

**THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING POLISH:**  
THE COMPLEX INTERACTION OF COMMUNITY  
IDENTITY AND RACE IN HAMTRAMCK'S POSTWAR  
DEVELOPMENT

by

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## **Introduction**

On October 10, 1921, the residents of the village of Hamtramck voted to incorporate as a city by a margin of 870 to 240, permanently carving out a 2.1 square mile Polish enclave from the ever-encroaching city of Detroit.<sup>1</sup> At first glance, the act of setting aside the equivalent of about 1.5% of the total area of Detroit seems relatively insignificant. Both cities were coming to rely heavily on the automotive industry as the base of their respective economies and both were experiencing the same population boom due to the proliferation of this industry. Hamtramck initially appeared to be a microcosm of Detroit, nominally set apart but analogous in most aspects. They were racially similar in composition (about 4% Black) and had the same awkward combination of industrial areas intermixed with residential areas.<sup>2</sup> Based on these similarities, it is not hard to imagine the histories of the two cities running parallel courses. Their common origins might have suggested a shared future for the two towns, a fate that was inevitably tied to the factor that led to their rapid expansion: the auto industry.

The two cities appear to follow the same general course of depopulation over the final sixty years of the twentieth century. Hamtramck and Detroit enjoyed an incredible population surge between 1910 and 1930, growing 1,581% and 337% respectively.<sup>3</sup> While Hamtramck's population started to decline after 1930, Detroit kept surging on, though at a slower rate. It was not until 1950 that Detroit reached its peak population at about 1,850,000, after which it began its tailspin, falling 50% between 1950 and 2000.

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Kowalski, *Hamtramck: The Driven City* (Charleston, SC : Arcadia Pub., 2002), 35.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Serafino, *West of Warsaw* (Hamtramck, MI : Avenue Pub. Co., 1983), 23.

<sup>3</sup> United States Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population*.

One explanation for this collapse put forth by historians such as Frank Serafino emphasizes the downfall of the auto industry, saying that gradual changes in market trends condemned urban areas so dependent on the trade.<sup>4</sup> The general course taken by The Big Three was to abandon the massive, labor intensive, urban factories for sprawling, suburban, machine-automated ones. This drained thousands of jobs from these areas, leaving behind massive skeletons of the American Dream. The tragic ‘rusting of the Rust Belt’ took few prisoners in Hamtramck and Detroit.

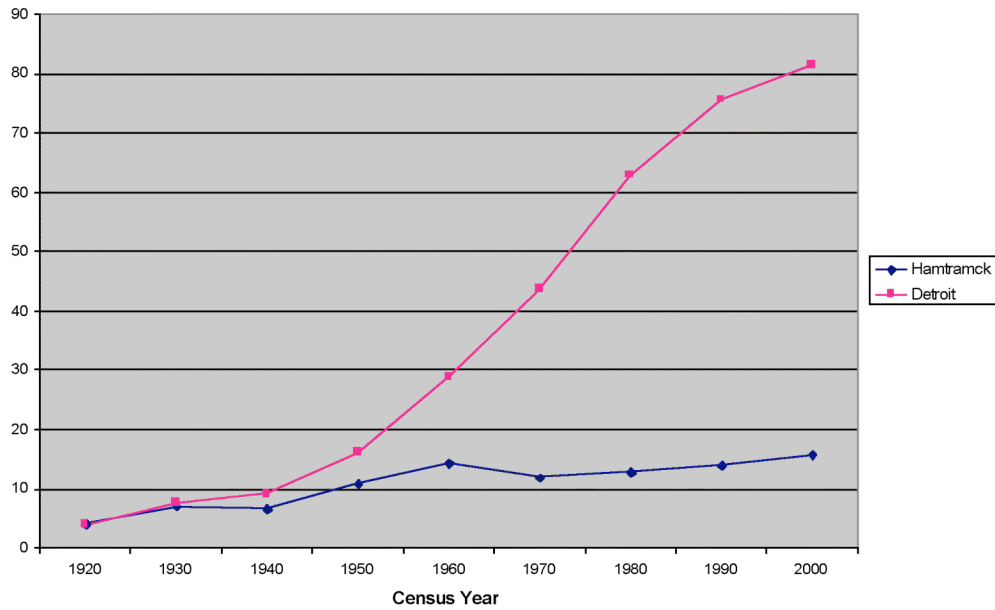
Despite sharing this generally common fate, however, the paths of decline for the two cities diverge in one important area. Both cities experienced a steady decline in population, but Detroit’s population shift reflected the notorious ‘White Flight,’ as the city’s makeup dramatically shifted from primarily white in the 1930s and ‘40s to mostly black by the 1980s. The racial tensions resulting from such drastic population shifts played a crucial role in defining the character of Detroit’s transformation throughout the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> Hamtramck’s evolution lacked this racial character as it remained predominantly white throughout the postwar era. (See Figure 1.) In the same period (1940 to 2000) when Detroit went from 9.2% to 82% Black, Hamtramck only went from 6.7% to 15% Black. What possible explanation can be offered for the city’s thorough avoidance of the population trends at work in Detroit?

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<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, 225.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis : Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, N.J. : Princeton University Press, 1998), 5.

Figure 1 - Hamtramck's Racial Divergence from Detroit



Was Hamtramck a case of an overtly racist community taking discriminatory measures to prevent racial integration? Detroit's history is rife with instances of discrimination on the part of individual neighborhoods. The postwar racial flux in Detroit created significant tensions between the White residents and the growing Black population, described by historian Thomas Sugrue as a 'turf war.'<sup>6</sup> White residents sought to preserve the traditional homogeneity of their neighborhoods, while Black residents resented their relegation to the city's poorest housing stock.<sup>7</sup> Many times, these white residents took active efforts to exclude Blacks from their neighborhoods. These racial tensions erupted into two separate riots, one in 1943, and a much more devastating one in 1967. Was Hamtramck like

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, 234.

<sup>7</sup> This is a drastic simplification of the respective qualms of these two generalized groups. The topic is discussed in more depth in Chapter Four, but no summation can do justice to Sugrue's complex and well supported arguments in *Origins of the Urban Crisis*.

other traditionally white communities nearby in Detroit? To what extent can racism and discrimination account for the observed racial trends?

### **The Importance of Being Polish**

This discussion of Hamtramck's history and development up to this point has been framed in, admittedly, misleading terms. Hamtramck's divergence has been compared to Detroit using categories of race: Black and white. The reality is that Hamtramck diverged from its surrounding city long before the White Flight of the postwar era. Hamtramck was from its very formation a Polish immigrant community, a characteristic associated with the city to this day. Around the time of incorporation, Hamtramck was one third foreign born Polish immigrants.<sup>8</sup> Ten years later, Polish foreign stock (the foreign born and their native born children) in the city comprised two thirds of the population.<sup>9</sup> By 1940, 81% of Hamtramck's population identified themselves as having Polish ancestry.<sup>10</sup> This legacy of Polish descent would have important ramifications for the postwar development of the city.

Permanently resettling in a new society was an incredibly challenging and stressful experience for immigrants. Language barriers alone would have been enough to make even the simplest of daily interactions an arduous endeavor. For those who chose to depart Poland for America, settling in communities with others facing the same pressures and obstacles was a comforting option.

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<sup>8</sup> United States Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population*, 1920.

<sup>9</sup> United States Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population*, 1930.

<sup>10</sup> United States Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population*, 1940. The reason the categories are discussed in varying terms is that the questions asked by the census change from year to year, generally towards more descriptive categories. While 1920 only offered foreign born statistics, the categories expand to include the native children of foreign born immigrants and those that self-identify as having a particular ancestry.

With Polish ethnic communities such as Hamtramck playing such vital roles for their inhabitants, it is not surprising that a substantial degree of attachment developed. This common bond shared by the residents is referred to herein as ‘community identity’ – a complex set of perceptions on the part of Hamtramckans that there was something special about their city that warranted a commitment to its future. There is strong evidence to suggest that there was a thriving community identity in Hamtramck in the postwar era and that this identity conferred a degree of stability on the city unseen in most of Detroit. Hamtramck did experience a consistent population loss from 1930 until the 1990s and many of those that left surely did so for life in the suburbs. But although many left, many more stayed. It is this population of committed residents that will be the focus of this thesis.

Detroit’s population lacked this ubiquitous ethnic component. While there was a significant immigrant population and even some immigrant communities in Detroit, this was by no means the defining characteristic that it was in Hamtramck. Detroit’s 1920 population was 29% foreign born white, but only 5.7% of the city’s population was a foreign born Polish immigrant.<sup>11</sup> It seems apparent that in Detroit many individual communities had identities particularly defined by race rather than ethnicity. The prolonged battles surrounding integration illustrate that residents in these neighborhoods were generally less cognizant of ethnic ties. Instead they saw ‘whiteness’ as the distinguishing factor and reacted defensively to those who contradicted this identity. Ultimately, it would seem that the attachments to these communities were somehow weaker than what existed in Hamtramck.

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<sup>11</sup> United States Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population*, 1920. An interesting side note, a significant portion of Detroit’s Polish population resettled in Hamtramck after its founding.

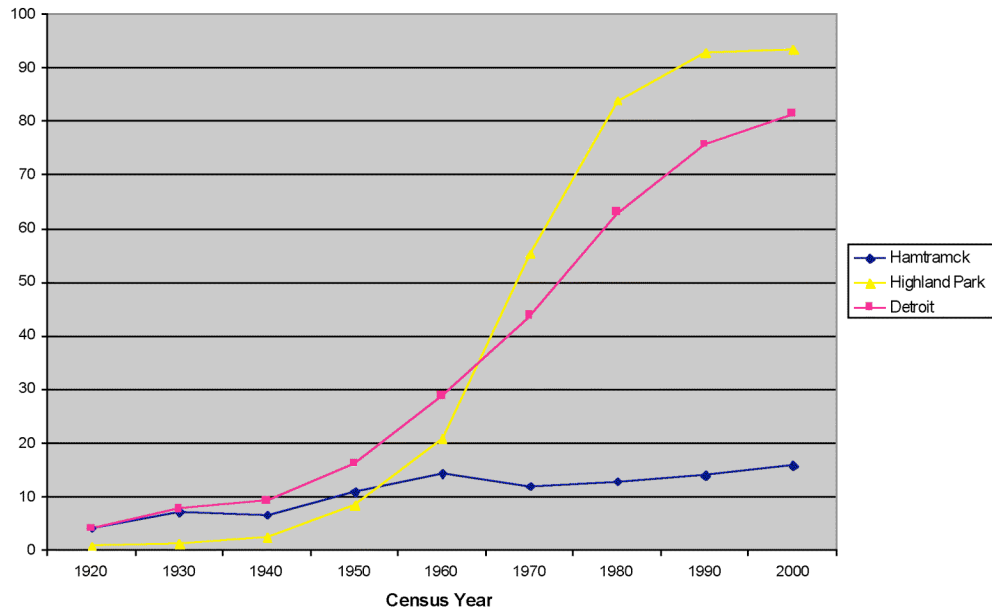
While the example of Detroit communities provide a comparison point with Hamtramck, the city of Highland Park is even more useful in this respect. Highland Park is a second separately incorporated city within Detroit approximately the same size as Hamtramck. At the time of Hamtramck's incorporation in 1921 and thereafter, the two cities were comparable in almost all economic and social aspects. The only significant difference between the two cities is that Hamtramck contained the aforementioned preponderance of Polish residents whereas Highland Park lacked any significant presence of this or any other white ethnic demographic.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, as Figure 2 illustrates below, Highland Park's postwar development mirrored the trends observed in Detroit.

The existence of a distinct community identity rooted in Hamtramck's history as a Polish ethnic community is thus an issue that demands consideration in any attempt to explain the postwar racial development of Hamtramck. The problem is that nobody has made a serious academic attempt to explain this aspect of Hamtramck's history. While the two books that have concerned themselves primarily with the general history of Hamtramck both recognize the unique

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<sup>12</sup> For example, in 1940 Hamtramck had 12,260 foreign born Polish residents while Highland Park had only 143. The comparison with Highland Park is an approach first utilized by Arthur Evans Wood in *Hamtramck: Then and Now*. Wood's analysis does not, however, pay any significant attention to the implications this ethnic disparity for the racial development of the respective cities. This is due most likely to the work having been written in 1955, before the racial differences between the two cities became as glaring as it was in the decades thereafter.

Figure 2 - Highland Park's Racial Development



history of Hamtramck's Black residents, neither of them offer a direct analysis as to *why* Hamtramck diverged so dramatically from Detroit.<sup>13</sup> This thesis is intended as an initial foray into that previously uncharted territory.

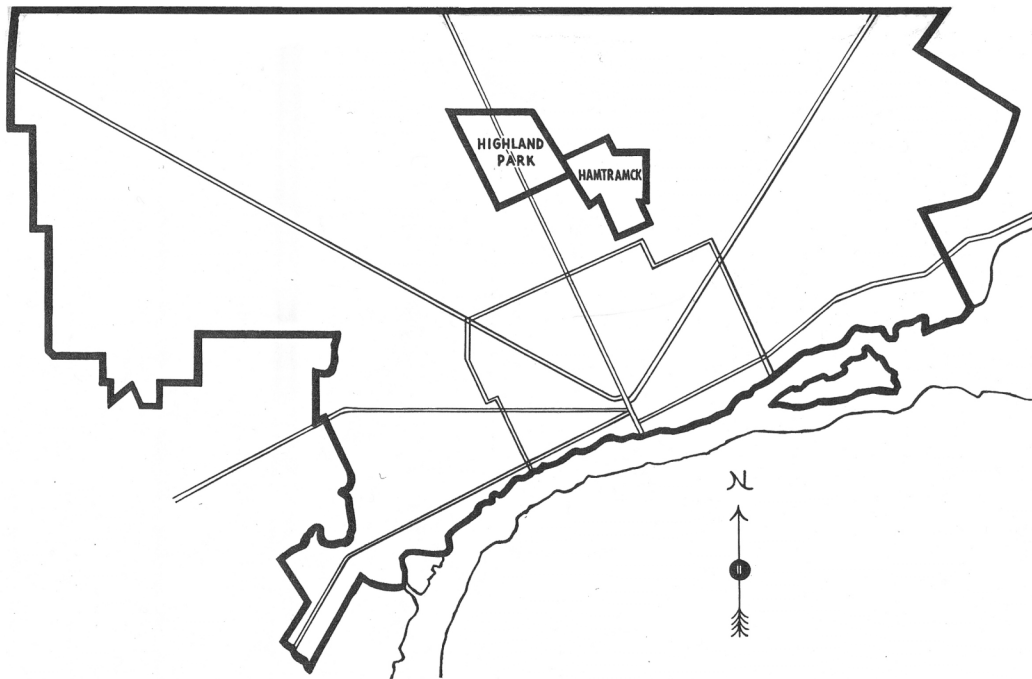
At this point, one thing that is glaringly obvious is that I have not answered any of the questions that I posed about racism and discrimination in postwar Hamtramck. It is important to note that the existence of a pervasive community identity in no way precludes the existence of racism and discrimination in Hamtramck's history. In fact, a thorough review of the history of Hamtramck's Black population reveals that there were numerous instances of racial discrimination, many of which were not at all subtle. The most egregious episode of discrimination was the city's execution of its urban renewal program,

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<sup>13</sup> These two histories are Greg Kowalski's *Hamtramck: The Driven City* and Frank Serafino's *West of Warsaw*.



**Figure 3 - Detroit, Hamtramck, and Highland Park**



HAMTRAMCK AND HIGHLAND PARK IMBEDDED IN DETROIT AREA

Source: Arthur Evans Wood, *Hamtramck: Then and Now* (New Haven: College and University Press, 1955).

which led to a class action lawsuit in which city officials were convicted of carrying out ‘Negro removal.’

This lawsuit will be the organizational theme for this thesis because it presents the opportunity for a uniquely practical approach to the interaction of race and community identity in Hamtramck. The various opinions expressed in reaction to the court’s decision illustrate the discrepancies that result when a one-sided approach to Hamtramck’s postwar history is taken. The reactions of Hamtramck residents to the decision directly contradict the findings of Judge Damon Keith. Hamtramckans perceived the events and circumstances surrounding the court case primarily through the lens of their community identity. As a result, they did not have an entirely accurate historical perspective on the city’s record on civil rights. Judge Keith’s decision takes a different one-sided approach, limited to questions

about whether there was discrimination in the city. Judge Keith was not out to develop a historical assessment of Hamtramck's development. Instead, he asked a certain set of questions necessary to make a legal judgment about the actions of Hamtramck officials.<sup>14</sup> National newspapers, however, generally took this judgment to be an overall assessment of race relations in Hamtramck and proceeded to overemphasize the role of racial discrimination in shaping postwar Hamtramck. The goal of this thesis is to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the forces that shaped Hamtramck's peculiar postwar circumstance.

In order to properly understand the context of the court case and aspects of the community's unique identity, one must grasp certain general trends of Hamtramck's history. Far and away the most important aspect of this history is how the city came to be a Polish enclave landlocked within Detroit. The course from Hamtramck's inception to the postwar era can be briefly sketched through an analysis of the role of the auto industry in the city's history. Trends in the city greatly paralleled the fluctuations in the auto industry, with prolific booms in the 1910s and 1920s, struggles during the Great Depression, and a surge immediately following World War II. Just as the auto industry began serious overhauls, Hamtramck embarked on a program of modernization of its own, with urban renewal beginning in the late 1950s. This program led to the lawsuit charging discriminatory practices against Hamtramck's Black population. The judgment

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<sup>14</sup> This is not to suggest that Judge Keith's *legal* approach was in some way one-sided. This discussion is to illustrate the differences between a legal and a historical approach. Community identity or not, racial discrimination was illegal, so considering such a potential influence was irrelevant to a legal consideration.

rendered spoke at length on the discrimination rampant in Hamtramck on the part of both public officials and private homeowners.

The exodus of Black residents from Hamtramck resulted primarily from urban renewal projects but had many supporting factors. Testimony at the trial reveals that strong racial prejudices exist within the defendant City making relocation of displaced Blacks a difficult if sometimes impossibly task...Few if any plans were made or implemented by city officials to correct a known unfair practice of discrimination by the white citizens toward the Black citizens of the community.<sup>15</sup>

Through this decision, the city and residents of Hamtramck were essentially declared racist.

The defensive reactions of Hamtramck residents that directly contradict the lawsuit decision will serve to illustrate the distinctive thought process of Hamtramckans: their community identity. To fully appreciate the connection between Polish immigrants and their ethnic communities, a review of the existing literature on Polish ethnic communities and Polish ethnic identity is necessary. Of specific interest are the issues of why Polish ethnic communities form and what long term trends are generally observed. By illustrating the importance of the ethnic community to the Polish immigrant, this body of scholarship provides the theoretical basis for the proposed existence of a pervasive community identity in Hamtramck.

Evidence for the existence and intensity of this community identity can be observed in several places. A careful review of Hamtramck's central newspaper's coverage of the 1967 Detroit race riots demonstrates how Hamtramckans thought of themselves and their city as exceptionally distinct from Detroit. Reactions to Judge Keith's ruling in newspaper articles and oral histories (taken in 1973) in addition to

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<sup>15</sup> *Garrett v. City of Hamtramck*, 335 F. Supp. 16 (E.D. Mich. 1971) at 19.

various documents concerning issues of urban renewal in Hamtramck offer insights into particular facets of this identity. Among these aspects of Hamtramck's postwar identity was a general feeling of aversion and suspicion towards outsiders and a deep-seated working class sentiment. While Judge Keith's decision insisted that race was the primary factor that Hamtramckans used to determine who belonged in Hamtramck, these features of the community identity suggest other considerations were at work.

Any attempt at assessing Hamtramck's postwar divergence from Detroit also requires a thorough evaluation of the history of Blacks in Hamtramck. Two tales emerge from the narrative of Hamtramck's Black population. One is the general assertion made by Hamtramckans both Black and white that racial harmony had characterized the city from its beginning. The other story arises from the substantial body of evidence, not the least of which is the federal court conviction, that there had been much discrimination and segregation throughout Hamtramck's history. As with the court decision, the subject of Hamtramck's postwar race relations comes to a stalemate with two contradictory positions emerging. This situation is even more perplexing because there are multiple instances of Black residents touting Hamtramck's racial unity when they were the very ones alleged to be the victims of the city's discrimination.

The impasse observed in the discussion of the legacy of Black Hamtramckans illustrates the incomplete picture formed from questions limited to issues of racism. Once again, 'community identity' proves to be a useful construct for understanding postwar Hamtramck, as the issue of race relations is less

contradictory when viewed through this lens. To answer the initial question, racism and discrimination did have a role in facilitating Hamtramck's postwar divergence from Detroit. As I will argue, there were, however, other factors just as significant, if not more so, than race alone.

My analysis concludes with a more in depth discussion of the practical applications of the community identity and the possible long term consequences. The most significant of these is that a strong community identity among citizens with a long-term commitment to their community probably conferred stability on Hamtramck. Rather than try to settle upon a comprehensive catalog of all the factors that brought about Hamtramck's postwar circumstance, this section will only address aspects of community identity as an influencing feature.

Undeniably, there was discrimination and racism throughout Hamtramck's history. With this premise in mind, the conversation about the role of community identity in Hamtramck's unique postwar racial development can begin.

