressed after the couple moved to the Van Dyke-Seven Mile area. "He kept saying, 'I want to go home, I want to go home.'" One winter day he left the house and was found three hours later wandering in the bitter cold. He ended up in a nursing home.

But a study conducted by University of Michigan researcher Leon Pastalan concluded that most are better off. The study showed 87 percent of the former Poletown residents older than 60 and 84 percent of younger former residents were happy in their new homes. Only 39 percent said relocation payments did not cover the costs of their new home.



**Protesters march against the planned destruction of their neighborhood in 1980.**

(This story was compiled using clip and photo files from The Detroit News Library.)

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