## **Chapter One: The Oddest City in America**

“In 1931 the New York Times writer Gladys H. Kelsey described what she called ‘the oddest city in the United States.’ She described this peculiar urban situation in the following manner: ‘The city is, in fact, a Polish enclave, reviving in pageants and in daily practices the manners and customs of the Polish peasant; a hot bed of Polish politics; a city in whose streets English sounds out of place, and in whose windows Old World, unintelligible signs are displayed; a city on whose corners plaster statuettes are vended from huge baskets, and in whose restaurants unfathomable dishes are served.’ Most startling of all was the fact that this city had a population of nearly 60,000 living within 2.09 square miles, and completely surrounded by the city of Detroit.”<sup>16</sup>

Where did Hamtramck come from? The existence of a separately incorporated city completely surrounded by another city 68 times larger is an obvious geographical anomaly. As the quotation from Robert Maday’s thesis indicates, Hamtramck was also quite a culturally and socially distinct entity from its early years. The purpose of this chapter will be to move towards a fuller understanding of the complexities of Hamtramck’s circumstance, as many of them had implications for the development of a community identity. One important aspect to appreciate is how Hamtramck came to exist within Detroit, leading Hamtramckans to view themselves as uniquely distinct from its larger neighbor. Another feature of Hamtramck’s history requiring discussion is the early, central, and continuous role of the automotive industry in the city’s progression. The centrality of the auto industry helped facilitate the development of a strong working class sentiment in the city.

The discussion on the auto industry will segue to the topic of postwar urban renewal in the city of Hamtramck and the city’s conviction of practicing ‘Negro

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<sup>16</sup> Robert C. Maday, *An Historical Geography of Hamtramck Township: An Attempt at Explaining the Origins of the City of Hamtramck*, (1977), 5. Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan.

removal' through its urban renewal programs in the *Garrett v Hamtramck* (1971) court case. This will provide the background story necessary to process the later observations on the interaction of Hamtramck's community identity and the issue urban renewal.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Township with the Unpronounceable Name**<sup>18</sup>

Hamtramck Township had a long history in the state of Michigan. The first mentioning of it was made on November 1, 1798 when it was established as one of four townships that made up Wayne County, which spanned most of the present day lower peninsula of Michigan at the time.<sup>19</sup> In 1818 and 1827, Wayne County was stabilized and reduced to its current approximate size, at which point Hamtramck Township was also reorganized. At this time, Hamtramck Township consisted of nearly 1/3 of present day Detroit, present day Hamtramck, Highland Park, and the Grosse Pointes, and also part of present day Belle Isle.<sup>20</sup> This constitution would not last, as Detroit began to covet Hamtramck Township's lands. The city began making several annexations over the 19<sup>th</sup> century, notably the Township's shoreline and Belle Isle possessions in 1891.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Hamtramck has a rich and interesting history, one that certainly can not be done justice in the space allotted in this project. I will be restricting my narrative to those aspects I deem to be relevant towards understanding the framework I have set up for assessing the city's community identity, namely the city's postwar development and the urban renewal lawsuit. The most thorough and current general history of the city is Greg Kowalski's *Hamtramck: The Driven City*. Kowalski's book contains a large number of photographs and minutia that cannot be covered as a matter of practicality. Robert Maday's thesis concerns itself with the origins of the city from the standpoint of a historical geography, and is far and away the best source on this topic.

<sup>18</sup> Friend Palmer referred to Hamtramck as "the township with the unpronounceable name in his book *Early Days in Detroit*. (Detroit: Hunt and June, 1906.) Quoted in Maday, *An Historical Geography of Hamtramck Township: An Attempt at Explaining the Origins of the City of Hamtramck*, 44

<sup>19</sup> Serafino, *West of Warsaw*, 33.

<sup>20</sup> Kowalski, *Hamtramck: The Driven City*, 17. See also, Maday, *An Historical Geography of Hamtramck Township : An Attempt at Explaining the Origins of the City of Hamtramck*, 48.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, 80.

While Detroit was slowly relegating Hamtramck Township to the interior of Wayne County, there was an important development that would have drastic ramifications for the location and character of Hamtramck well into the twentieth century. By the mid 1870s, railroads were being laid throughout the Township as they radiated out of the developing Detroit. As industries sought to expand and escape the congestion of Detroit, they did so along the railroads and railroad frontage soon became “as desirable as that on the waterfront had been.”<sup>22</sup> This industrial expansion would enable the growth of the auto industry in both Hamtramck and Highland Park.

At a particularly central railroad junction along Joseph Campau, the street destined to become Hamtramck’s main thoroughfare, industrial activity increased towards the end of the nineteenth century. Due to this increased development “and perhaps inspired by increased land values or the example set by Highland Park’s incorporation [in 1889], the residents of this community decided to incorporate the area...as a village” in 1901.<sup>23</sup> Another possible motivation for incorporating as a village could have been that the ever-encroaching city of Detroit had whittled Hamtramck Township down to just over 10 square miles by 1904. Confusingly enough, this new village adopted the name ‘Hamtramck’ mirroring the township it had been established within. The former would become the present day Hamtramck while the latter would soon fade to irrelevance.

At the time of incorporation of the village of Hamtramck, most of the population (only about 500 persons total) were of German descent and lived south

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, 80-82.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, 86.



of Holbrook Street, with the northern half of the village yet to be developed. (Please see map of Hamtramck in Appendix to help visualize this and future discussions.) Historical geographer Robert Maday identifies 1907 as the turning point for Hamtramck village:

Before that year, this landscape was occupied by a community of largely German agriculturalists which had gradually developed into a community...This would be the Hamtramck of the past. The Hamtramck of the future could be seen, in 1907, just a few blocks away...Here...were the multitude of names of those in the old Polish settlement on Detroit's East Side. Congested within their community, they needed new lots and new housing. Previous occupancy on either side of their settlement resulted in their gradual movement outward toward Hamtramck.<sup>24</sup>

The events that created the ensuing population boom are truly remarkable. Aspects of demographics, geography, and economics combined to produce a critical mass that led to the proliferation of Hamtramck from 2,200 persons in 1907 to 21,520 persons in 1915, an increase of 978%.<sup>25</sup>

The relatively unoccupied section of Hamtramck soon found itself with car factories on either side, with Henry Ford opening a factory in Highland Park in 1908 and the Dodge Brothers opening a factory in the southern part of the village of Hamtramck.<sup>26</sup> Proximity to two large employers would make settlement in this section of Hamtramck ideal, but another factor ensured the influx of new residents would be predominantly Polish. In 1909 St. Florian, a Polish Catholic parish, was established near the corner of Joseph Campau and Holbrook at the dead center of the village. Maday observes that “the importance of this location should not be underestimated, for Catholicism can almost be considered a trait of Polish

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, 98.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, 106.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, 103 Though the Dodge Brothers were initially suppliers for Ford, in 1914 they began competition with Ford by making their own cars and expanding their factory. This competition would catalyze Hamtramck's development even more.

nationality.”<sup>27</sup> Regarding the appeal of Hamtramck village at this time, Maday summarizes:

Now Detroit’s largest immigrant community at this time, the Poles could see in or near Hamtramck factories that would employ them, a school and church where, in their own Polish language and tradition their children could be brought up, and soon, where there had been fields, subdivisions filled with lots upon which to build their own houses.<sup>28</sup>

Though the Polish population that flooded into Hamtramck came from Detroit’s Polish communities at first, the city soon began attracting Poles directly from Europe and from other settlements in America. The immigrants that chose to resettle saw Hamtramck as a “developing ethnic community where work was available at wages greater than the coal mine, and life was free of the outside prohibitions or cultural taboos of the culturally hostile landscape of prevailingly Protestant America.”<sup>29</sup> This incredible boom in Polish immigrants garnered Hamtramck national attention.<sup>30</sup>

Events followed that made Hamtramck’s incorporation as a city an issue of plain practicality. In 1916 Detroit once again annexed part of Hamtramck Township. This annexation wrapped Detroit around the Northern and Eastern side of Hamtramck Village, while previous annexations had put Detroit at the Southern and Western border; Hamtramck was now effectively surrounded.<sup>31</sup> (Figure 1.1) Highland Park incorporated as a city in 1917, removing even more

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<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, 100.

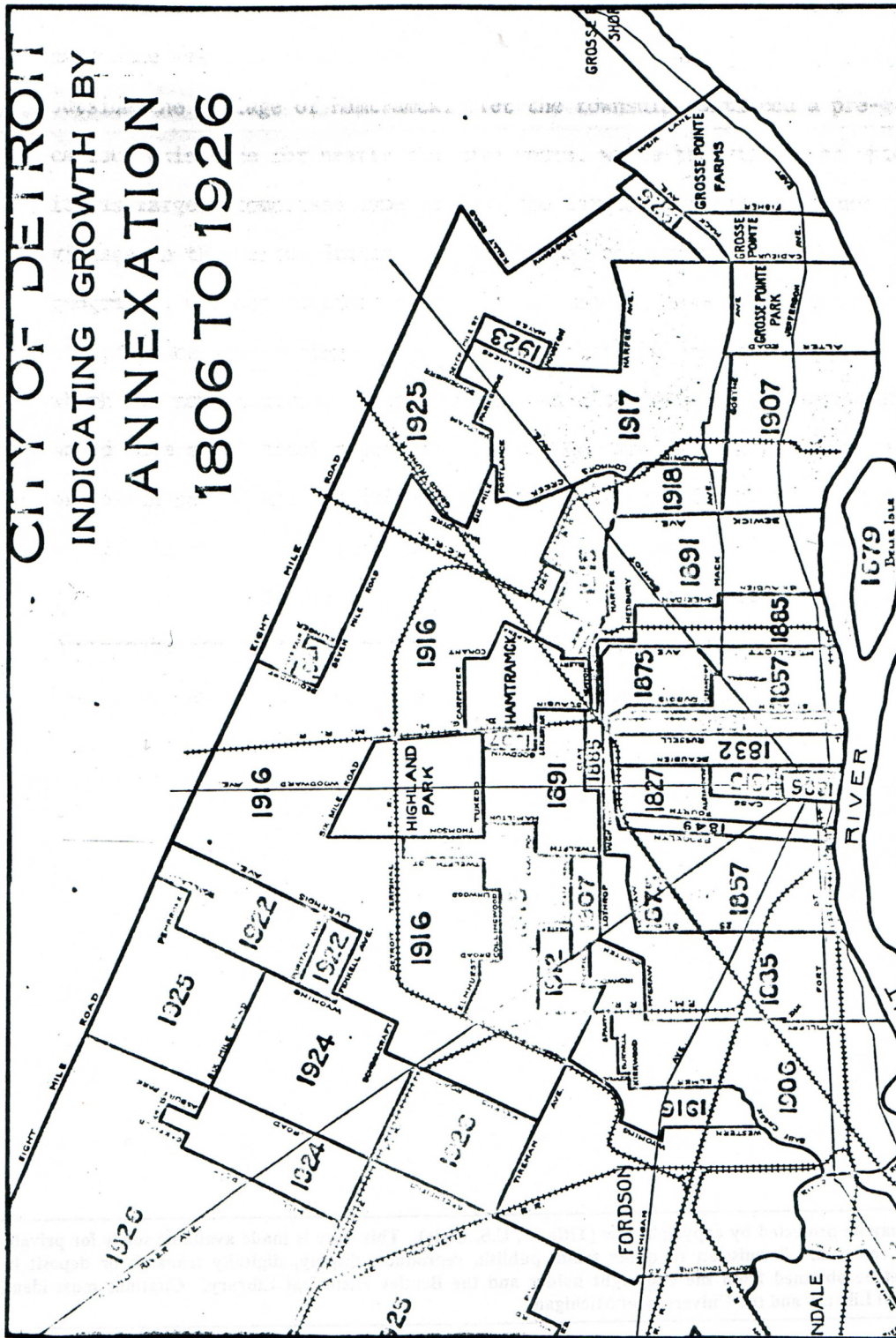
<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, 103.

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, 111.

<sup>30</sup> This was not the last time the small city would gain the attention of the national media, garnering coverage both as a paradigm of the ‘rusting of the Rust Belt’ and as a racist enclave guilty of ‘Negro removal.’

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, 107.

Figure 1.1 – Hamtramck’s Path to Enclosure<sup>32</sup>



<sup>32</sup>ibid., 109. This map was originally printed in the *Manual of Wayne County*, 1926. Image shown above is a reproduction of the map’s appearance in Maday’s thesis.

area from Hamtramck Township.<sup>33</sup> The result of Detroit's multiple encroachments and Highland Park's incorporation made the Township government superfluous, as one observer stated a little over a month before the vote to incorporate:

The township government, apart from the village government, is a political luxury the village clings to at a tremendous expense to the taxpayers. The village has grown until there is but a narrow strip of land in the township outside the village. Less than 100 voters live in this territory. For this handful of people the township government, with its expensive machinery, still exists. The village has the votes to abolish this useless appendage at any time. But the people continue to maintain two sets of offices, village and township.<sup>34</sup>

The village residents were not blind to their reality. In order to eliminate the vestigial township government and to ensure that Detroit's land feast would not extend to their village, Hamtramck Village residents voted on October 10, 1921 to incorporate as a city by nearly a four-to-one margin.<sup>35</sup> With this vote, the die was cast: Hamtramck was now its own city within Detroit, a Polish ethnic community with its foundation inextricably linked to the automotive industry.

### **Hamtramck's Driving Force: The Auto Industry**

Hamtramck and Dodge Main, Dodge Main and Hamtramck; for seventy years the two were practically synonymous. Considering the centrality of the auto industry (specifically the Dodge Main factory) in the early development of Hamtramck, it should come as no surprise that the industry would remain very important to the city's subsequent evolution. That being said, it is necessary to address the role of the Dodge Main factory in Hamtramck's history in order to

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<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, 107.

<sup>34</sup> Henry L. Commons, "The Town That Hasn't Felt the New Day." *The Dearborn Independent*, August 27, 1921, 12. Quoted in Maday, *An Historical Geography of Hamtramck Township: An Attempt at Explaining the Origins of the City of Hamtramck*, 93.

<sup>35</sup> Kowalski, *Hamtramck: The Driven City*, 35. Kowalski notes that "under Michigan law, a city cannot annex another city, so incorporation would protect Hamtramck from its big neighbor."

evaluate the later analysis this thesis makes of Hamtramck's unique community identity. Particularly of interest is how the entrenchment of the auto industry in Hamtramck life shaped the city as a primarily working class community.

Dodge Main was truly an impressive structure. At its height, the factory had over five million square feet in floor space containing over thirty seven miles of conveyor belts. When operating at peak productivity, it was capable of producing a new car every thirty seconds.<sup>36</sup> At one point Dodge Main employed 36,000 people and it was said that everyday during shift changes the scene on Joseph Campau resembled a parade.<sup>37</sup> Appreciating that the entire population of Hamtramck peaked around 56,000 (and this level was only maintained for a short period of time around 1930), the factory would have been an inseparable aspect of life in Hamtramck. Hamtramck historian Greg Kowalski appropriately observed that "when Dodge Main prospered, so did the city."<sup>38</sup> The factory would come to contribute a substantial portion of the city's tax base, at times supplying a full 25% of the overall budget. In fact, there were several times City Hall requested that the company pay its taxes early to bail the city out of its regular financial straits so city employees could be paid.<sup>39</sup> The Chrysler Corporation, owners of Dodge after 1928, willingly obliged its city.

Such was the relationship between the two entities, factory and city, a sort of symbiosis and mutual appreciation rooted in a common past. But Dodge Main was more than just a tax base, more than just a place of employment. Dodge Main

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<sup>36</sup> Serafino, *West of Warsaw*, 108.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, 113.

<sup>38</sup> Kowalski, *Hamtramck: The Driven City*, 37.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, 37.

was psychologically ingrained in the hearts and minds of Hamtramckans. Looming ominously at the end of Joseph Campau at the southern edge of the city, it was an ever-present feature of Hamtramck life. To celebrate their relationship with the factory, Hamtramck threw a week-long festival called ‘Dodge Days’ in November 1954. Chrysler used the event to introduce new models, and had an open house at their factory for residents to get an inside look at life in the factory. Kowalski describes the popularity of the event, recounting how “the week of parties and parades drew hundreds of thousands of people to the city.”<sup>40</sup> Crucial to the lives of generations of Hamtramckans, the auto industry and Dodge Main became the engine driving Hamtramck’s destiny, directly informing its development from a nascent industrial boomtown to a stagnant paradigm of the Rust Belt.

As Hamtramck continued its meteoric surge in population into the 1920s, the auto industry was likewise proliferating. Immigrants flocked to the city in droves to have their chance at the American Dream. Just as Hamtramck was enjoying unprecedented success, tragedy struck as the stock market crashed on October 28, 1929 and the Great Depression descended upon the country. The Depression hit Hamtramck particularly hard because of its nearly exclusive economic reliance on the auto industry, threatening the precarious station of many working class families. In 1929 Dodge Main had 30,000 workers as approximately 250,000 cars rolled off the line. By 1932 when the Depression was at its worst, production plummeted to 28,111 cars.<sup>41</sup> By this time half of the families in

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<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, 104.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, 49.

Hamtramck were on welfare as wages at Dodge Main were cut by more than half; those who complained about the wages were simply replaced.<sup>42</sup>

One long term legacy of Hamtramck's Depression experience was the rise of unionism in the factories. Most of the city was involved in the massive sit-down strike waged at Dodge Main and elsewhere, either as workers in the factory or as supporters of the strike. Workers sat down in Dodge Main for 17 days in March of 1937, cheered on by picketers and fed by family members.<sup>43</sup> This strike cemented the influence of the UAW in the factories of Detroit and Hamtramck, as ethnic workers from Hamtramck traveled to factories around Michigan and the Midwest to rally other immigrant laborers behind the union movement.<sup>44</sup>

The men employed at Dodge Main were not the only Hamtramckans to participate in strikes, as the activist mentality was shared by the women of Hamtramck. In 1935, faced with rising food costs that were especially harsh in light of the Depression, the women of Hamtramck rallied behind Mary Zuk to protest the prices set by meat packers.<sup>45</sup> The movement soon spread to Detroit and attracted national attention to their cause. Ultimately accomplishing little other than the launching of Zuk's political career, the episode demonstrates the influence women had in Hamtramck as the manager of domestic affairs.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, 50-51.

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, 53.

<sup>44</sup> Maday, *An Historical Geography of Hamtramck Township: An Attempt at Explaining the Origins of the City of Hamtramck*, 116-117.

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, 116.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, 116. For a more complete discussion of the events of the meat strike, see Kowalski pp. 60-61. For more information on the important role of women in the Polish immigrant household see Paul Wrobel's *Our Way*, especially chapter four. Polish American women in working class families in the early 20th century were primarily concerned with running the household and generally made the decisions in this area. Division of labor between husband and wife was pretty rigid in this aspect, though by no means absolute.

Hamtramck was eventually rescued from its economic troubles by World War II. As hundreds of thousands of men and women went into the armed forces, demand for laborers, especially skilled workers, increased substantially.<sup>47</sup> The gigantic industrial base of the auto industry was converted to war time production and the workforce at Dodge Main jumped to 40,000 persons.<sup>48</sup> Though this significantly reduced the unemployment brought on by the Depression, it did not correspond with an increase in the quality of life in Hamtramck as rationing and various drives for charitable causes were accepted by residents as necessary sacrifices for winning the war.<sup>49</sup>

After victory was declared, Hamtramck's economic future remained uncertain. With the soldiers returning from overseas, fears of unemployment spread and those who had used the war to climb the social ladder (specifically women and African Americans) were confronted with the return of the people whose jobs they had been recruited to fill.<sup>50</sup> Two separate reports issued after the conclusion of the war found that unemployment levels had reached 300,000 persons for the Hamtramck-North Detroit area.<sup>51</sup> The respite from economic woes offered by World War II seemed as though it was destined to be short-lived.

Despite the initial signs of impending struggles, Hamtramck's postwar economic concerns proved to be temporary. As the country converted back to civilian production, it soon became apparent that returning soldiers wanted to start

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<sup>47</sup> Kowalski, *Hamtramck: The Driven City*, 81-82.

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, 81;89.

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, 80.

<sup>50</sup> As many factory workers were called away to fight, the demographics that were traditionally shut out from certain jobs were suddenly needed to fill the void.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, 89.



families. Suburbs proliferated and large consumer goods were in high demand, especially cars. As Hamtramck historian Frank Serafino succinctly put it, “[a]fter the war, the American buying public literally bought anything on wheels.”<sup>52</sup> As a result, production at Dodge Main was greater than ever.<sup>53</sup>

As the postwar era progressed into the 1950s, industrial growth continued around the country and in Hamtramck Dodge Main expanded its plant twice.<sup>54</sup> But these expansions belied the factory’s unstable position, and Dodge Main’s financial successes were not long for this world. For example, in 1953 over twenty thousand workers were laid off and labor unrest followed in 1954.<sup>55</sup> If job security issues were bad, the underlying problems with the Chrysler Corporation and the factory itself were much worse.

In 1958 Chrysler suffered its first financial deficit since the Depression and was losing market share to Ford and General Motors.<sup>56</sup> There are a number of reasons given for why Chrysler struggled at this time, but, in general, they were mismanaged, financially and otherwise.<sup>57</sup> They failed to adapt to a changing market that wanted fuel efficient cars and lost business to both imports and the other domestic companies that made this adjustment earlier. Eventually they would recover in the early 1960s and get away from the “gas-guzzling dinosaurs” of the past, adopting the increasingly popular smaller designs.<sup>58</sup> This cyclical competition

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<sup>52</sup> Serafino, *West of Warsaw*, 126.

<sup>53</sup> Kowalski, *Hamtramck: The Driven City*, 90.

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, 104.

<sup>55</sup> Serafino, *West of Warsaw*, 114.

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, 127.

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, 131.

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*, 127.

with foreign auto companies to stay fuel efficient while retaining high profits would continue through the rest of the twentieth century.<sup>59</sup>

While Chrysler as a corporation was able to adjust to the pressures of increased fuel costs and survive, Dodge Main was not as flexible. As originally constructed, Dodge Main was a massive, inefficient structure. It was built on city land to accommodate an urban workforce whose transportation was limited to a very short proximity. In the early decades of the factory's existence, fuel was cheap and energy efficiency was not a concern.<sup>60</sup> Beginning in 1945 but increasing pace in the 1950s and '60s, Chrysler began constructing a series of new factories that followed the shift towards rural/suburban, one story, fuel efficient complexes.<sup>61</sup> As this happened, Dodge Main became increasingly peripheral to Chrysler's operations as various responsibilities were transferred to other factories. For example, the transmission line was shifted from Dodge Main to Indiana, taking an important department from the old factory.<sup>62</sup> By the 1960s Dodge Main became known as "Hamtramck Assembly," suggesting its diminishing relevance to the Chrysler Corporation. The factory that was once considered the pride of the auto industry would continue its struggles through the 1970s, eventually fading to extinction in 1980.

### **Renovating for the Future: Urban Renewal in Hamtramck**

Just as Dodge Main and Chrysler were forced to change with the times or succumb, Hamtramck faced similar pressures as a city. Due to the rapid rate at

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<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, 128.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, 108.

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, 127.

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, 116.

which the city was constructed and expanded in the 1910s and 1920s, Hamtramck did not benefit from much urban planning. In the late 1950s and in the midst of a declining population, Hamtramck found itself in need of large scale repairs and modernization. In 1957 the city council formed a city planning commission to address the various problems the city faced. The general goal was to utilize the funds made available by the Housing Act of 1949 to develop a plan of urban renewal that would prepare Hamtramck to mature as a city.

After experiencing the incredible population surge in the early twentieth century, Hamtramck went through a period of sustained population loss starting in the 1930s and continuing into the 1990s. After peaking in the 1930s at over 56,000 persons squeezed into the 2.1 square mile city, Hamtramck's population dropped to 48,838 in 1940 and 43,355 in 1950.<sup>63</sup> (See Figure 1.2) Hamtramck historian Greg Kowalski explains this trend as “a natural leveling off of the population to a more manageable number,” adding that such a steep decline in population was not cause for concern.<sup>64</sup>

There were a number of factors that contributed to the population decline observed in Hamtramck. First of all, there were a large number of people living in a very small area. Houses were generally constructed on 30 foot lots, and it was not uncommon for four families to share one house, two families per floor.<sup>65</sup> While this might have been realistic for immigrant families trying to establish

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<sup>63</sup> United States Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population*. Kowalski, *Hamtramck: The Driven City*, 94.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, 96.

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, 94.

Figure 1.2 – Hamtramck’s Population Figures, 1901-1980<sup>66</sup>

| Year | Population |
|------|------------|
| 1901 | 500        |
| 1907 | 2,200      |
| 1915 | 21,520     |
| 1920 | 48,615     |
| 1930 | 56,268     |
| 1940 | 49,839     |
| 1950 | 43,355     |
| 1960 | 34,137     |
| 1970 | 26,783     |
| 1980 | 21,300     |

themselves in a new country, this set up was less agreeable to future generations. As the children of these densely packed families grew up, they naturally needed space to raise their own families, space that Hamtramck could not provide. This consequence was cemented in the postwar trend of suburbanization, as the later generations sought spacious suburban life complete with cars and plenty of room for kids to grow up. Constructed as a working class immigrant town, Hamtramck was simply not suitable for Baby Boom families and their changing preferences.<sup>67</sup>

The initial population boom had effects on the city other than making it generally awkward for postwar American life. The speed with which Hamtramck was built led to a haphazard construction and layout of the city. Kowalski expounds

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<sup>66</sup> 1901, 1907, 1915 figures from Maday, *An Historical Geography of Hamtramck Township: An Attempt at Explaining the Origins of the City of Hamtramck*, 138, all others from <sup>66</sup> United States Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population*.

<sup>67</sup> Kowalski, *Hamtramck: The Driven City*, 95. Kowalski also observes that the city was so compact that there was not room for garages, whereas the expansive suburbs offered all of the amenities of the city but with all the space growing families could need.

on this issue, describing how throughout Hamtramck's development, "little had been done to enforce zoning ordinances, so factories were literally next door to homes."<sup>68</sup> For example, Wyandotte Street "had a factory, houses, a high school, and stores all within the length of one city block."<sup>69</sup> This intermixture of industrial and residential areas was not the most practical of environments. Another increasingly severe problem was the aging infrastructure. Hamtramck was originally subdivided by a number of different developers who each had their own ideas for organizing the city. A report on land use in Hamtramck observes that

as a result, streets were platted and improved without any overall continuity to the movement of traffic. There are a number of streets which dead end, others cross major thoroughfares at oblique angles and still others which are clearly unnecessary.<sup>70</sup>

The sewer lines were more than fifty years old in some places and some of the water lines were wooden and just as old.<sup>71</sup> An additional obstacle facing postwar Hamtramck was the gradual deterioration of the city's housing stock. In 1950, 1,886 of 12,500 housing units in the city (15%) did not meet "normal" housing standards.<sup>72</sup> Substandard housing was an eyesore and potentially dangerous to community residents, and for these reasons was at the top of the list for potential improvements to Hamtramck.

The city planning commission convened in 1957 to address these various issues. The Housing Act of 1949 made federal funds available for locally initiated urban renewal programs, and it is through this program and the later Department of

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<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, 110.

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*, 33.

<sup>70</sup> City Planning Associates, *Hamtramck, Michigan, City in Transition : Preliminary Report[s]* (Mishawaka, Ind.: , 1967), 20.

<sup>71</sup> Kowalski, *Hamtramck: The Driven City*, 110.

<sup>72</sup> *ibid.*, 100.

Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that the commission sought to handle Hamtramck's problems. The most approachable and practical concern was the deteriorating housing in need of major repair or demolition, so this was the one that dominated the committee's immediate attention. The city began consulting with the Housing and Home Finance Administration (the predecessor of the Department of Housing and Urban Development) which helped pay for the development of a master plan for urban renewal in Hamtramck. The subsequent Vilican-Lehman report was adopted as the general plan in 1959. One of the report's central tenets was that the city should undergo a program of planned population loss.<sup>73</sup> The primary means Hamtramck took to achieving this goal was to clear slum residential areas located on the periphery of the city and convert them to industrial zones.<sup>74</sup> Kowalski observes that "while the [urban renewal] program began innocently and with good intentions, it would evolve into a nightmarish situation in the late 1960s."<sup>75</sup>

Hamtramck's urban renewal officially began in October of 1959 with the Smith-Clay project (also known as Urban Renewal Project R-29) that demolished houses on Smith and Clay Streets on the far South side of town across from the Dodge Main factory. Kowalski notes that this part of town was the oldest and that "for reasons that have never been clear, the South End has always been a somewhat

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<sup>73</sup> *Garrett v. City of Hamtramck*, 503 F.2d 1236 (6<sup>th</sup> Cir. 1974). Unable to track down this report, one is left to speculate about the reasoning behind this goal. Perhaps fewer residents would achieve the more 'manageable' number that Kowalski referred to; perhaps more industrial zones would widen the tax base and help the struggling city. Whatever the justification, this was the course Hamtramck took.

<sup>74</sup> This conversion would also serve to boost the city's tax base.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, 100.

neglected part of the city.”<sup>76</sup> The Smith-Clay project razed the homes of 600 residents, comprised primarily of African-Americans, in the years 1962 and 1963.<sup>77</sup> Soon after, Dodge Main expanded onto the sight, converting most of it to a parking lot to accommodate its increasingly suburban workforce.<sup>78</sup> This conversion from a substandard residential zone to an industrial zone is exemplary of Hamtramck’s urban renewal goals.

In the mid 1960’s Hamtramck announced two other industrialization plans similar to the Smith-Clay project.<sup>79</sup> The first project, the Denton-Miller project, was to be a slum clearance project located in the Southeast part of the city, near the Smith-Clay site and Dodge Main. The other renewal project on the agenda for Hamtramck was the Grand Haven-Dyer-Dequindre site at the extreme Northwest corner of the city. Like the other two projects, its goal was to clear substandard housing in order to transition the location to industrial purposes.<sup>80</sup> These projects, however, never officially got off the ground due to legal problems to be discussed momentarily.

Another project that complemented and coincided with the urban renewal projects initiated by Hamtramck was the construction of Interstate 75. Also known as Urban Renewal Project R-30, the Chrysler Expressway project involved clearing a route for the I-75 Chrysler Expressway to pass from Detroit through Hamtramck as it extended northward to the suburbs. The federal and state highway authorities suggested two routes for the highway to take through the city, but the course

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<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, 100.

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, 112; Garrett, 503 F.2d at 1239.

<sup>78</sup> Serafino, *West of Warsaw*, 51.

<sup>79</sup> Garrett, 503 F.2d at 1239.

<sup>80</sup> Garrett, 503 F.2d at 1239.

ultimately adopted was the one suggested by the Vilican-Lehman report.<sup>81</sup> This new path was favored by Hamtramck officials because it would serve to isolate the Northwest corner of the city, the location of Grand Haven-Dyer project. The physical separation of this land from the rest of the city by a large interstate would serve to further justify transitioning it from residential to industrial land.<sup>82</sup> Upon completion in 1968, the freeway project had carved through the Northwest corner of the city, necessitating the clearance of 220 one and two story housing units (including part of the Colonel Hamtramck Homes housing project), three churches, and one industrial building.<sup>83</sup> The project ultimately caused the displacement of about twelve hundred families, of which approximately 75% were African American.<sup>84</sup>

While this project was being planned and completed, the city had planned out another redevelopment project, Urban Renewal Project 31, also know as the Wyandotte Project after the street it was centered around. Originally conceived in 1961 and begun in 1964, the project called for the rehabilitation of substandard housing located in the middle of the city.<sup>85</sup> This was the only project of the three that was focused on an area with a majority of white residents and was the only one planned for a location geographically central to the city.<sup>86</sup> Setbacks were encountered in 1966 when it became apparent that the original redevelopment plan based on land use assessments was not practical, and plans for the area had to be

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<sup>81</sup> *Garrett*, 503 F.2d at 1239.

<sup>82</sup> *Garrett v. City of Hamtramck*, 335 F. Supp.

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, 51. See also, Kowalski, *Hamtramck: The Driven City*, 112

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, 112.

<sup>85</sup> Serafino, *West of Warsaw*, 51.

<sup>86</sup> *ibid.*, 51. The specific boundaries of the area are outlined on p. 112 of Kowalski, *Hamtramck: The Driven City*, 160. “This program centered on the area bounded by Holbrook, Joseph Campau, Hewitt, and Lumpkin, spanning 197 parcels of property, including some city owned land.”



restructured.<sup>87</sup> The proposal was expanded from its original ten acres to cover forty acres in order to maximize federal funding and its general strategy was altered from rehabilitating the current structures to clearance and reconstruction.<sup>88</sup> The new proposal, suggested by the mayor, called for the construction of a Hamtramck Civic Center, complete with a new city hall, police station, fire station, senior citizen home, and private housing.<sup>89</sup> The housing section of the new proposal contained plans for 180 living units, of which only thirty would be used for low-income families.<sup>90</sup> It is this portion of the urban renewal plans that would ultimately become the focal point of a controversial and drawn out lawsuit that would lead to a finding that sent shockwaves through the community.

### **The Gavel Strikes: *Garrett v. City of Hamtramck* (1971) and ‘Negro Removal’**

On November 22, 1971, undoubtedly one the most historically significant days in Hamtramck’s existence, Judge Damon Keith delivered his decision in the *Garrett v. Hamtramck* urban renewal lawsuit. In a thirteen page opinion Judge Keith announced his judgment in no uncertain terms, ruling that the City of Hamtramck had developed and carried out its urban renewal program with the intent to reduce its Black population.<sup>91</sup> He ardently confirmed the plaintiffs’ charge of ‘Negro removal,’ a play on the words ‘urban renewal.’ This highly damning and inflammatory decision sparked nearly thirty years of legal battles with the net result being the cessation of urban renewal in Hamtramck.<sup>92</sup> How did the promising

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<sup>87</sup> Serafino, *West of Warsaw*, 51.

<sup>88</sup> *Garrett*, 503 F.2d at 1240. See also *Garrett*, 335 F. Supp. at 18.

<sup>89</sup> Kowalski, *Hamtramck: The Driven City*, 112. Serafino, *West of Warsaw*, 51.

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*, 51.

<sup>91</sup> *Garrett*, 335 F. Supp. 16.

<sup>92</sup> The courts virtually froze Hamtramck’s access to federal funding while the issue remained unresolved and the terms of the court’s orders were not met. Numerous appeals, Hamtramck’s

prospect of the urban renewal program fall from grace, thoroughly denounced in a federal court and looked down upon across the country?

After the revised Wyandotte plans were announced, public hearings were held to address citizen concerns and objections. Residents complained vociferously that insufficient low income housing was being built to replace the structures marked for clearance and that inadequate relocation assistance was being provided by the city.<sup>93</sup> Despite these criticisms, the plans were set to be implemented as proposed. At this point (April 24, 1967) an official complaint was filed with HUD, enumerating these same grievances and including the charge of “Negro removal” practices on the part of city officials.<sup>94</sup> A brief investigation was conducted by HUD, but apparently satisfied by what they found, the contract between the city of Hamtramck and HUD for federal urban renewal funding was executed soon after.<sup>95</sup>

The opposition to the program would not go silently into the night, for they had other avenues to pursue. At one of the city meetings conducted to address public concerns, the urban renewal director made an inappropriate and offensive comment to the effect that the urban renewal program should be supported as a means of controlling the influx of ‘Mississippians’ into Hamtramck.<sup>96</sup> An urban

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horrendous financial state, bureaucratic red tape, and unsuccessful negotiations would plague the resolution of the matter. It should also be noted that Hamtramck officials maintained innocence throughout, an inexplicable development considering the evidence to the contrary. See Kowalski, *Hamtramck: The Driven City*, 114.

<sup>93</sup> *Garrett*, 335 F. Supp. at 18.

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.* Judge Keith would criticize the HUD investigation later in his decision, noting how the HUD ‘investigation’ consisted of them being assured by city officials that all laws would be followed and that relocation assistance would be provided. *Garrett*, 335 F. Supp. at 23.

<sup>96</sup> Kowalski, *Hamtramck: The Driven City*, 113; The specifics of the comment were retold by a councilwoman present for the meeting and typed in a document on file at the Hamtramck Historical Commission. See the ‘Urban Renewal’ file. The reference made by the official is to the influx of Southern Blacks into the urban Midwest that occurred after World War I but increased during WWII when factories were hiring. The events recounted in the document are unconfirmed.

renewal committee member happened to have a tape recorder on her lap in the meeting, and upon returning home that evening played the tape for a judge who happened to be at her house for a regular card party.<sup>97</sup> This judge happened to teach at the University of Detroit Urban Law Center, and obtained a copy of the tape to take to his students.<sup>98</sup> Assisted by attorneys from this organization, residents affected by the Wyandotte Project joined by the South End Improvement Association (a group formed to represent residents affected by the Hamtramck urban renewal projects) filed suit in a federal district court on November 20, 1968.<sup>99</sup> The residents filed a class action lawsuit, claiming to represent “those black citizens of the City of Hamtramck who have been or are scheduled to be displaced or substantially affected by urban renewal projects.”<sup>100</sup> The charges were that

“the City of Hamtramck and its mayor, its coordinator of urban renewal, and its City Planning Commission have intentionally planned and implemented urban renewal and other government projects for the purpose of removing a substantial portion of Black citizens from the City.”<sup>101</sup>

The suit also named HUD as a defendant, alleging that they “knowingly failed to remedy [the improper actions of the city] and has failed and refused to utilize the available administrative relief which would serve to protect plaintiffs’ rights.”<sup>102</sup>

The federal trial lasted three weeks as Judge Keith heard testimony from a wide variety of witnesses. The opinion he wrote provides a thorough appraisal of Hamtramck’s urban renewal policy, covering the objective facts of the various projects while assessing both their consequences and legal implications. All of the

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<sup>97</sup> Apparently the committee member had a tape recorder due to consistent disagreement about what various other committee members had said in the past.

<sup>98</sup> *ibid.*, 113

<sup>99</sup> *Garrett*, 503 F.2d at 1240.

<sup>100</sup> *Garrett*, 335 F. Supp. at 17.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* 18.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

evidence recounted by Judge Keith leads him to the judgment that Hamtramck officials through their various urban renewal policies willfully and knowingly pursued a program of population loss to be achieved by the large scale removal of Black residents.

The argument Judge Keith gives to demonstrate the impropriety of those responsible for Hamtramck's urban renewal program is quite straightforward. He identifies three factors regarding Hamtramck and its urban renewal programs whose combined effects resulted in the removal of a substantial portion of Hamtramck's Black population. First, the several renewal programs were generally positioned in the fringe areas of the city where the greatest proportion of Black residents lived compared to the rest of the city.<sup>103</sup> Of all the programs planned and pursued, only the Wyandotte program was one where the affected population was primarily white, and this was the only program that included plans for replacement housing instead of total conversion to industrial land.<sup>104</sup> The consequence of this trend in project location is that the large majority of persons displaced by the renewal program were Black.

A second factor that influenced the effects of urban renewal in Hamtramck was the city's incredibly low vacancy rate. Throughout the urban renewal years, Hamtramck had a vacancy rate of less than 3%, meaning that those displaced by urban renewal would be competing over a very small number of available units within the city. To make the housing situation worse, there was "virtually no vacant

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<sup>103</sup> *Garrett*, 335 F. Supp. at 19.

<sup>104</sup> It should be recognized that a substantial portion of the Wyandotte area was to be replaced by the aforementioned Civic Center containing the new city hall, police and fire stations, etc. Being centrally located, conversion of this area to industrial land would not have been an option.

land available for development” in Hamtramck on which to construct the increasingly sparse low income housing.<sup>105</sup> In other words, if residents displaced by the industrialization projects wished to relocate within the city, they had very few options from which to choose, especially if they were of low or moderate means. The only possibility of alleviating this growing strain on the limited housing supply was to construct new units in the urban renewal areas.<sup>106</sup> This, as we have seen with most of the programs, was not in the intended plans for a majority of the land cleared or slated for clearance by Hamtramck’s urban renewal programs.

The final factor that combined with the location of the projects and the low vacancy rates in Hamtramck to result in the necessary exodus of Black Hamtramckans is what Judge Keith described as the “rampant and overt discrimination in housing” prevalent in Hamtramck.<sup>107</sup> He explains that “testimony at the trial reveals that strong racial prejudices exist within Defendant City making relocation of displaced Blacks in the community a difficult if not sometimes impossible task.”<sup>108</sup> Judge Keith makes reference to discrimination in the private housing practices of Hamtramck citizens nine times in the five pages committed to reviewing the facts of the case.<sup>109</sup> Importantly, Judge Keith states multiple times that Hamtramck officials had “long been aware” of these discriminatory practices in the private housing market.<sup>110</sup> The argument then concludes that significant relocation assistance would have to be provided by city officials if these obstacles

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<sup>105</sup> *Garrett*, 335 F. Supp. at 19.

<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Garrett*, 335 F. Supp.

<sup>110</sup> *ibid.*

were to be overcome, and the general consensus is that no such assistance was provided. Since city officials knew of this discrimination, they would have likewise known that displacing a significant number of Black residents in a city with a desperately low vacancy rate would have the net effect of forcing Black Hamtramckans, faced with no other option, out of the city.

These circumstances are evidenced by the testimony given regarding the specific renewal programs. For example, when carrying out the Smith-Clay project,

testimony of numerous witnesses as well as City officials indicates that no substantial relocation assistance was afforded to those displaced...who...confronted by rampant and overt discrimination in housing, were and will continue to be forced to live outside the defendant City's boundary.<sup>111</sup>

The end result of these practices was that Blacks much more frequently found themselves short of housing options in Hamtramck and were forced to relocate. In fact, 57% of Black families dislocated by the Smith-Clay project moved out of the city while only 33% of whites displaced relocated out of the city.<sup>112</sup>

Discrimination was also egregious in the implementation of the Wyandotte Program, the one that actually spawned the lawsuit. Among the houses marked for clearance in this project was a stretch of multifamily homes inhabited by approximately eighteen Black families. The majority of the buildings in the Wyandotte area were substandard to such an extent that clearance was the only option. Despite being an area of primarily white residents, Judge Keith states that "the uncontradicted [sic] evidence is that the City proceeded to destroy the houses in which the Black families were living before doing anything to the houses

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<sup>111</sup> *Garrett*, 335 F. Supp. at 19.

<sup>112</sup> *ibid.* at 20.

occupied by white persons in the area.”<sup>113</sup> He goes on to describe how Black residents “were persuaded and even harassed to vacate their homes speedily and find other dwellings.”<sup>114</sup> Judge Keith makes it clear that this was no coincidence; that this was discrimination condoned and enabled by city officials:

“Testimony shows that Hamtramck officials were well aware of the difficulties in relocating encountered by these Black citizens but ignored their requests for assistance, failed to investigate complaints and in no way compensated such displaces for the loss suffered. The evidence is that many displaced Black citizens relocated in dwellings that were unsafe, unsanitary and for the most part uninhabitable.”<sup>115</sup>

This type of treatment typified the entire process of urban renewal in Hamtramck and on this day Hamtramck officials were made to answer for their consistent abuse of the city’s Black residents.

Judge Keith goes on to observe that the only land left available for the construction of low income housing is the Wyandotte Area, regretting that this land instead was intended to serve the needs of “white senior citizens” and that the single family housing would be too expensive for the displaced Black residents.<sup>116</sup> With all of the circumstances laid out, he issues his finding:

“This court finds that according to the original master plan adopted by the City of Hamtramck, and to some extent implemented in the past ten years, the population of the City was to be reduced by the displacement, without relocation, of persons in the City who lived within areas predominantly Black.”<sup>117</sup>

With this statement, Judge Keith confirms that Hamtramck’s urban renewal policy was just as the plaintiffs had charged: a policy of ‘Negro removal.’ Judge Keith’s

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<sup>113</sup> *ibid.* at 21.

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *ibid.* at 20.

decision would send shockwaves across Southeastern Michigan and attract national attention to the usually introverted and self-reliant city.

The ruling, though appropriate and legally sound, struck a nerve among Hamtramckans. This was more than just an accusation of prejudice; this was a federal court conviction confirming the objective guilt of the city and its residents. For those who called Hamtramck home, who had spent their lives building the enclave from its earliest days, this issue was personal. The vehemently defensive reactions of Hamtramckans to Judge Keith's decision indicate the strength with which residents identified with their community. The disparagement of their community could not go without response.



## **Chapter 2 – The Complicating Factor of Community Identity**

### **Echoes of the Gavel**

Although we can be sure that not all residents felt the same way about Judge Keith's decision, a wide enough variety of sources exist to suggest that there was a general consensus, at least among white Hamtramckans, that race was not a factor in Hamtramck's urban renewal plans. Reactions of all kinds denied the pervasiveness of any racial problem, with this rejection taking several forms. In some instances when the accusation of discrimination was mentioned, the ignored plight of white residents was offered as a defense. Other people took great offense at the charge of racism, projecting the problem back on the accusers themselves. One Black resident that did feel that urban renewal was geared towards 'negro removal' subsequently denied the ubiquitous nature of discrimination charged by Judge Keith. This common reaction indicates that Hamtramck residents had a vastly different view of the events taking place in their city than the outside world.

Lifelong resident and one time member of the city plan commission Walter Paruk approached the urban renewal lawsuit with complete denial of racial motivations, explaining the lopsided decline in Black residents as mere coincidence. In an interview from 1973, Paruk strongly asserted that "...from my experience as a public official in the city of Hamtramck and as a citizen of the city of Hamtramck, I know deep in my heart that this was not a racially motivated program."<sup>118</sup> Instead, Paruk insisted that the urban renewal program was simply

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<sup>118</sup> Thomas Lewandowski, *Julia's Prayer: Recollections of Hamtramck, MI a Polish-American Community*, sound cassettes. 1998 Oakland Community College. Oral history given by Walter

intended to upgrade the community and provide “desperately needed” new housing. His explanation for why black residents ended up being disproportionately evicted was that the area targeted for redevelopment had a number of absentee landlords who allowed their tenements to deteriorate and become eyesores. These houses just so happened to be “occupied by the negro race” and rather than trying to get the absentee landlords to upgrade, it would be better to raze the structures and start over.<sup>119</sup>

This theory, however, completely contradicts the testimony offered at trial in the *Garrett v. Hamtramck* (1971) lawsuit. Judge Keith’s decision states that “Defendant city does not challenge the testimony that the condition of the houses occupied by Black citizens in the area was not significantly different than that of houses occupied by the white citizens.”<sup>120</sup> Most of the houses were declared substandard, but the “uncontradicted [sic] evidence is that the City proceeded to destroy the houses in which the Black families were living before doing anything to the houses occupied by white persons in the area.”<sup>121</sup> Although it is likely that Paruk did not have access to as wide of a body of evidence as Judge Keith, these contradictory assessments illustrate the divergence between the perceptions of Hamtramck residents and those of the outside world.

Other discussions of the housing lawsuit preferred to deflect accusations of racism by emphasizing that Hamtramck whites suffered just as the Black residents did. The headline article of the December 2, 1971 issue of the *Hamtramck Citizen*

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Paruk, 1973. *Julia’s Prayer* is a series of oral histories given by various Hamtramck residents in the early 1970s and catalogued/published in 1998.

<sup>119</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Garrett*, 335 F. Supp. at 21.

<sup>121</sup> *ibid.*

was the first coverage that the newspaper of record for Hamtramck gave of the urban renewal lawsuit decision. The article itself focused on a meeting that had taken place regarding the future of the urban renewal projects. It briefly mentioned the actual ruling, saying that "...District Judge Damon Keith had ruled that Hamtramck's Urban Renewal program was developed to exclude blacks from the city's boundaries."<sup>122</sup> Not content to leave this accusation standing without a response, the very next paragraph retorted that "Keith made little mention in his 27-page opinion of the white removal in the same areas. A large amount of whites had their homes demolished." The article's author is clearly offering his opinion on the merits of Judge Keith's decision. The choice to cover the urban renewal lawsuit decision with a front page article that is editorial in nature speaks to primacy placed on this opinion by the editors. The strictly fact-based account of the ruling is relegated to the second page.

A similar pattern appears the next week on the front page in a column titled "Our Opinion: Let's Get to Work." The editors of the paper admonished the city and accepted the judgment, saying "you simply don't remove people from an area and toss them to the wolves." The column is intended to propose a plan for future action (hence the title), but before getting to this actual plan the editors paused to describe the failure of Judge Keith to "admit that white residents of Hamtramck were also removed for the areas in question." They described how "whites complained but Legal aid told them 'Sorry, the money has run out.' The matter

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<sup>122</sup> Gordie Wilczynski, "Urban Renewal Meeting is Sunday." *The Hamtramck Citizen*, December 2, 1971.

never reached the courts.”<sup>123</sup> These two editorial pieces illustrate the position of the writers for the *Hamtramck Citizen*: race was not the issue in urban renewal, for whites faced the same abuses as Blacks.

A different response to Judge Keith’s decision was one of offense and deflection, with residents turning the criticisms leveled against them on other surrounding suburbs. City Treasurer Joseph B. Lennard was particularly emphatic in his attack on the supposed hypocrisy of Hamtramck’s accusers: “I would like to see Gov. [George] Romney...put 12 percent black persons in lily white Bloomfield Hills [his home town]. Don’t tell me we’ve discriminated against blacks. We’ve never had any racial problems in Hamtramck and I’m proud of this fact.”<sup>124</sup> Lennard redirected the accusation of discrimination at the outsiders involved in Hamtramck’s urban renewal program, namely HUD official George Romney. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this outburst is how Lennard denied the complete absence of any racial tension in Hamtramck. This statement is irreconcilable with the opinion of Judge Keith, which makes multiple references to the “strong racial prejudices” and the “discriminatory practices of residents within defendant City” that “city officials had long been aware of.”<sup>125</sup>

This tactic is not limited to city officials directly responding to Hamtramck’s conviction. Walter Paruk, when prompted in his 1973 oral history towards the issue of housing discrimination, also brought up the actions of Detroit’s suburbs. He described the situations in Oakland and Macomb counties as ‘tricky,’

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<sup>123</sup> *The Hamtramck Citizen*, December 9, 1971.

<sup>124</sup> “Urban Renewal Project Will Continue.” *The Hamtramck Citizen*, December 9, 1971. Bloomfield Hills is an affluent suburb of Detroit.

<sup>125</sup> *Garrett*, 335 F. Supp. at 19.

implying that the situation was similarly difficult in Hamtramck.<sup>126</sup> Paruk's statement indicates that Lennard's reaction was not merely a public official trying to save face, but was consistent with other Hamtramck residents. Paruk, speaking in a candid oral history over a year after the decision was given, had no incentive towards public relations. When some Hamtramck residents thought about housing discrimination, Detroit's suburbs came to mind, not their peaceful city.

Other Hamtramckans focused their frustrations on Judge Damon Keith and the Federal court system in general. Mayor Raymond Wojtowicz sarcastically remarked that "if Judge Keith had wanted to make one big slum of Hamtramck, he could not have written a better order."<sup>127</sup> For the mayor, the problem was not in the actions Hamtramck took while implementing urban renewal programs for which they were responsible. Instead, it was Judge Keith who was to blame for condemning Hamtramck to doom and deterioration with his decision. Hamtramck resident John Ness similarly bemoaned the lack of accountability Federal judges had towards the American public. In his letter to the editor published in the *Hamtramck Citizen* titled "Some Judges Only Please Themselves," Ness asserted that "Any judge can find a loophole in any case if he so desires." He saw the problem in terms of class and ethnicity, continuing on:

The people that have money can appeal any case. Poor people are out of luck. The Polish community would benefit in this instance since none of the 20 federal judges in Michigan are of Polish descent. I feel there should be at least three.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Lewandowski, *Julia's Prayer: Recollections of Hamtramck, MI a Polish-American Community*. Walter Paruk oral history taken by Thomas Lewandowski, 1973. Oakland and Macomb counties along with Wayne County form the Metro-Detroit area.

<sup>127</sup> Editorial from the December 14, 1971 issue of the *Michigan Chronicle*. The Damon J. Keith Collection, Box 14, Folder 2, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

<sup>128</sup> *The Hamtramck Citizen*, December 16, 1971, p.4.

This tactic of attacking the Federal court dismissed the merits of the case by suggesting Judge Keith may have simply found a loophole through which Hamtramck could be harassed, and that if a Polish judge had been deciding the case, he would have recognized the truth and rejected the charges of discrimination. Instead, a judge was able to subvert the democratic process and exercise his will, essentially trampling the working class Polish Americans of Hamtramck.

Not all residents denied that Hamtramck officials had racial motivations when planning for urban renewal. Reverend William Brooks, a Black Hamtramckan, moved to the city in 1919, two years before it incorporated. From his youth he was involved in local politics, and as an adult he was close to those in power in the city. Brooks recounted that white councilmen and mayors whom he had talked to had been afraid that someone would become mayor and enable the large-scale influx of Blacks into the city, just like what had happened in neighboring Highland Park (which Brooks identifies as the former center of segregation for the area). Although he was vague on the timeframe during which these feelings were coalescing, Brooks reported that the city began to “get tough on Blacks.” He even compared the city’s actions towards Black residents to the United States’ treatment of American Indians, with the city’s attitude regarding its black residents being ‘we don’t care where you go, so long as it’s not Hamtramck.’<sup>129</sup>

Brooks offered compelling testimony that racial prejudice was a major factor in Hamtramck’s urban renewal program. He also offered the unique

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<sup>129</sup> Lewandowski, *Julia’s Prayer: Recollections of Hamtramck, MI a Polish-American Community*. Oral history given by Reverend William Brooks, taken by Thomas Lewandowski, June 7, 1973.

perspective of both a Black resident and a political insider, and his assessment severely complicates the picture other residents had been painting while confirming the ruling of Judge Keith. Paradoxically, William Brooks' oral history ends with an unmistakable affirmation of the virtues of the city: "There's no better race relations, with all our problems...than here in Hamtramck."

How then can these irreconcilable positions be accounted for? On the one hand, Judge Damon Keith thoroughly denounced the city for its urban renewal program and the residents for their discriminatory practices. On the other hand, Hamtramck residents and officials completely dismissed any racial discrimination or motivations in its urban renewal practices and in the city in general. Even the one longtime resident who recognized 'negro removal' in the city's urban renewal program asserted that there are there is no significant racial problem in the city. On the face of the matter, the strong defensive reactions of Hamtramck residents seem inexplicable given the emphatic and seemingly well-supported charges of Judge Keith. How could Hamtramck residents possibly argue that race was not a primary factor in the development and implementation of their city's urban renewal program? The reason is, quite simply, because they honestly believed it.

What is not simple, however, is *how* they could have come to believe this. This was not a case of an overtly racist community in denial of their true nature. There is no explicit evidence that there was racial intimidation or open conflict in the city like some neighborhoods in Detroit experienced, and there is much to suggest that no such feelings existed. The central factor that led to both the misperceptions of Hamtramck's citizens and the misunderstandings of the outside

observers is the unique community identity that existed in the city of Hamtramck, an identity that has its roots in the city's history as a Polish ethnic community.

### **The Relevance of Ethnicity**

The importance of Hamtramck's history as an ethnic community to the development and perpetuation of a community identity, which in turn shaped the city's development, is illustrated by a comparison with Highland Park. Highland Park is another separately incorporated city surrounded on all sides by Detroit. It is similar in size and economy to Hamtramck and had been since the 1940s and earlier.<sup>130</sup> In the period 1940 to 2000, Highland Park went from 2.2% to 93% Black while Hamtramck only went from 6.7% to 15% Black. Highland Park's population changes were consistent with Detroit, which went from 9.2% to 82% Black over the same period. The two cities that shared many circumstances in their early development clearly diverge with respect to race after 1940. How can this divergence be accounted for? What factors separate Hamtramck and Highland Park?

Highland Park and Hamtramck incorporated in 1918 and 1921 respectively. Their total populations were very similar in 1920, with Highland Park having 46,499 people and Hamtramck having 48,615 total residents. The eye-catching statistics, the ones that likely account for the divergence in racial composition, are the ones regarding the immigrant populations in the two cities. At this time, Highland Park's total foreign stock numbered 26,450 people, a full 57% of the

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<sup>130</sup> Both cities had economies centered on the auto industry. Highland Park is 3.0 square miles in area compared to Hamtramck's 2.1.



city's population.<sup>131</sup> Hamtramck's foreign stock was 44,520, an astounding 92% of the city's population.

Hamtramck had a remarkably high concentration of immigrants, but it was specifically Polish immigrants that came to dominate the city's population. In 1920 Hamtramck was one third foreign born Polish immigrants while Highland Park had a mere 230.<sup>132</sup> The number of Polish Hamtramckans grew in the city's early existence, and by 1940 81% of Hamtramck's population identified themselves as having Polish ancestry.<sup>133</sup> While the two cities were similar in size, relied on the auto industry, had comparable median incomes, and were located within Detroit, Hamtramck was unique in that it had an entrenched Polish tradition. This distinguishing factor is the focus of this chapter.

### **The Legacy of the Immigrant: Ethnic Communities and Identity Development**

It is hard to know exactly when Hamtramck's community identity came into being. We know that there was a formal political identity beginning with incorporation in 1921 when the residents of the village of Hamtramck decided to permanently establish themselves separate from Detroit. The people of Hamtramck were now their own official entity; their residence within a particular 2.1 square mile area surrounded by Detroit was now a distinguishing factor of their life; they were Hamtramckans. The movement to incorporate, supported by a 4 to 1 margin, was driven in part by the desire to prevent annexation by Detroit. That the idea of

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<sup>131</sup> Census of the United States of America, *United States Census of Population*, 1920. 'Foreign stock' is the combined number of foreign born immigrants and the native born white residents who have one or more parents who were foreign born.

<sup>132</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> United States Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population*, 1940.

remaining separate from Detroit was appealing to these early Hamtramckans suggests that there was already a distinct identity forming. Whether incorporation spawned an identity or simply labeled an existing sentiment is an issue outside the scope of this thesis, as our interest is in the texture of that identity in the postwar era. The fact of the matter is that there was now a formal demarcation between Hamtramck residents and Detroit residents. This distinction would become increasingly relevant as two cities diverged in the years following Hamtramck's incorporation.

Before proceeding with an analysis of the development and pervasiveness of Hamtramck's community identity, it would be helpful to clearly distinguish exactly what concepts are involved. A community, as I use it, is a group of people that one chooses to associate with. Communities can vary in size, but the ones that are relevant to this thesis are the ones that can be considered geographically local.<sup>134</sup> In geographical communities, members know or have the potential to have regular contact with all other members. Within this community, members can come to develop a common history and culture, participate in formal and informal social institutions, and share in the affectionate bonds of family and friendship.<sup>135</sup>

To the extent that these attachments develop in an individual, community can become an incredibly important psychological and emotional facet of their identity. An identity, as I use it, is the way one thinks about their self. Thus, a community identity is a way a person thinks about their self in terms of this wide

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<sup>134</sup> Other communities larger in size might be 'religious communities,' 'national communities,' etc.

<sup>135</sup> Many thanks to Prof. Angela Dillard for her assistance in hashing out this definition of 'community.'

variety of attachments that comprise their ‘community.’ In other words, by using the term ‘community identity,’ I mean to refer to the unique self-concept that residents of Hamtramck had distinguishing them from the rest of the world and, more specifically, distinguishing them from the city of Detroit. The fact that they were Hamtramck residents implied that they were *not* Detroit residents, and it is the strength of this distinction that is at issue here. This is not to be confused with an ethnic identity, though it certainly contains aspects of one. It might be said that ethnic identities are a subset of the more general community identity; community identities can have ethnic components. As we shall see later in this chapter, ethnic identities have the potential to determine the character and strength of a community identity.

With a formal identity in place following incorporation, the main catalyst for the proliferation and entrenchment of Hamtramck’s community identity was the substantial number of immigrants, particularly Polish immigrants. When Hamtramck incorporated, a full 1/3 of the population was comprised of foreign born Polish immigrants.<sup>136</sup> In 1930, the combination of foreign born Polish immigrants and those native born residents that had one or two foreign born Polish parents combined to make up 67% of the city’s population.<sup>137</sup> In other words, two out of every three residents was either born in Poland or had at least one parent born in Poland. These figures do not include those residents that self-identified as having

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<sup>136</sup> United States Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population*, 1920.

<sup>137</sup> United States Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population*, 1930. The analysis is presented with 1930 figures because the 1920 census did not include the figures regarding the nationality of those who were native born with foreign or mixed parentage. The number of foreign born Polish immigrants in 1930 amounted to 28% of Hamtramck’s population, compared to the 33% of 1920, so the composition was fairly consistent over this period. Since the focus is on the Polish aspects of Hamtramck, the analysis begins with these figures.

Polish ancestry (for instance, third generation residents). Thus, Hamtramck had a substantial Polish population in the first decades of its existence. It is no stretch of the imagination that certain general characteristics of a Polish immigrant community would manifest themselves in Hamtramck.

There are a number of issues to discuss in order to fully understand this aspect of Hamtramck's development. First, a working definition of what ethnic communities actually are is needed. Second, it is necessary to examine the various motivations behind the development of such communities. The discussion of the manifold purposes that Polish ethnic communities serve will illustrate why they become incredibly significant to their residents. Finally, it will be important to appreciate the long term trends of these ethnic communities. By examining these trends we can get an idea of what a Polish ethnic community like Hamtramck might have looked like as it progressed into the postwar era. This will be a useful reference point for seeing what aspects of Hamtramck's postwar circumstance can be traced back to its roots as a Polish ethnic community. To meet these various ends, a thorough review of the scholarship on Polish ethnic communities will be necessary.

### **What Ethnic Communities Are and Why They Exist**

There is one especially relevant issue to bear in mind throughout this analysis of ethnic communities. In the article "Beyond Hansen's Law: Fourth Generation Polonian Identity," Eugene Obidinski points out that "[t]heories of ethnic group identities are relevant and appropriate only in terms of specific times, places, and particular groups" and goes on to warn against trying to construct an all-

encompassing theory on the subject.<sup>138</sup> Although this caveat is certainly germane to this project, and this section should not be seen as trying to hammer out in concrete terms exactly what all ethnic identities are, there does seem to be some consensus in the literature on Polish ethnic communities regarding certain general trends. There are some useful generalizations that can be made and employed to better understand Hamtramck's development.

The literature on ethnic identity is vast, as this topic has been of great interest to sociologists throughout the twentieth century. Determining which sources to consult for this thesis could be a daunting task. However, there have been a number of works that have dealt specifically with Polish Americans and their experience in the United States. This material is thus preferable over sources that generalize about all European immigrants (or large demographics of them), for Poland's history is different in significant ways than most of Europe. Any literature that focuses on the peculiarities of Polish immigrants will be more applicable to Hamtramck. Additionally, this literature deals with *urban* ethnic communities (such as Hamtramck), allowing for even more direct application of the various theories. Specificity in as many aspects as possible is a useful ally in traversing the vast terrain of the scholarship on ethnicity.

Sociologist Neil Sandberg defines ethnicity as "a term that emphasizes the historical and cultural ethos of a group, its values, expectations, behavior, and those characteristics that help to distinguish it."<sup>139</sup> An 'ethnic' is thus a person who

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<sup>138</sup> Eugene E. Obidinski, "Beyond Hansen's Law: Fourth Generation Polonian Identity," *Polish American Studies* 42, no. 1 (1985), 27.

<sup>139</sup> Neil C. Sandberg, "The Changing Polish American," *Polish American Studies* 31, no. 1 (1974), 5.

subscribes to this historical and cultural foundation, distinct from that of the larger society and its defining characteristics.<sup>140</sup> As sociologist Paul Wrobel found in his study, the concept of a neighborhood is central to the self-understanding of those ethnics living in a concentrated area. For them, a large segment of a city becomes more than just a series of streets, but instead a cohesive social unit to interact with and around which their identity becomes solidified.<sup>141</sup> This latter concept is important with regard to Hamtramck as a distinct city, since it formally created a neighborhood-sized area within Detroit. Polish immigrants had both a vague concept to relate to in their ethnicity and a tangible structure through which to congregate with those of a similar world-view in the neighborhood.

There are a number of theories as to why these ethnic communities form. These theories can be grouped into three general categories, the first containing explanations from the historical background of Polish immigrants. The other two theories are both based on the idea that the immigrant communities serve vital psychological needs of the immigrants. The second theory is that the community provides the immigrant with positive experiences and fulfills their needs. The third

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<sup>140</sup> This formulation of 'ethnicity' was selected because it uses practical terms. Some sociologists have the tendency to construct ideas of ethnic identity and community in very general, impersonal terms. Insofar as the definition we adopt is going to be applied to a specific community, the terminology employed will be more useful if the detached sociological descriptions are discarded in favor of more common sense terms. For an extremely thorough series of criteria on what defines an ethnic community, see Lopata's *Polish Americans* pp.4-5. Lopata's theory is comprehensive and based on the writings of five separate authors, though by and large it is not helpful for understanding Hamtramck as a unique community.

<sup>141</sup> Paul Wrobel, *Our Way: Family, Parish, and Neighborhood in a Polish-American Community* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 39. It is important to be cautious when using trends delineated by Paul Wrobel's study of a Polish American community in the 1970s. As was mentioned, ethnic theories are only relevant to a given place and time, but the community Wrobel studied was located only a couple miles north of Hamtramck, was a primarily working class neighborhood and was quite similar to Hamtramck at this time in a number of relevant categories, such as median income, median property value, racial composition, and a primarily Polish-American population. The important difference is that Hamtramck was its own city, whereas they were merely a neighborhood in Detroit.

theory is that the community provides methods of protection from the discrimination and prejudice of the outside world.

The first category of theories behind ethnic communities argues that Polish immigrant communities formed and took on certain characteristics due to the historical experience of the Polish people in Europe. James Pula is the main proponent of this theory, and he makes a number of compelling points in his book *Polish Americans: An Ethnic Community*.<sup>142</sup> Pula argues that the partition that Polish people experienced beginning in 1772 drastically altered their psyches.<sup>143</sup> Poland's territory was divided up between Germany, Austria, and Russia and did not exist as a political nation until 1919 after World War I. The Poles in Germany became increasingly urbanized as a shortage of rural opportunities forced them into the city. Importantly, the process of being dominated also made them reluctant to give up their language, culture and religion and resulted in a certain cultural defensiveness. This resistance led to the formation of distinct communities in German cities that resisted acculturation and assimilation for generations.<sup>144</sup> These same communities for the preservation of culture would form after the Poles immigrated to the United States. Pula goes on to assert that the literature indicates that Poles "traditionally value security, stability, order and respectability over 'progress,'" and that ethnic communities provided for these qualities in life.<sup>145</sup> He finishes his analysis of the historical roots of Polish ethnic communities by saying

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<sup>142</sup> Another instance of this type of historical theory can be seen in Sandberg's *Ethnic Identity and Assimilation* on p. 12.

<sup>143</sup> James S. Pula, *Polish Americans: An Ethnic Community* (New York: London: Twayne Publishers; Prentice Hall International, 1995), 1.

<sup>144</sup> Pula, *Polish Americans: An Ethnic Community*, 15.

<sup>145</sup> *ibid.*, 23.

that “in Europe the Polish peasant defined his existence as part of a family, a community, a religious organization, and an organizational presence. In America it was the same.”<sup>146</sup> For Pula, Polish ethnic communities were simply a natural continuation of European life for the immigrants who made the trip to America.

The second general category regarding the reasons behind the development of ethnic communities is that the community provides the immigrant with positive experiences and fulfills their psychological needs. Generally speaking, these sources hold that ethnic communities serve the immigrant’s desire for stability, comfort, understanding, and the familiar. There are many ways to put this argument. Richard Alba, who has published multiple works on ethnicity in America, states that there are two general theories regarding the persistent vitality of ethnicity. One of these is that “ethnic communities and cultures serve vital human needs because they provide enduring personal identities amid the social flux of a rapidly changing society and also provide communities of solidarity.”<sup>147</sup> In other words, ethnic communities provide certainty in an uncertain, changing, modern world. The immigrant feels comforted by being able to live in a smaller society, one where people experience the world and face the same obstacles that he does. Wrobel observed a similar role in his study of a Detroit Polish-American neighborhood emphasizing that it was the Parish community that provided members with an opportunity to participate in an environment that is comfortable

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<sup>146</sup> *ibid.*, 29.

<sup>147</sup> Richard D. Alba, "the Twilight of Ethnicity among American Catholics of European Ancestry," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 454 (Mar., 1981), 87. The other theory is that that ethnicity is reinforced by common socioeconomic position.



and supportive.<sup>148</sup> Along the same lines, Sandberg reports that ethnic communities “...enable [the ethnics] to identify themselves within a large and impersonal society.”<sup>149</sup> Transitioning to life in an urban setting in a foreign society would have been quite a stressful experience, but ethnic communities provided a respite from these challenges. The ethnic community was thus an intermediate and transitional place, injecting familiarity into the unfamiliar American city life.

The third theory is that the community provides methods of protection from the discrimination and prejudice of the outside world. The idea is that the frustrations of the outside world lead the immigrant to turn inwards and use the community as a sanctuary. One compelling formulation of this theory is Helena Znaniecka Lopata’s status competition theory. The premise is that rather than trying to succeed in the larger society right away, which would be difficult given their lack of education and the state of prejudice, ethnics turned inward to the community and sought status there.<sup>150</sup> Lopata argues that Polish immigrants as a whole showed very little interest in gaining those traits that might increase status in larger society (for example, literacy and education in general).<sup>151</sup> Instead, status and opportunity was sought through the institutions of the community, be it through Polish-interest organizations, involvement in the Parish, or, as was especially the case of

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<sup>148</sup> Wrobel, *Our Way: Family, Parish, and Neighborhood in a Polish-American Community*, 148. The name of the Parish was changed to protect the identities of the residents and to encourage their candid participation.

<sup>149</sup> Neil C. Sandberg, *Ethnic Identity and Assimilation: The Polish-American Community; Case Study of Metropolitan Los Angeles* (New York, Praeger, 1974), 1. Quoting Greeley (1969) favorably. The full quote includes aspects that are mentioned elsewhere in this section: “Ethnic groups keep cultural traditions alive, help to organize the social structure, provide their members with preferred associates and opportunities for mobility and success, and enable them to identify themselves within a large and impersonal society.”

<sup>150</sup> Helena Znaniecka Lopata and Mary Patrice Erdmans, *Polish Americans* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1994), 11.

<sup>151</sup> *ibid.*, 10.

Hamtramck, involvement in local politics. By limiting their worldview to the community, they could ignore the pains of discrimination from the outside world and be content with the prestige they gained in relation to each other. The argument is that status competition can hold a community together and give meaning to life by giving ethnics positive goals to work for and inculcating an impetus to contribute to the community.<sup>152</sup> The identification with the community becomes even more ingrained and the strength of the community in general improves with the work of those competing for status.

One specific example illustrating why immigrants would need a community to provide them emotional support is presented in Mary Cygan's article "Inventing Polonia." Cygan mentions an ad from the World War I period that instructed Polish-Americans not to be ashamed to be seen reading Polish publications.<sup>153</sup> The fact that ethnics of this time were self-conscious about being perceived as Polish speaks to the state of opinion of the outside world. Why risk the deprecation of society when you can insulate yourself within the confines of a supportive ethnic community? Adjusting to American society had the potential to be quite stressful, but the ethnic community allowed for the gradual adjustment and the support of those undergoing the same process.

This example touches on the subject of Polish language publications, which played a significant role in the formation and perpetuation of Polish ethnic communities. For immigrants that had no prior exposure to the English language, Polish newspapers were the source of a wide variety of information. Polish-

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<sup>152</sup> *ibid.*, 13.

<sup>153</sup> Mary E. Cygan, "Inventing Polonia: Notions of Polish American Identity, 1870-1990," *Prospects* 23 (1998), 231.

American sociologist James Pula elaborates on the broad functions of the Polish press, observing that

its pages provided local news and information from Poland for people unable to speak English, carried organizational news, imparted information about American customs, laws, and naturalization procedures, and generally assisted in the adjustment of immigrants to their new environment.<sup>154</sup>

The language barrier was one that would have made Polish immigrants the target of suspicious Americans. Being unable to communicate with larger society reinforced the need for an ethnic community.

These varying theories are by no means mutually exclusive. To the contrary, they seem to overlap in some areas and might be seen as intertwining in their assessment of the immigrant experience. The variety of purposes that ethnic communities serve illustrates why it was reasonable for them to form and justifies their importance to their members. By fulfilling the mental and psychological needs mentioned above, ethnic communities became more than just a physical waypoint between two societies; they became an integral part of their members' existence and identity. For example, sociologist John Musick observed what he called a "Polish sub-culture" in Hamtramck. His description of the mentality of Hamtramck's residents has language highly suggestive of status competition. Musick said that Hamtramck residents had a

sense of personal identity which is drawn not from the larger society but from the Polish sub-culture of Hamtramck. They have a sense of being apart, of being unique and individual which results from their relationship to the values, norms, and criteria of prestige which are unique to the Polish sub-culture of Hamtramck and remarkably different from those of the larger society.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> *ibid.*, 30.

<sup>155</sup> John Musick, "Ethnicity and the Economic Squeeze." The University of Michigan School of Social Work, April 1971. Quoted in Lopata and Erdmans, *Polish Americans*, 203.

Fifty years after incorporation the effects of the city's ethnic and immigrant legacy are still readily manifested in the personal identities of the residents. The natural tendencies of the immigrants to relate to each other in unique ways within their communities resulted in a development of a unique identity.

### **Long Term Trends in Ethnic Communities**

The reasons for forming ethnic communities are one issue, but immigrants eventually adjust, adapt, and have children. The circumstances change as later generations face different challenges than the immigrant generation did. Polish immigrant communities exhibit a variety of long term trends as they progress through the generations. These trends include a departure from strictly ethnic identities in favor of more pluralistic forms with a working class emphasis, the development of the community into a complete social structure, and an increased sense of embattlement with outside forces.

One long term trend in ethnic communities is a decline in the overall ethnicity of its residents as dual identities tend to take root. (For example, Polish-American is a dual identity, as opposed to a singular 'Polish' or 'American' identity.) Sandberg is particularly emphatic that ethnicity tends to decline linearly across generations, but the concept of the decline of ethnicity over time is actually fairly intuitive. It would be expected that experiences in America would change from generation to generation, not stay static over periods of fifty or sixty years. As the distance from Europe increased over generations and life experiences changed, divergences would be anticipated. Instead of looking at the change in ethnic identity

in terms of 'decline,' it is more accurate to frame the situation in terms of evolution or development as subsequent generations adapted to life in America and became a part of larger society. Obidinski advances a theory that dual identity develops as the second and third generations grow up in America, saying that they hold on to traits of ethnic identity the first generation brought over only so long as it is compatible with larger society. As time goes on and this negotiation process continues, the later generations prefer to define themselves as "Polish-Americans" or "Americans of Polish Descent."<sup>156</sup> The end result of this process is that ethnics end up with an adjusted identity.

While the identification with ethnic ties may diminish over generations, a working class identity tends to increase in importance as a central part of the overall community identity; a shared economic circumstance appears to help build and reinforce the community bond. Explanations of the working class facet of ethnic communities have both historical and sociological components. Sandberg mentions that class distinctions were very rigid back in Europe for those of Polish descent, and they brought this with them to their early American experience.<sup>157</sup> In addition to this, there is also the theory of 'ethclass' interaction, where people of the same social class act alike and have the same social values. People often confine their primary group social participation to their particular class segment within their own ethnic group.<sup>158</sup> This theory holds that communities tend to form among those Polish immigrants who were working class, as almost all were. The idea of

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<sup>156</sup> Obidinski's article contains data from surveys given to school children in Buffalo, New York to take home. 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> generation strongly prefer these categories over "Polish" or "American."

<sup>157</sup> Sandberg, *Ethnic Identity and Assimilation: The Polish-American Community; Case Study of Metropolitan Los Angeles*, 12 Quoting Thomas and Znaniecki favorably.

<sup>158</sup> *ibid.*, 4 Quoting Milton M. Gordon (1964) favorably.

'ethclass' is also fairly intuitive, as it is usually the case that people of the same class live in the same neighborhoods and thus have similar interests and more opportunity to interact. Similarly, it is intuitive that urban ethnic communities would take on aspects of class in their identities by default, as this is the class to which a majority of residents would have belonged. Additionally, Sandberg found that the working class was "significantly more ethnic" than upper classes, which supports the theory mentioned by Alba that ethnicity is reinforced by common socioeconomic position.<sup>159</sup> The working class aspect of ethnic communities became a distinct quality while reinforcing the ethnic ties.

The working class component of the ethnic community experience became increasingly important to the second and third generation. Cygan argues that the conception of identity evolves over time as new generations inherit the conceptions of their forbears. Those who had different experiences in Europe and America would thus bring competing views to the table that must be reconciled.<sup>160</sup> For the postwar generation, especially those who went away to college and returned to the traditional community, the working-class aspect increased in significance to their understanding of their communities. Their views were influenced by the rhetoric of the civil rights movement as they came to see 'Polish-Americans' as a minority culture defined by their common experience in the working class.<sup>161</sup> The fusing of working class and ethnic identities into an overall community identity in the second and third generations was catalyzed by this development in postwar America.

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<sup>159</sup> Sandberg, *The Changing Polish American*, 11. See footnote 11 for the discussion of Alba's theory.

<sup>160</sup> Cygan, *Inventing Polonia: Notions of Polish American Identity, 1870-1990*, 211.

<sup>161</sup> *ibid.*, 234.

Though this transition away from a purely ethnic identity to a dual identity with working class aspects could be seen as a threat to Polish immigrant communities, structural pluralism commonly develops allowing for the community to exist independent of its original ethnic ties. Despite the fact that the ethnic fervor of the town wanes, the structure that has been established over decades remains in place. As Lopata put it, “decreasing Polishness has not necessarily decreased the organizational and institutional complexity of the ethnic community.”<sup>162</sup> Sandberg defines structural pluralism as the continuity of structured in-group relationships and institutions with the concurrent disappearance of distinct cultural traits.<sup>163</sup> The theory is fairly straightforward, dictating that as immigrant communities mature their businesses, clubs, organizations, and neighborhoods become established independent of the ethnic character of the community. While the level of ethnic identification might subside from generation to generation or even as a generation matures, these ‘structures’ themselves remain unthreatened. Alba confirms this trend of structural pluralism when he refers to the

“widely held position...that the acculturation of the Catholic groups...has occurred in terms of a public American culture...but that behind an Americanized façade, ethnic subcultures quietly live on, receiving their chief expression in terms of the values concerned with home, family, and community.”<sup>164</sup>

This ‘Americanized façade’ is merely the perception of the outside world looking at a community that despite being no longer strictly ethnic is still very important to the personal lives of the residents.

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<sup>162</sup> *ibid.*, 90.

<sup>163</sup> Sandberg, *Ethnic Identity and Assimilation: The Polish-American Community; Case Study of Metropolitan Los Angeles*, 3. Quoting Gordon (1964) favorably.

<sup>164</sup> Alba, *the Twilight of Ethnicity among American Catholics of European Ancestry*, 93.

Structural pluralism is made possible by another long term trend of Polish ethnic communities: their tendency to develop into complete social structures independent of larger society. This pattern stems from a number of the aforementioned reasons for why the communities form in the first place. Ethnic communities become havens from the outside world and are consequently developed from within to fulfill all the needs of its residents. Immigrant communities found themselves needing many resources, as Lopata explains, and as a result many residents opened businesses to fill needs in the community, thus creating an “increasingly complex, diversified, and self-sufficient economic and social structure.”<sup>165</sup> In determining what institutions are needed, Polish ethnic communities often try to provide for all the requirements of their members and develop an institutional framework that allows the community to thrive. For example, a community in its early days would be likely to start a parish to serve their religious needs while a resident would be likely to start a small food market or grocery store to meet this particular need of the residents. Members will open up pharmacies, bakeries, doctor’s offices, etc., until the city is entirely independent. As new needs arise or become apparent, they will be met by newly entrepreneurial residents. This is one of Lopata’s six criteria for ethnic communities (see footnote 4), that communities share a degree of “institutional completeness so that members *can*, but do not necessarily need to, limit their significant and important interactions to its confines.”<sup>166</sup> It becomes possible to experience life entirely from within the community, and this possibility remains established over time.

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<sup>165</sup> Lopata and Erdmans, *Polish Americans*, 34.

<sup>166</sup> *ibid.*, 5. Emphasis added.



Over time another distinct trait has developed in many Polish immigrant communities, though this one is due to both the nature of the ethnics and the communities they found and the social forces that have characterized postwar urban America. An inherent apprehension towards outsiders tends to transform into a growing sense of attack from the outside in these communities. As previously mentioned, ethnic communities would provide support for the immigrant generations. The outside world contained prejudice, stereotypes, and a way of life that was unfamiliar to residents in the early days. As members turned inward for support from these hostile outsiders, they began a trend of mistrust and aversion to those from the outside world that did not die with future generations. A community identity increasing in strength necessarily increases the distinction made between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ or in sociological terms, between ‘in group’ and ‘out group.’

This trend took on a different form in the postwar era, as several forces combined to put new pressures on Polish ethnic communities. A decline in manufacturing and industrial jobs in addition to an influx of African Americans into northern cities resulted in an increase in competition for a declining number of jobs, housing, and services.<sup>167</sup> Lopata explains this as a variation of the old status competition, saying community residents resented this new group that was encroaching upon the status-invested property that they had spent years building as their proof of social success. They resented the social successes that the civil rights movement was having, as they often felt their needs were going unmet while instead help was going to Blacks.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Pula, *Polish Americans: An Ethnic Community*, 128.

<sup>168</sup> Lopata and Erdmans, *Polish Americans*, 135-6.

The competition for resources was amplified as many cities, including Hamtramck, developed urban renewal programs which employed federal funds to help refurbish their outdated infrastructures and services. One facet of urban renewal that created much controversy and put pressure on traditional communities was the proposed development public and low-income housing projects. Those who promoted this interest and who called for racial integration in these traditionally Polish communities were viewed by residents as outsiders trying to dismantle their communities.<sup>169</sup> For Polish ethnic community residents in the early twentieth century, outsiders were avoided as prejudiced and intimidating; in the postwar era they were feared as threats to traditional community life and the stability that defined it.

## **Conclusion**

Given the complex and varied roles Polish ethnic communities play in the lives of immigrants, it is understandable that these communities can become so important to their residents. The specific roles that Polish ethnic communities serve for their residents help to amplify the general bonds of community that usually develop in neighborhoods.<sup>170</sup> As the community grows in significance to its residents, a certain degree of attachment develops. This attachment is what I call community identity: a shared feeling among inhabitants that their community is importantly unique. Someone with a strong community identity would feel that there was something irreplaceable about life in their community. A Polish

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<sup>169</sup> Pula, *Polish Americans: An Ethnic Community*, 130.

<sup>170</sup> These are the bonds of family, friendship, culture, history, et cetera mentioned above.

immigrant tradition helps facilitate the attachment of residents to their community, enabling the entrenchment of a community identity.

To illustrate the importance of a Polish immigrant tradition, consider the earlier comparison with Highland Park. Recall that the only significant difference in the early years of these cities was Hamtramck had a substantial number of Polish immigrants while Highland Park had almost none. Despite being incredibly similar in the prewar era, the racial composition of the two cities diverged drastically in the postwar era. The bonds of attachment to Highland Park were not strong enough to deter a 'White Flight,' but in Hamtramck, a community fortified by its Polish ethnic tradition, no such trend occurred. The more important a community is to the daily lives of its residents, the stronger it is going to be. Residents with long term commitments to their city would be much less inclined to leave what they have worked to build. The strength of Hamtramck's community identity is likely the factor that allowed it to remain in tact while surrounding areas were undergoing profound changes. The ethnic component of Hamtramck's history can thus be a possible explanation for the racial divergence seen between Hamtramck, Highland Park, and Detroit in the postwar period.

With a firm textual foundation for the proposed development of a community identity in Polish ethnic communities established, our attention now turns to postwar Hamtramck. Was there evidence for a community identity in postwar Hamtramck, and if so, what traits defined this identity? What can we learn about how Hamtramckans thought of themselves and their community? By

appreciating the complexities of Hamtramck's community identity, we can then assess the possible impact it had on Hamtramck's postwar development.

### **Chapter 3 – Hamtramck’s Postwar Identity**

We know that Hamtramck diverged significantly from Detroit and Highland Park in terms of racial composition. I proposed the concept of community identity as a possible driving factor in Hamtramck’s trends. The secondary literature provided justification for the potential development of a strong community identity in Polish ethnic communities. This chapter will undertake an investigation into Hamtramck’s community identity. The first section will use the *Hamtramck Citizen*’s coverage of the 1967 Detroit race riots to illustrate the pervasiveness of a community identity in Hamtramck. The second section will look at various documents concerning urban renewal in order to pinpoint some specific facets of this identity. Using the lens of community identity, we can then analyze aspects of postwar Hamtramck to move towards a nuanced understanding of the city’s development.

#### **Community Identity Exposed: The 1967 Detroit Race Riots**

Though ‘community identity’ can be a rather nebulous concept in itself, detecting and assessing an identity can be an even murkier task. The problem is that community identities, like personal identities, are more or less subconscious processes. They exist in the minds of residents, both informing and being shaped by everyday experiences. As a result, evidence for an intangible identity is usually indirect and obscure. Rarely in the course of daily life does a person pause to reflect on how strongly they are attached to their community or why their community is special to them. Evidence for a community’s identity can, however, become readily observable when conflict with the outside world occurs. These conflicts reinforce

in-group identification for the problem is caused by ‘outsiders’ and are framed generally in an ‘Us vs. Them’ context, though it may be in language more subtle than this. Such conflicts take the usually tacit identity and usher it to the fore. One such conflict was the 1967 Detroit Race Riots, and the *Hamtramck Citizen’s* coverage of this event illustrates the unique facets of the city’s identity.

The *Hamtramck Citizen* is Hamtramck’s official newspaper and it has been published once per week since September 1934. As the local newspaper, the *Citizen* can be very useful to see how the community as a group perceived the world. Newspapers serve a unique role in American society, helping to shape community opinion while at the same time generally reflecting the sentiments of its readership. Thus, although the *Citizen’s* coverage of the riots should not be seen as a delineation of a homogeneous Hamtramck opinion, it can be taken to be an accurate approximation of community attitudes.

There are certain general expectations for how a local newspaper would cover riots that were taking place immediately outside its city. It is clear that the devastating nature of the riots was something that was immediately recognized in Hamtramck, with an article on the first issue of the *Citizen* following the riot estimating the damages incurred over the first two days of riots to be over \$200,000,000.<sup>171</sup> Bearing this in mind, it is sensible to expect coverage proportionate to the gravity of the events taking place. For example, the *Detroit Free Press* on July 27, 1967 carried at least 15 stories related to the riots in some way. The riot dominated every front page of every section and was the subject of every large story. Appreciating the fact that one of Detroit’s major newspapers

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<sup>171</sup> “City Free of Riot Damage,” *The Hamtramck Citizen*, July 27, 1967.

would naturally be more centered on riots happening in Detroit than a newspaper concerned primarily with the affairs of Hamtramck, one might nonetheless expect the story to at least make the *Citizen's* headline. Though it is hard to definitely state what would suffice as typical or expected coverage of an event like the Detroit riots of 1967, it can be stated with certainty that the *Hamtramck Citizen's* coverage is anything but typical or expected.

On July 23, 1967, in the early morning hours in one of Detroit's largest black neighborhoods, the police decided to bust a 'blind pig,' an illegal after-hours bar. Detroit police decided to arrest all eighty five people present and detained them outside the bar while waiting for backup to arrive.<sup>172</sup> The incident attracted the attention of local residents and a crowd soon gathered to investigate the situation. Amid charges of police brutality, the detainees and onlookers alike grew restless. Tensions escalated and eventually a full-fledged mob scene broke out. The uprising raged on for five days, eventually put down by a combined force of 17,000 law enforcement officials.<sup>173</sup> By the time the dust had settled, the riot ended up being among the most destructive urban uprisings ever, as 43 people were killed and tens of millions of dollars in property damage was incurred.<sup>174</sup>

There are a few trends that emerge throughout the *Citizen's* coverage in the two weeks following the riots. First, the paper does not once treat the events surrounding the riots as intrinsically relevant, but instead only mentions the riots as

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<sup>172</sup> Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, 259.

<sup>173</sup> *ibid.*, 259.

<sup>174</sup> *ibid.*, 259. This is a barebones description of the specific details surrounding the outbreak of the riot. For a comprehensive analysis of the factors that directly led to the marginalization of Detroit's Black population resulting in this outburst of racially inspired frustrations, pursue this book.

they relate to Hamtramck. Secondly, the coverage of the riots breaks down the situation into two homogenous groups, one of which is the residents of Hamtramck characterized as virtuous, united, and peaceful, while the other is simply referred to as ‘outsiders’ that the paper represents as chaotic, destructive, and threatening. Instead of covering the riots as independently important or appreciating the intricacies of the events occurring, all of the stories generally promote a common theme emphasizing the persevering safety of the city in the face of the threat of destruction. All of these trends indicate the presence of a strong and stable community identity engrained in Hamtramck residents, a concept defined significantly in opposition to Detroit.

Throughout the weeks following the 1967 race riots, the *Citizen* covered the riots in a number of ways, but one consistent feature of all the appearances of riot information was that the paper’s focus was completely on how the riots affected Hamtramck. The problems and destruction experienced in Detroit were only mentioned in order to highlight the virtue of Hamtramck residents. Instead of an occasional spotlight on the perils of Detroit, the riot was always depicted as a victory for Hamtramck, with instances of the former being used to emphasize the significance of the latter. Examples of this theme can be seen most clearly in the way the riots were initially covered, but also are prevalent in a number of other places.

The Detroit race riots broke out early in the morning on July 23, 1967, which means that the first issue of the *Citizen* to cover the riot would have been the July 27<sup>th</sup> issue. How would the city surrounded on all sides by Detroit cover



arguably the biggest single event in the city's history? The story received three very brief columns on the front page, one small column buried on the bottom of the last page, and a brief statement from the Mayor atop the last page. To put this in perspective, the headline for that day read "Local Merchants Being Fleeced By Stolen Check Passing Gang." The story was not even considered the most important one of the week; the plight of local shop-owners was more significant than the plight of Detroit residents. Perhaps even more telling is that the front page contained a column almost as big as the three on the riot put together. The headline for this article read "Bowling Winners Named." Detroit may have lost an estimated \$200,000,000 according to the front page article, but George Flaig of Warren won \$20,000 in a bowling tournament. The editors included a statement from the mayor on the last page to reassure Hamtramckans of their safety and figured that was the end of the issue. After the uprising was quelled, it seems that the paper realized that Hamtramck had survived an incredibly dramatic event and thus the events became more germane. Even then, however, the events were not presented as though they were intrinsically relevant, but only pertinent as they were experienced in Hamtramck. Thus, the next week's issue was the one primarily focused on the riots, but in the context of the community's victory over the outside 'threats' of the citizens of Detroit, villainized as outsiders bent on lawlessness and disorder.

Even after the editors of the *Citizen* decided that the riots were deserving of more extensive coverage, it was not because of the immense damage they had caused in Detroit but because Hamtramck was able to escape this damage through the admirable virtue of its citizens. For instance, the headline of one article from the

August 3<sup>rd</sup> issue reads “Riots Caused Tension In Hospital, *That’s All.*”<sup>175</sup> The story covers the riot as it was experienced in a local hospital that went through the riot days in a state of heightened security and was locked down during the curfew hours. It details how the hospital employees were worried a sump pump might fail and how they almost ran out of some surgical supplies. The destruction in Detroit was irrelevant for the paper that was catering to a readership of an entirely separate community.

Another clear example of the *Citizen* approaching the Detroit riots only through the lens of Hamtramck’s experience occurs on pages 5-6 of this same August 3<sup>rd</sup> issue, where area businesses have sponsored a two-page spread thanking the armed forces in a dramatic fashion. The main headline reads “While Detroit Burned...Hamtramck Was Safe and Quiet!” The newsworthy item is not that Detroit was burning, but that Hamtramck persevered through the experience. The editors and writers only make a dramatized reference to the treacherous surrounding metropolis in order to emphasize the comfort experienced within confines of the city, a feat accomplished only through the admirable behavior of the citizens.<sup>176</sup> The community was too wrapped up in their own victory to pay respect to the tragedy that had befallen its neighboring city. They did not identify with Detroit and had no qualms about referencing Detroit’s plight while blatantly bragging about their peaceful riot experience.

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<sup>175</sup> “Riots Caused Tension in Hospital, That’s All.” *The Hamtramck Citizen*, August 3, 1967. Emphasis added.

<sup>176</sup> Although the spread sponsored by 40 businesses listed below, the professional layout and presentation suggest the involvement of *Citizen* staff. The ad uses photographs taken by the newspaper, so the paper itself had at least a minor role in creating it, and likely created the whole thing and solicited sponsors afterward.

Further proof that Hamtramck as a community never perceived the Detroit riots as independently relevant to their lives can be seen in the way the coverage basically disappeared after the August 3<sup>rd</sup> issue. The August 10, 1967 issue only covered the riot in the form of two sample letters that were reprinted to show what people were sending city officials. (It is important to note that neither of these letters expressed any concern for Detroit or the events that had transpired, but instead were the standard expressions of gratitude and pride in their own community.) By the August 17, 1967 issue the riot had fallen from the pages of the *Citizen*. Compare this with the *Detroit Free Press*, which on August 17, 1967 ran two separate stories on the front page and had six other stories on various subjects relating to the riot. Once again, it is understandable that Detroit's newspaper would exhibit much more concern over the riots over a much longer period of time, as this would be appropriate for an event of such a magnitude. What is amazing, and what truly speaks to the dominance of the community identity in Hamtramck, is the complete absence of any actual coverage of what occurred in Detroit independent of Hamtramck's safety from the events.

A second overriding theme in the *Hamtramck Citizen's* coverage of the 1967 race riots in Detroit is that any account of what took place with regard to Hamtramck during the riots simplified the involved parties into two groups: Hamtramck residents and 'outsiders,' conferring a characteristic homogeneity onto each group. Examples of this simplification can be seen most vividly in the aforementioned two-page spread in the August 3, 1967 issue, but is also observable in various other instances.

Pages five and six of the August 3<sup>rd</sup> issue comprise a two page spread that area businesses have sponsored to thank the armed forces and policemen for securing Hamtramck in its most dire hours. It is impressively laid out with nine pictures representing various scenes in the city during the riots and has a small recap of the events that transpired in Hamtramck during the course of the Detroit riots, lauding the virtue of its citizens and expressing gratitude for the thorough job the police did in securing the city. The spread's depiction of the riots sticks to the trend of simplification into the two groups of residents and outsiders. The story begins by describing how "the people of Hamtramck...are the finest in many respects. Over the years, they have demonstrated their ability and desire to live harmoniously as neighbors." From the very first sentence the article has described its first group, the united, harmony-loving residents. After a few stories from the riot experience, the article goes on to explain that "our police knew our people. They knew they could not expect any trouble from that source. *So all that remained was to keep outsiders out.*" (Emphasis added.) The riot experience in Hamtramck boiled down to the resolve of the virtuous, peaceful residents holding down their fort against the forces of the outsiders comprised of lawless looters. What was newsworthy was how the residents banded together to guard the walls of their fort from those who would destroy it.

This spread's use of the resident/outsider dichotomy is not limited to the story it tells with words, but is prevalent also in the pictures selected to help tell the tale of Hamtramck's survival. To represent the imminent danger of the rioting outsiders, a picture of an unexploded Molotov cocktail is shown. Other pictures

show policemen and soldiers with their rifles raised on the frontlines waiting for the riotous outsiders to make their move on the city - the courageous guardians of the peaceful residents. Mixed in with these are images of a Hamtramck undisturbed. One picture shows the Mayor hard at work planning the strategic defense of the city and another is a (perhaps overly) dramatic picture from a distance of a silhouetted soldier standing guard at gas and oil tanks. Featured right in the middle of the page is the empty and serene Joseph Campau Avenue, the main thoroughfare of the city. Thanks to the hunched over mayor hard at work and the stoic soldier, the Molotov cocktails of the outsiders did not have a chance to disturb the heart of the city and her law-abiding residents. The point the editors are advancing is as vivid as it is simple: while the havoc of the outside (Detroit) threatened to spill over in the tense nights of the riots, Hamtramck was safe and sound.

Other instances of the outsider/resident simplification can be seen interspersed in the language used in various articles covering the riots in the *Hamtramck Citizen*. An article titled "Mayor's Statement" on the back page of the July 27<sup>th</sup> issue is an instance of the mayor himself emphasizing a homogenous Hamtramck. After he extends his "appreciation to all the people of all races in Hamtramck" for helping maintain order, he proclaims that "once again our people have demonstrated that they stand united...and will not tolerate anything that may be harmful to our city." A similar generalization of Hamtramck's residents is seen in the article "Mayor Says" in the August 3<sup>rd</sup> issue, where he gives credit to everyone for "all were wonderful" and each person could be "proud of the effort

put forth to save [their] city.” The community members, homogenous in their undying commitment to protecting Hamtramck, were to all be commended.

These portrayals of a city united are one side of the story, and they contrast with how the rioters were represented in the paper. The most forthright statement of the community’s perceptions of the rioters is in the article “City Safe Mayor Says.” The article describes how Hamtramck’s geographic location put the city in a position where it was almost impossible to avoid the riots completely. It proceeds to declare that “it became imperative...to impose a restriction to keep the city from becoming a haven for the overflow of outsiders bent on lawlessness and disorder.”<sup>177</sup> This one sentence directly states the way the community perceived the rioters: outsiders without purpose besides destruction and impertinent beyond their threat to the community.

These were the riots as they were interpreted by a community. It is certain that for individual residents the riots represented a large spectrum of things. Some probably had friends or relatives living in Detroit and some surely worked in the city. But for the residents of Hamtramck as a group, a community, the riots were not addressed as an outbreak of violence with deep political, economic, and social foundations. The riot was never covered in the *Citizen* as an independently significant event; there were no articles discussing the riots themselves or why they may have started or their implications for the future of Detroit and/or Hamtramck. It is thus unsurprising that there no attempt to perceive the rioters outside of the resident/outsider dichotomy. The community as a whole did not perceive the riots

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<sup>177</sup> *The Hamtramck Citizen*, July 27, 2003.

as being particularly indicative of any larger issue or significance, and likewise they did not see the rioters as anything more than lawless outsiders.

What possible explanation can there be for a city to react to such catastrophic events with such irreverence for the city around them? How can there be not one single article about the riots (outside of the context of how Hamtramck valiantly avoided them) in the month following the destructive event? How can they reduce the deeply rooted socioeconomic/political struggles of those who chose to riot to simple lawlessness, and interpret these outsiders as a threat to the homogenous body of united and virtuous Hamtramckans? The lack of concern for the plight of Detroit reflected by the editors of the *Citizen* is incomprehensible at first glance. It is incomprehensible, that is, until one considers the nature of the community identity that was prominent in the experience of post World War II Hamtramck.

A community identity is a subconscious element of one's daily life. It took an event like the Detroit race riots of 1967 to draw the community identity of Hamtramckans to the surface. Once Hamtramck had to physically defend itself from the events developing around them in Detroit, they inevitably realized that they were quite different from the outlying city - that there was something very distinct about the 2.1 square miles that they inhabited. They immediately became self-aware of their membership in this community, and this moment of reflection brought forth the expressions of pride that characterize the *Citizen's* coverage of the riots. It was as if the smoke from the riots became a mirror for the residents of Hamtramck: looking out into the chaos of the outside world provided them with an

opportunity to recognize that they were part of a stable community wholly separate from the outside world and, more specifically in this instance, Detroit.

Two quick examples of this reflective process are in the two letters that were reprinted in the August 10, 1967 issue of the *Hamtramck Citizen*. The two letters were printed as examples of the letters city officials were still receiving that week, and they both contain overt statements of community pride that were brought on by the riots. One of them puts the sentiment quite succinctly. It was written on behalf of a senior citizens organization who wanted to thank the police, city council, and firemen for their roles in protecting the city. They were grateful for those who “worked so hard on [their] behalf to save the destruction in [their] beautiful city of Hamtramck.” They finish it with the conclusion that the whole experience has led them to: “We will never cease to be proud to live in this community.” The riot experience brought the pride of residents such as these senior citizens to the surface, showing them the extent to which they identified with their community. The community identity that usually resided outside of their everyday perceptions was thrust upon them when they were physically blockaded as a precaution to prevent rioting. The boundary of Hamtramck that had previously been psychological became at once a visible, tangible boundary, temporarily awakening residents to the distinction that was already being made in their minds. Eventually, the dust from the riot settled, the curfews were lifted, and the community identity returned to its usual seat in the subconscious.

It is important to revisit the earlier note that this community identity did not mean the same thing to everyone at all times. It seems improbable that all



Hamtramck residents approached the riots in the same fashion as their city's newspaper. For example, the two letters from the August 10, 1967 issue were most likely not the only letters sent about the riots, but they were the ones identified as 'representative' of the community's sentiments. That being said, the newspaper does give us a general insight into how the community as a whole approached the events together, and this was with a stable community identity that emphasized their virtues in opposition to the outside world.

### **The Threat of the 'Outsider': Urban Renewal & Community Identity**

Just as the threat of siege during the Detroit Race Riots evoked clear expressions of Hamtramck's pervasive community identity, urban renewal came to be viewed as an attack from the outside world, but with significantly more destructive potential. Rioters would merely cause physical damage – damage that could be repaired – but to residents, urban renewal threatened to dismantle their traditional community by permanently altering the composition of the city. The concern was that low income and public housing would supplant the stable neighborhoods of homeowners with transient, jobless tenants dependent on the federal government for Welfare. Hamtramck residents had a particular conception of their city as being home to hard-working homeowners who take care of their property. Urban renewal (or at least certain aspects of it) contradicted this aspect of the community identity, and responses to the programs illustrate how citizens responded to this conflict.

Urban Renewal, while not a clearly defined event like the Detroit race riots, was a prolonged conflict within Hamtramck that provides insight into the

community identity. Though initially pursued as an effort to modernize and revitalize the city, determining the most effective means to achieving these goals soon devolved into a bitter battle replete with imagery of the death of the city. The decision issued by Judge Damon Keith is one specific event within this larger conflict, and the reactions of residents to this event, just as to the race riots, are another unique instance of the community being confronted with its own identity.

One way to look at the Keith decision is as a challenge to Hamtramck's community identity. In the decision, Judge Keith charged Hamtramck's citizens with discriminatory housing practices. In other words, he felt Hamtramck residents distinguished between Black and white when deciding who would move into the community. As Judge Keith saw it, race was a facet of the community identity: whites belonged on the inside and Blacks were to be relegated to the outside. Hamtramck's reaction to this assessment was defensive and outraged, since this was not at all how they conceived of their community.

As was seen at the beginning of Chapter Two, the reaction of Hamtramck residents to Judge Keith's ruling were consistent in their denial of any racial factors in the mismanagement of the city's urban renewal program. The front page article of the *Hamtramck Citizen* from December 2, 1971 and the next week's editor's statement both reject Judge Keith's assessment of their identity by bringing up the plight of whites. City Councilman Bernard Bator and Mayor Raymond J. Wojtowicz both used census figures as a means to undermine the charges of racism

at a city-wide meeting to address the future of the urban renewal program in Hamtramck.<sup>178</sup>

The factual and objective approach to the accusation of racism in Hamtramck is a practical one, but even more telling is the appeal that some citizens made to their own emotions and experiences. Hamtramckan Walter Paruk's assessment should be recalled: "...from my experience as a public official in the city of Hamtramck and as a citizen of the city of Hamtramck, *I know deep in my heart* that this was not a racially motivated program."<sup>179</sup> What does such an appeal actually mean? What gives Walter Paruk this feeling deep in his heart?

Walter Paruk made a personal reflection on his community as a whole as he had experienced it throughout his life. The way one can know 'deep in their heart' that a city program is not racially motivated is if 'deep in their heart' they know something about their city as a whole, that is, as a community. Judge Keith's decision forced Paruk to think overtly about Hamtramck in this way, and after doing so he realized that race was not a factor he considered to be among those that comprised 'Hamtramck' in his heart. That he could do such reflection and come up with a certain answer implies that there was a real community identity to which he was appealing to in his emotional statement.<sup>180</sup>

City Treasurer Joseph B. Lennard's outraged remarks similarly reflect his access to the community identity. In response to Judge Keith's charges he said,

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<sup>178</sup> *Hamtramck Citizen*, "Urban Renewal Project Will Continue." December 9, 1971.

<sup>179</sup> Lewandowski, *Julia's Prayer: Recollections of Hamtramck, MI a Polish-American Community*. Oral history given by Walter Paruk, 1973. Emphasis added.

<sup>180</sup> Walter Paruk was one time District Judge for the 31st District Court in Hamtramck and served on the city planning commission. While he would have had a role in planning Hamtramck's urban renewal, in his oral history he is giving a subjective assessment of the program, an appeal to his feelings. The statements do not appear to have any ulterior political motives but are given as citizen in deep reflection on the community as a whole.

I would like to see Gov. (George) Romney...put 12 percent black persons in lily white Bloomfield Hills (his home town). Don't tell me we've discriminated against blacks. We've never had any racial problems in Hamtramck and I'm proud of this fact.<sup>181</sup>

Lennard, just as Walter Paruk did, took the charge of racism and compared it to his conception of 'Hamtramck.' Though his statement is more of an appeal to history than to a personal sentiment, the source is the same. When he assessed the issue of race as a factor in Hamtramck's history, Lennard concluded that there had never been any racial problems in the city. Joseph Lennard consulted the community identity for a response to the court decision, which apparently was a readily accessible construct for Hamtramck's residents.

Reactions to the concept of urban renewal in general and to its proposed implementation in Hamtramck also indicate the prevalence of a community identity at this time in Hamtramck's history. Many Hamtramck residents feared not only that urban renewal would result in the influx of outsiders into their city, but that the program itself was the work of outsiders from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The importance of these concurrent fears to the concerns of Hamtramck residents can be seen through a number of responses to urban renewal programs. In addition to this aversion to outsiders, these documents reveal a working class sentiment central to their identity.

One brief but significant illustration of the concern that urban renewal was a program being run by outsiders to drastically alter the city is in an informational pamphlet distributed by the city entitled "Hamtramck and Urban Renewal."<sup>182</sup> The

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<sup>181</sup> "Urban Renewal Project Will Continue." *The Hamtramck Citizen*, December 9, 1971. Bloomfield Hills is an affluent suburb of Detroit.

<sup>182</sup> Hamtramck Historical Commission Archives, "Urban Renewal" File. Accessed October 6, 2006.

pamphlet, printed in 1968, was essentially an attempt at explaining what urban renewal was, what its goals were, and how it could help the city of Hamtramck. It appears to have been geared towards garnering support from those who were skeptical of the idea of renewal. One intriguing aspect comes on page five of this pamphlet where it explains how the decisions driving the program were being made. The explanation is only half of a page, consisting of three paragraphs. In these three small paragraphs the pamphlet stressed the involvement of Hamtramck citizens who “devote their time without financial remuneration,” making sure to include this point twice. The repetition of this phrase is eye-catching in such a small amount of space, specifically the phrase ‘without financial remuneration.’ The focus on the lack of a monetary incentive among those residents involved was meant to reassure residents that these citizens are acting in the interests of the city and its residents.

The rest of the pamphlet focused on specific benefits the city would experience as a result of urban renewal, portraying the program as the key to a prosperous future in Hamtramck. The last page of the pamphlet contains a list of the specific benefits followed by one last attempt to persuade the residents. The pamphlet appealed to the possible death of the city, saying “A sign of decay, cold and empty homes are signs of a dying city.” In setting urban renewal up to be essential to Hamtramck’s well-being, the pamphlet lists as the first benefit to be a “balanced housing supply for all income groups.” It would appear as though those who designed this pamphlet did not foresee that so many residents would take issue

with this tenet. Hamtramck residents did not want housing for all income groups, only those hardworking residents committed to the future of the city.

As urban renewal progressed in Hamtramck, the fears about public and low-income housing would grow, especially after Judge Keith ordered the city to revamp its plans to include such housing. After Judge Keith's ruling, the December 2, 1971 issue of the *Hamtramck Citizen* had a picture on its front page taken from the city's amended renewal program that was presented at the previous week's city council meeting. The caption to the picture describes the new plans: "The 'pipe dream' includes: (A) high rise tenement house similar to Detroit's Jeffries Project, *which is an extremely high-crime area.*" (Emphasis added.) The first feature of the new program that the caption touched on was the plan for public housing, qualified by what is basically a warning that this element would threaten the safety of the city. The subtle yet significant placement of this part of the plan coupled with the comparison to Detroit shows the concern of the article's author with public housing and would have reinforced the fears of residents concerned with the effects of urban renewal.

Father Joseph Kubik, a pastor at St. Florian Catholic Church in Hamtramck, did an effective job of articulating the intuitions behind the opposition to public housing.

We cannot agree that low cost housing or apartments be built to bring *outsiders* into Hamtramck. But we do agree with the acceptance of persons who are of low income stature but who are gainfully employed and who would become homeowners. Low income people, in practice, applies to those who are dependent on public assistance in some form, or who are

unemployed or unemployable, or who are transient or temporary residents in a community.<sup>183</sup>

This was a public statement regarding the community of Hamtramck and is deserving of careful analysis. Father Kubik, as a pastor, was a community leader, and as such his views can be seen as both a reflection of the city's residents and as an influence on these same people. The most important aspect of Father Kubik's statement is how it plainly demarcated which people the community would accept and those which had no place there. It is compelling evidence that there was an established identity, for it was clear to this community leader which types of people belonged in the city. Those who contradicted this identity were to be kept out, with the focus in this instance being on defeating low income or public housing programs.

Which people was Father Kubik specifically saying belonged in Hamtramck? The first two sentences of his statement amount to a confirmation of a working class facet of the city's identity. The first sentence said that low cost housing should be defeated to keep outsiders out. The next sentence said that the city accepted those who were of low income status but were hard workers and would become homeowners. Therefore, 'outsiders' were those who were of low income but were not hard workers and had no long term commitments to the community. Although the rest of the quote contradicts the first part because he uses the term 'low income' to describe different things, it seems that Father Kubik was setting up two groups: outsiders, who were unemployed and transient, and those

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<sup>183</sup> "Urban Renewal Project Will Continue." *The Hamtramck Citizen*, December 9, 1971. Emphasis added.

who fit in with Hamtramck's identity, defined as hard working and permanent residents.

Resident Walter Paruk confirmed the city's trend towards stable homeowners when he was prompted to assess the urban renewal program in Hamtramck. He felt that many of the plans would not work since the "culture in the city of Hamtramck [was] more orientated to one family dwellings than it [was] to apartments or townhouses."<sup>184</sup> This consideration of the "culture of the city" is an unmistakable reference to a community identity that agrees with Father Kubik's appraisal – both expressed the desire for people committed to the future of the city while living there as homeowners. Paruk also expressed opposition to the construction of low cost housing for the general reason that once constructed, this type of housing would lead to a 'decline' in the area.<sup>185</sup> A general concern for the city's well being was ingrained in residents, and low cost housing was seen as a threat to that well being.

The rhetoric concerning the danger of outsiders became increasingly dramatic for the 1972 city council elections in Hamtramck, as a bloc of four candidates took this issue on as a central campaign issue.<sup>186</sup> The issue of urban renewal was framed as an issue of whether or not residents would be forced to move out or if the community would be preserved. One campaign flyer, shown in Figure 3.1, had a question centered on it in bold font, asking "Must You Move

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<sup>184</sup> Lewandowski, *Julia's Prayer: Recollections of Hamtramck, MI a Polish-American Community*. Walter Paruk oral history taken by Thomas Lewandowski, 1973.

<sup>185</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>186</sup> The four candidates were David Zukowski, Robert Zwolak, John Poplawski, and Thaddeus Morecki.



**Figure 3.1 – 1972 Campaign Literature**



This portion of a 1972 City Council campaign flyer plays upon citizen fears regarding the consequences of urban renewal. Note the Polish translation on the bottom.<sup>187</sup>

Out of Hamtramck? Yes or No.”<sup>188</sup> The bottom half of the flyer was a Polish translation of the text at the top to ensure that any non-English speakers could hear their message. This demographic would have been among those most likely to be concerned with the perpetuation of the traditional community for it likely served many of the previously mentioned roles of ethnic communities for them. These

<sup>187</sup> Hamtramck Historical Commission Archives, “Urban Renewal” file.

<sup>188</sup> *ibid.*

candidates would protect the community, making the promise that “you can stay in Hamtramck if you elect four good councilmen.” Featured prominently in the middle of the flier is a cartoon depicted an ‘urban renewal’ bulldozer destroying the house of the right out from under its elderly inhabitants.

The flyer also featured two other cartoons (Figure 3.2) to illustrate what urban renewal was doing to the city. One depicted a shady character labeled “urban renewal” snatching a purse labeled “pension checks” from an old woman. The other shows a robber named “Low Cost Housing” beating a blue collar “Hamtramck Resident.” These candidates were playing on the fears of residents that urban renewal was an assault on Hamtramck and its residents being waged by outsiders.

These same candidates also published another flyer during the same campaign, this one focused on the idea of having to move out of the city should urban renewal continue.<sup>189</sup> The flyer was directed at the city’s aging population, and it also had a Polish translation at the bottom of it. It poses the question, “To what other city will you move when your own street becomes half filled with wrecked empty homes and *outsiders*.” (Emphasis added) Recognizing that many of the city’s aging residents would not be able to afford to move on their social security or pension incomes, the flyer asks “would children be forced to take you into their house? What if they don’t want you in their house?” This was an attempt to play upon the insecurities of Hamtramck residents, making urban renewal the enemy of the traditional community Hamtramck residents had grown

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<sup>189</sup> *ibid.*

**Figure 3.2 – 1972 Campaign Cartoons**



Additional cartoons from the 1972 campaign literature, each reinforcing the threat of urban renewal to Hamtramck's residents.

dependent on. Underlined in this flyer is the question “Where did the Polish people move to???” It is apparent that there was concern with the idea of change in the traditional community, and that ‘Polishness’ was a feature of this traditional community identity. The appeal to the older generations of Hamtramck strategically makes an appeal to the ethnic community of old that undoubtedly played an important role for these residents.

This political campaign not only illustrates particular characteristics of the community identity, it highlights the importance of the community and its familiar

aspects to the residents.<sup>190</sup> Not only would low income housing imposed by urban renewal usher in “outsiders” with the undesirable characteristics mentioned by Father Kubik, but the only option once these outsiders had infiltrated the community would be to move out. The war on public housing and urban renewal was thus one for the traditional community whose identity residents had constructed over the years and had become dependent on.

### **Conclusion**

These documents strongly indicate that there was a community identity in Hamtramck in the postwar era, and that there was some degree of consensus about certain aspects of this identity. The *Hamtramck Citizen's* coverage of the 1967 Detroit race riots primarily highlights the pervasiveness of the identity and the strength of the distinction made by Hamtramck residents between those who are residents and those who are ‘outsiders.’ The documents pertaining to the *Garrett v. Hamtramck* decision and the urban renewal program in Hamtramck indicate that there were two definite characteristics that distinguished between ‘outsiders’ and those who would be welcome in Hamtramck: those who fit the identity. These traits were that the person be hard-working (a working class sentiment), and that the person intend to become a homeowner and thus make a long-term commitment to the community.

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<sup>190</sup> Ultimately, none of these candidates were elected. The 1972 city council election was actually a recall election: in January of 1972 four city councilmen were recalled due to charges of mishandling of money and the urban renewal program. Two of the candidates (Zwolak and Zukowski) of this bloc were appointed by the governor to serve on the council until elections in May, but were associated with past city activities and were viewed by citizens as only a temporary solution until they could finally elect new members and move on. As for the other two candidates, they were likely guilty by association. For a discussion on this see Kowalski pp. 122-123.

Appreciating that there was a unique community identity in postwar Hamtramck, we can now assess how this identity helps account for the city's racial divergence from Detroit and Highland Park. It is important to note that the existence of a community identity and a broader charge of racism are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is possible that residents associated such things as transience and dependence on federal Welfare with African Americans, and thus discriminated against them based on the color of their skin. In order to sort out the validity of racial accusations and attempt to reconcile them with the Hamtramck residents who insisted unequivocally that there were no racial problems in the city, an examination of the history of Blacks in Hamtramck is necessary.

## **Chapter Four: Race and Community Identity in Postwar Hamtramck**

### **The World Reacts**

The decision delivered by Judge Damon Keith on November 22, 1971 attracted attention from many major national news outlets, including the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Washington Post*. Such broad coverage is not surprising given the circumstances. After all, this was a civil rights case filed in the 1960s and the ruling made by Judge Keith was a landmark one. It was the first time that a federal judge ordered a city to build housing and adjust its laws as restitution for past discrimination.<sup>191</sup> Using the same concepts applied to desegregation in schooling in previous civil rights decisions, Judge Keith made Hamtramck an example for other cities that might use urban renewal and housing policies to preserve or institute segregation. A decision of this magnitude was certainly worthy of national coverage. But news of the landmark decision was not limited to these major sources, as Hamtramck's name soon found its way onto the pages of smaller papers such as the *Patriot Ledger* printed out of Quincy, Massachusetts.<sup>192</sup>

The coverage of the lawsuit decision printed by the popular weekly magazine *Newsweek* represents the way the issues of race and urban renewal in Hamtramck were presented to the country. In the December 6, 1971 issue the story was given a small one-column box about an inch long titled "Renewal or Removal." The box announced the city's conviction and referred to the case as "a

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<sup>191</sup> Agis Salpukas, "Judge Tells a City to Build Housing," *The New York Times*, April 4, 1973.

<sup>192</sup> An article covering the court decision was run in the December 12, 1971 issue. Article in The Damon J. Keith Collection, Box 14, Folder 2, Archives of Labor & Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

conventional American lament.” Through this brief exposure and the others offered in the major national newspapers, Hamtramck was cast as another example of America’s racial struggles in which another city shamelessly discriminated in the name of racial homogeneity. For most reading these articles, it was probably the first and last time they would hear or even think about Hamtramck

The story conveyed by the national media was naturally simplified. Their purpose was to transmit the story of small city within Detroit that was convicted of ‘Negro removal.’ These news outlets did not have the benefit of historical distance to fully appreciate the events unfolding in Hamtramck. What is now needed, and what has been generally lacking from the prior literature, is a nuanced and historical approach to the unique racial development of postwar Hamtramck. To accomplish this, a solid understanding of the role of Hamtramck’s Black population throughout its history will be necessary. Though the extant literature, much of which will be used to reconstruct this history, always makes sure to address the story of Hamtramck’s Black population, the discussion never reaches the important question of *why* Hamtramck’s racial makeup diverged so radically from its surrounding localities.

Was Hamtramck merely another occurrence of a ‘conventional American lament,’ striving for and achieving racial segregation through discriminatory practices? After discussing the legacy of Blacks in Hamtramck, the second half of this chapter will attempt to move the conversation about Hamtramck’s postwar development past the question of racism, preferring instead a more comprehensive approach. Specifically, issues of racism will be evaluated in light of the unique

characteristics of Hamtramck's history delineated in the previous two chapters. By appreciating the city's roots as a Polish ethnic community and the ramifications this had for the development of a community identity, a more complex and accurate picture of race in postwar Hamtramck will come into focus.

### **The Complicated History of Blacks in Hamtramck**

There are many ways to describe the legacy of Black residents in Hamtramck. To be certain, it is a fairly confusing and inconsistent narrative. As was seen in the reactions of Hamtramck residents to Judge Keith's decision discussed in Chapters Two and Three, there was a common assertion that 'Blacks had a deep and rich history in Hamtramck.' The reasoning continued that because of this tradition the charge of discrimination by officials and residents was ludicrous. It seems the faith in Hamtramck's Black tradition expressed by residents was based on reality, as there is much evidence that Blacks have in fact been accepted by the city and have played a significant role in its development from the very beginning. However, there is compelling and undeniable evidence that there was also discrimination in the city throughout its history, increasing in scope and severity in the postwar era. Ultimately, these two contradictory circumstances can be resolved for the most part by appreciating a distinction that was traditionally made between 'Hamtramck Blacks' and all other 'outsider Blacks.' One thing that is apparent after reviewing the history of Blacks in Hamtramck is that Hamtramck's postwar development is much more than an open-and-shut case of systematic racism.

***“One Big, Happy Family”***



When Hamtramck residents said that Blacks have always had a place in Hamtramck, they were speaking the truth. The Michigan State Census of 1904 shows a village population of 1,559, with 24 of these being “Negro.”<sup>193</sup> Although this was by no means an impressive percentage of the population, these numbers show that there was a Black population in Hamtramck from the very beginning. Even though they were a smaller fraction of the population, Black residents were by no means insignificant in everyday Hamtramck life. There were several Black policemen to serve the village in these years.<sup>194</sup> The first Black church was established in 1907, the existence of which attracted other Black families to the city who wished to belong to such a place of worship.<sup>195</sup>

Hamtramck’s Black residents were also politically involved in the early formative years of the city. One Black resident, Walter Thompson, was elected constable in 1920 and another, Ordine Tolliver, served on the village council just prior to incorporation.<sup>196</sup> When it came time to elect the first City Council in 1922, Blacks and Poles joined forces to form a political bloc for their mutual benefit. In the early years of Hamtramck Village and Township, other ethnic groups traditionally dominated politics, primarily Germans but also Irish and Jewish residents. Poles and Blacks banded together and Dr. James L. Henderson, a Black Hamtramckan, was elected to this first Council.<sup>197</sup> Though this bloc had largely

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<sup>193</sup> Maday, *An Historical Geography of Hamtramck Township: An Attempt at Explaining the Origins of the City of Hamtramck*, 95.

<sup>194</sup> Serafino, *West of Warsaw*, 84.

<sup>195</sup> *ibid.*, 98 <sup>195</sup> Lewandowski, *Julia's Prayer: Recollections of Hamtramck, MI a Polish-American Community*. Oral History of William Brooks, taken June 3, 1973.

<sup>196</sup> Serafino, *West of Warsaw*, 84. Kowalski, *Hamtramck: The Driven City*, 37.

<sup>197</sup> Lewandowski, *Julia's Prayer: Recollections of Hamtramck, MI a Polish-American Community*. Oral History of William Brooks. It is interesting to note that Detroit’s Black

disbanded by the 1924 election (Polish immigrants were rapidly becoming an overwhelming majority in the city while the old power holders were moving out), there were a couple of Black candidates for city council in the 1930s and a few Black constables in these early years.<sup>198</sup>

In light of this political involvement, there does seem to have been relative racial harmony in Hamtramck in the pre-World War II era. Anecdotes abound of how African American residents rented out space in their homes to Polish immigrants and how there were many Black residents who were fluent in Polish.<sup>199</sup> William Brooks recalled his experience as a Black youth in Hamtramck in an oral history, telling of a time he got in trouble with his mother for using the Polish phrase for ‘go to Hell.’<sup>200</sup> He also spoke of the great leveling effect that the Great Depression had on Hamtramck residents, saying that in 1932 at the peak of the Depression “you couldn’t tell the difference [between Blacks and whites] as far as living” because everyone was poor.

One enabling factor that allowed this perceived equality in status to exist in the city was the lack of segregation in Hamtramck for the most part, especially for this period in American history. As Hamtramck historian Greg Kowalski observed, “[Polish and Black residents] shared space at a time when most of the rest of the country was segregated. Black and white children played together and went to school together.”<sup>201</sup> Former Mayor Robert Kozaren, who held office for eighteen

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population did not experience this degree of political involvement at this time, as the first Black member of the Detroit City Council was not elected until November 1957 (William Patrick).

<sup>198</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>199</sup> *ibid.* Oral History of Iris Butler, taken in 1973.

<sup>200</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> Kowalski, *Hamtramck: The Driven City*, 36.

years (1980-1998) likewise recognized this aspect of Hamtramck's history when speaking with historian Frank Serafino:

“The blacks, and all other nationalities, shopped in the same stores, paid the same prices, and got the same services. They went to the same theaters, they drank out of the same water fountains, and ate at the same restaurants. We never had discrimination like in the South.”<sup>202</sup>

Not only did Hamtramck lack the racial tensions of the South, it did not experience the racial problems of the city that surrounds it. When Detroit erupted in riots that were primarily racial in motivation in 1943, Hamtramck residents of both races lived in peace and the city itself saw no incidents.<sup>203</sup> As we saw in Chapter 3, the same can be said (and was repeatedly said) about the race riots of 1967. Further evidence for the equal status enjoyed by Hamtramck Blacks is that “there was civil rights apathy in Hamtramck because blacks already had what others were fighting for.”<sup>204</sup> Apparently Black residents were not compelled to fight for civil rights to the degree that other African Americans who were faced with more consistent discrimination were.

There is also evidence that this equality endured into the postwar era to some extent. As was mentioned in Chapter One, World War II opened up many employment opportunities for Blacks in the auto industry. The growing integration of Dodge Main did cause some conflicts on the factory floor at first, but the increasingly powerful unions helped open up opportunities for Blacks and

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<sup>202</sup> Serafino, *West of Warsaw*, 84. This statement was made when he was mayor and should be treated with the same caution as any statement made by a politician in office, especially when defending his City's history on race relations. Additionally, as will be mentioned, there actually were a couple instances of segregation. That being said, this statement does appear to be historically consistent for the most part.

<sup>203</sup> Lewandowski, *Julia's Prayer: Recollections of Hamtramck, MI a Polish-American Community*. Oral History of William Brooks.

<sup>204</sup> Serafino, *West of Warsaw*, 84 .

addressed some of the issues of discrimination that arose.<sup>205</sup> When Frank Serafino published his history of Hamtramck, *West of Warsaw*, in 1983, he made the assertion that “Blacks in Hamtramck do not consider themselves discriminated against, and consider themselves true Hamtramckans.”<sup>206</sup> One lifelong Black resident who grew up in the postwar era, Ricardo Stovall, told New York Times reporter William Stevens that he had grown up with Polish friends with whom he would go to parties with, saying that Hamtramck was “one big, happy family” and that it had always been that way.<sup>207</sup> The claim that Hamtramck had a strong record of racial harmony, advanced by many white residents in the wake of Judge Damon Keith’s decision, can be substantiated by the historical record and the testimony of Black residents alike.

### ***Towards an Impasse: Discrimination and Segregation in Hamtramck***

To end the assessment of Hamtramck’s record on racial equality there would be to ignore the significant evidence that there was real and overt racial discrimination that existed before the War but accelerated thereafter.<sup>208</sup> In a sight straight out of the Jim Crow South, there were bars in Hamtramck located across from the Dodge Main factory that did not serve Blacks up through the 1940s, when the unions intervened on behalf of Black workers.<sup>209</sup> Similarly, “segregation persisted at the restaurant counter of at least one store on Joseph Campau” into the

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<sup>205</sup> Lewandowski, *Julia's Prayer: Recollections of Hamtramck, MI a Polish-American Community*. Oral History of William Brooks. For more on the increased racial tensions at Dodge Main in the postwar era, see Frank Serafino’s *West of Warsaw* at page 115.

<sup>206</sup> Serafino, *West of Warsaw*, 85.

<sup>207</sup> William Stevens, “Hamtramck Strives to Retain Its Polish Character.” *The New York Times*, October 6, 1974.

<sup>208</sup> To be fair, no published work on Hamtramck history makes the claim that Hamtramck was free from discrimination and acquits them of such charges.

<sup>209</sup> *ibid.*, 115.

1960s.<sup>210</sup> It seems that when Mayor Kozaren asserted that Hamtramck “never had discrimination like in the South” he was not being entirely historically accurate.

This type of specific, formalized segregation was not the only type of segregation seen in Hamtramck throughout its history. A more general form of *de facto* segregation developed in the housing patterns of Hamtramck in the postwar era, becoming entrenched by the 1960s. Using 1950 census information, University of Michigan sociologist Arthur Evans Wood observed that in Hamtramck “the percentages of Poles and Negroes are in inverse relation, clearly indicating a pattern of segregation in this Polish community.”<sup>211</sup> Figure 4.1 shows distribution of Hamtramck’s nonwhite population in 1967. The city is broken up into ten sections, listing the population percentages of nonwhites in each area. The ‘Study Areas’ are taken from a 1967 analysis of the housing characteristics contracted by the City of Hamtramck as a step towards developing a comprehensive urban renewal plan for the city. The individual areas were based primarily on census tracts established for the 1960 census, but were adjusted to account for “changes...in the physical character of the City” that occurred after the tracts were set up.<sup>212</sup> While the figures in the report are given in terms of ‘nonwhite’ population, it is worth noting that in 1960 those persons classified as ‘White’ or ‘Negro’ accounted for all but 30 of the 34,137 total residents. In 1970, there were 135 persons not

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<sup>210</sup> Kowalski, *Hamtramck: The Driven City*, 37.

<sup>211</sup> Arthur Evans Wood, *Hamtramck, Then and Now; a Sociological Study of a Polish-American Community* (New York,: Bookman Associates, 1955), 22.

<sup>212</sup> City Planning Associates, *Hamtramck, Michigan, City in Transition: Preliminary Report[s]*, 44.

Figure 4.1 – Distribution of Nonwhite Residents in Hamtramck in 1967

| Study Area # | Area in Acres | Population | Percent Nonwhite |
|--------------|---------------|------------|------------------|
| 1            | 93.47         | 1,854      | 48%              |
| 2            | 143.51        | 5,155      | -- *             |
| 3            | 141.25        | 3,697      | 3%               |
| 4            | 166.16        | 2,782      | 31%              |
| 5            | 128.70        | 4,620      | 6%               |
| 6            | 197.70        | 4,836      | 6%               |
| 7            | 152.62        | 4,228      | 6%               |
| 8            | 58.12         | 2,476      | 8%               |
| 9            | 134.41        | 1,853      | 19%              |
| 10           | 108.00        | --         | --**             |

Source: City Planning Associates "Hamtramck, Michigan, City in Transition, 1967.

\*According to the report, "there is no significant nonwhite population" in this area.

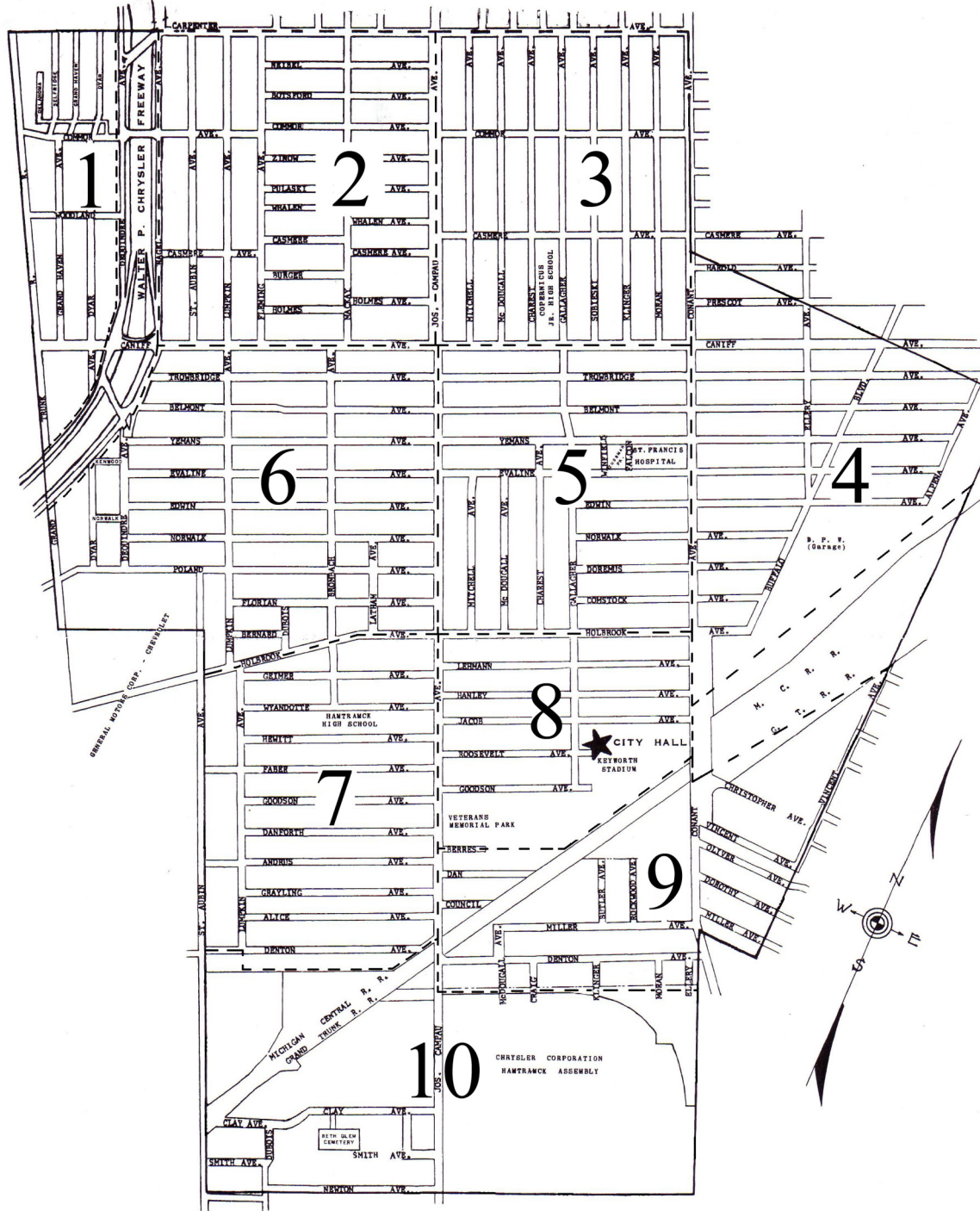
\*\*Area 10 is an industrial area, including the Dodge Main factory at the southern edge of the city.

classified as 'White' or 'Negro.'<sup>213</sup> In other words, the number of nonwhite, non-Black residents was negligible.

As the population figures show, though the overall nonwhite population of Hamtramck in 1967 comprised 10% of the total population, it was not spread out evenly across the city. In fact, 2/3 of the total acreage with residential areas had a nonwhite population percentage lower than this city-wide average. Not only that, but 54% of the city's black population lived in Study Areas 1 and 4, which combine to make up only 21.3% of the city's residential acreage. Also worth noting is the

<sup>213</sup> United States Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population*.

Figure 4.2 – Hamtramck ‘Study Area’ Boundaries<sup>214</sup>



**CITY OF HAMTRAMCK MICHIGAN**

COURTESY OF HAMTRAMCK BOARD OF COMMERCE

C.5

<sup>214</sup> Original map of Hamtramck from the collection at the Library of Michigan in Lansing, Michigan. Labels and borders based on Study Area boundaries in *Hamtramck, Michigan, City in Transition: Preliminary Report*.

relative geographic location of these areas of increased Black population, represented in Figure 4.2. Study Area 1 is the area of land to the extreme Northwest of the city that is separated from the rest of Hamtramck by the Chrysler Expressway (I-75). Study Area 4 is the extreme East flank of the city. Not only was the Black population concentrated in certain areas, these areas were on the outskirts of Hamtramck.

There are a number of possible explanations for these statistics and not all of them imply racial discrimination. For instance, there could be numerous economic and social factors affecting the housing options of residents. There was a federal housing project constructed in the 1940s, the Colonel Hamtramck Homes, built in Study Area 1. It is also known that there was a tremendously low vacancy rate in the city in the postwar years. Since the population of the city started out as predominantly Polish immigrants, the pace of racial change in the city would only be able to go as fast as vacancy rates permitted. It should be remembered, however, that in his decision in the urban renewal lawsuit, Judge Damon Keith made multiple references to the rampant discriminatory practices in private real estate in Hamtramck. These practices likely affected the geographic dispersal of Blacks within the city. Whatever the specific combination of causes that produced this *de facto* segregation, its existence contradicts the vision of racial harmony purported by residents.

The facet of Hamtramck's history that creates the most incongruence between the rhetoric of equality and actual experience is the urban renewal lawsuit discussed at the end of Chapter One. At the most basic level, this lawsuit was about



a group of Black Hamtramckans charging that they had been discriminated against by the city. When Judge Keith found in their favor, it directly undermined the idea of racial harmony in Hamtramck. The fact that residents felt strongly enough to bring a civil action against the city is a sign that not all residents were ready to proclaim the virtue of Hamtramck and its racial history. The evidence presented at trial clearly indicated racially discriminatory practices in the implementation of the Wyandotte renewal program. For example, the houses of Black residents were demolished before those of the White residents despite no difference in physical condition. It is this sort of occurrence that creates doubt about the assertions of racial harmony.<sup>215</sup>

Hamtramck's urban renewal lawsuit conviction in the 1960s was not the first time the city was reprimanded by a federal judge for racial discrimination. In 1942 the city began construction on a housing project in the Northwest corner of the city with the help of the federal government (the above-mentioned Colonel Hamtramck Homes).<sup>216</sup> A federal suit was filed alleging that unfair practices were being used to deny African Americans access to these newly constructed residences. In a somewhat contemporary account of the circumstances surrounding this action, Arthur Wood describes the sentiments of White Hamtramck residents at the time.<sup>217</sup> Wood reports that it was "well known [among politicians] that the Poles

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<sup>215</sup> Some qualifications are needed regarding these last points. The actions of officials directing urban renewal do not directly reflect the state of race relations on the individual level. However, that elected officials would not see these actions as inappropriate might suggest that they felt they had the tacit approval of residents. One could go on speculating about to what extent urban renewal discrimination reflected private sentiments, but the broader point concerns the existence of the discrimination.

<sup>216</sup> Kowalski, *Hamtramck: The Driven City*, 90.

<sup>217</sup> Wood's book was published in 1955 and uses the testimony of residents in support of many of his claims.

themselves were vigorously opposing Negro occupancy” of the housing project.<sup>218</sup>

He then goes on to add that not only were residents opposing integration in the housing project, but additionally the local Catholic priests

[were] not inclined to admit Negro children into the parochial schools. Indeed, one alleged reason given for the phenomenal growth of these schools in Hamtramck in recent years is that Polish parents have preferred them, as then their children would not have to mingle with Negro pupils.<sup>219</sup>

Appreciating that this allegation is unsubstantiated (both in Wood’s book and in any of the extant literature), its appearance in a contemporary sociological book makes for an interesting possibility.<sup>220</sup> After over ten years of litigation in the Colonel Hamtramck Homes lawsuit, “the courts ruled that the housing project had to be integrated.”<sup>221</sup>

Although the evidence for discrimination in Hamtramck seriously calls into question the idea of racial harmony throughout the city’s history, they do not invalidate the examples racial equality. What does seem to be clear, however, is that the centrality of Blacks in Hamtramck’s history tends to be overstated by those who

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<sup>218</sup> Wood, *Hamtramck, Then and Now; a Sociological Study of a Polish-American Community*, 99.

<sup>219</sup> *ibid.*, 238-239. There are some criticisms of Wood’s work that should be noted. It may have been observed that this source was excluded from consideration for most of this thesis, and this was by design. Though it is one of a very small body of secondary literature focused on Hamtramck, it is not very useful for historical purposes. First, the work as a whole lacks any consistent citation of sources. Second, it was written in the 1950s, only 30 years into the city’s history, so it provides little information on postwar Hamtramck (the primary focus of this work). Third, it is a sociological work and focuses mainly on aspects of how the city’s foundation as an immigrant community has affected things such as how the city was governed in the early years. That being said, there is no reason to doubt the academic integrity of this author when it comes to the reporting of these details. Paul Wrobel offers a thorough criticism of the work in his book *Our Way* (pp.21-23), concluding that “Wood’s picture of Hamtramck life is sociologically questionable and incredibly ethnocentric.”

<sup>220</sup> One other possible explanation for an increase in parochial school attendance in postwar Hamtramck is the increasing priority given to cultural preservation among Polish residents. However, whether there is a difference between enrollment in Catholic schools to preserve traditional culture and doing so to avoid racial integration remains to be seen. For an in-depth discussion on the importance of the Catholic church and its schools to the residents of an urban Polish ethnic community, see Paul Wrobel’s *Our Way*, 1979.

<sup>221</sup> Kowalski, *Hamtramck: The Driven City*, 90.

tout the city's legacy of integration throughout its existence. In his discussion of the history of Blacks in Hamtramck, Frank Serafino observes that "in some ways blacks were excluded from some facets of Hamtramck life as the Poles grew in number, especially in political circles."<sup>222</sup> He supports this by noting that residents tended to vote for people with Polish surnames and there were very few Black political leaders after the early years described above. Additionally, the housing patterns that clearly indicate segregation within the city imply that the number of Black residents fully integrated into city life is much lower than the total number of Blacks in the city as a whole. While the city might have a population composed of 10% Black residents in 1967, the proportion of this population not relegated to the outlying areas is much lower. Though this pattern does not speak to the sentiments or actions of individual community members, it does reflect the state of integration in Hamtramck.

Appreciating that Hamtramck's Black population was not as integrated as citizens were wont to admit leads to a broader generalization: the significance of Black residents in Hamtramck's development was likewise overstated. Take, for example, the way Hamtramck historian Greg Kowalski covers the issue of influential Black Hamtramckans. He digresses from a discussion of the first city council, which included a Black resident, to address in two paragraphs the involvement of Hamtramck's Black population over its history. The first paragraph is about the early presence of Black residents and the tradition of racial equality in the city. The second paragraph lists some of the noteworthy Black Hamtramckans. He lists four residents including a longtime nurse and community servant, a city

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<sup>222</sup> Serafino, *West of Warsaw*, 84.

employee union organizer, a radio station founder, and a member of the historical commission.<sup>223</sup> That the significance of Black residents can be sufficiently addressed through four residents in relatively humble positions speaks to the secondary role of Black residents in Hamtramck's history.

This is not to imply that there were not important Black Hamtramckans in the city's history. To be sure, there were undoubtedly very significant community members who served the city in important ways, as Kowalski alludes to. Additionally, it is apparent that this paragraph was not intended to exhaust this topic. However, the reality is that this limited coverage and the popularity of anecdotes such as the ones about Blacks fluent in Polish indicate that this group of fully integrated Black Hamtramckans was an exclusive group, people worth remembering for being unique rather than being normal.

The discussion of the history of Blacks in Hamtramck thus seems to lead inexorably to an impasse. On the one hand there is the large body of evidence for the traditional involvement of Black Hamtramckans and for general racial harmony in the city. On the other hand, there is the undeniable and often times blatant examples of discrimination as well as the argument to be made for the decreased importance of Blacks in Hamtramck's overall history. This conflict is not merely the product of the historical analysis of a third party. The statements made by William Brooks in his oral history illustrate how these two aspects of Hamtramck's racial history coexisted in the minds of Hamtramck residents themselves. At one point he compares Hamtramck's removal of its Black residents to the country's treatment of the American Indians and minutes later he makes the statement that

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<sup>223</sup> Kowalski, *Hamtramck: The Driven City*, 36.

“there’s no better race relations, with all our problems...than here in Hamtramck.”<sup>224</sup> In the narrative of Hamtramck’s racial history as it stands here, these two statements are confusing and seemingly irreconcilable. The reason for this is that the narrative that has been related thus far is incomplete.

***Expanding the Narrative: Hamtramck’s Community Identity and the ‘Outsider’***

There is clearly something further to consider in the narrative of the racial history of Hamtramck. Not surprisingly, this remaining factor is a part of the city’s community identity and a vestige of the community’s roots as an ethnic enclave. Frank Serafino succinctly described this aspect of race relations in Hamtramck:

To understand the Hamtramck attitude toward blacks, one must understand a basic premise: there are two kinds of blacks, Hamtramck blacks and Detroit blacks. This is a reinforcement of the “outsider” concept, and the blacks in Hamtramck are accepted in the community and have adopted the city with a fervor equal to the Poles.<sup>225</sup>

In chapter two, we saw that an aversion to outsiders was a common long term trend in Polish ethnic communities. In chapter three, we saw clear evidence for a strong community identity in Hamtramck with an emphasis on the distinction between Hamtramck residents and outsiders. Now the concept of a community identity becomes a useful tool in understanding the state of race relations in postwar Hamtramck.

When applied to the history of Blacks in Hamtramck, the ‘outsider distinction’ aspect of Hamtramck’s community identity helps alleviate some of the contradictions encountered above. Those African Americans that grow up in the

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<sup>224</sup> Lewandowski, *Julia's Prayer: Recollections of Hamtramck, MI a Polish-American Community*. Oral history of William Brooks. Even appreciating the fact that this is a relative statement, it is hard to explain how someone who thought Hamtramck treated its Black population like Indians could honestly think that their city was relatively better on race relations than everywhere else.

<sup>225</sup> Serafino, *West of Warsaw*, 83.

city, that embrace the community, are the Hamtramck Blacks. To put it in the terms that Father Joseph Kubik used (see Chapter Three), these were hard-working people with a long term commitment to the city. These are the people like William Brooks and Ricardo Stovall, the Black Hamtramckans that espoused the racial harmony of the city in the postwar era. As the Serafino quote noted, ‘Hamtramck Blacks’ were fully accepted into the city, meaning they were viewed as members of the community. In light of these circumstances, it is not surprising that there were no disturbances in Hamtramck during the 1943 and 1967 Detroit riots. It would appear that for all of those considered to be a part of the community, Hamtramck really was, as Ricardo Stovall put it, ‘one big, happy family.’

What about those who were not considered to be a part of the community – the outsiders? Some of the more significant instances of discrimination in Hamtramck’s history can be better understood in the context of the outsider distinction. The housing lawsuit over the Colonel Hamtramck Homes in the early 1940s was as an attempt by Hamtramck residents to keep outsider (in other words, Detroit) Blacks from occupying the newly constructed housing. Even the most blatant example of discrimination, the actions of city officials surrounding the urban renewal lawsuit, has elements of this outsider distinction in it. The disparaging remarks that the urban renewal director made regarding how the renewal programs should be used to keep ‘Mississippians’ out of Hamtramck (see Chapter One) makes reference to potential Black residents as outsiders.<sup>226</sup> This is not to say that

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<sup>226</sup> Another potential way the outsider distinction applies to urban renewal projects in Hamtramck is that they ended up displacing a large number of Black residents who were living in substandard housing on the periphery of the city. It is possible that these residents were themselves viewed as outsiders, part of the influx of southern African Americans into Northern cities such as Detroit

this excuses the actions of the people responsible for discriminatory behavior. The point is that there are indications that this distinction is partly responsible for these specific events in Hamtramck's racial history.

One additional observation to be made about Hamtramck's community identity is that the legacy of racial harmony seems to have been deeply entwined in it. One consistent feature that was observed in the reactions of Hamtramckans to Judge Damon Keith's decision and in the oral histories taken in 1973 is the idea that there had always been racial unity in Hamtramck. The regularity of this affirmation is such that it seems to have been part of the community identity itself; when Hamtramckans thought about race relations in their city, this is the general consensus they arrive at. Bearing in mind the fact that a construct such as community identity operates on a subconscious level, it is feasible that it could effect the perceptions of residents. This helps explain some of the disparities between the ruling of Judge Damon Keith and the reactions of Hamtramckans. Residents could look at clear evidence of discrimination in Hamtramck, like the housing lawsuit, see the same undeniable (and not denied by the city) evidence of prejudice and discrimination, but still hold fast to their assertion that there has been nothing but racial harmony in the city.

Assessing the existence of a distinction between 'Hamtramck' and 'outsider' Blacks in Hamtramck's postwar history is a difficult task, just as identifying the community identity was. In support of the concept there is Frank

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during the twentieth century. As Hamtramckans witnessed this trend take hold in Detroit, they may have perceived the same thing happening in their city. Indeed, Frank Serafino observes that "many of Hamtramck's blacks came from Georgia and Alabama in search of better wages and working conditions." (p. 84) If many of Hamtramck's Black residents did come from the south, it is no stretch of the imagination that they might be seen as 'outsiders.'

Serafino's research done in the 1980s. While his sources for the formulation quoted above are unidentified, it is likely the result of personal interviews.<sup>227</sup> When describing the 'outsider distinction,' Serafino mentions the unity in the city, contrasting that

When discussions turn to Detroit blacks, however, ideas change: charges of prejudice abound. Of those who remember the Detroit riots, many blame the decline of the city of Detroit and the preponderance of slum areas to the gradual increase in Detroit's black population.<sup>228</sup>

He goes on to note that Hamtramckans also blame Detroit's increased Black population for making the city unsafe and lament the deterioration of Belle Isle, traditionally a favorite weekend destination of residents.<sup>229</sup>

In addition to Serafino's analysis, an aversion to outsiders has been shown to be a component of Hamtramck's community identity in the postwar years. The *Hamtramck Citizen's* coverage of the 1967 Detroit riots is indirect evidence for an 'outsider distinction' in these years. The riots were an event with substantial racial overtones, and the newspaper conveys a community understanding of the event as an uprising of a group of destructive outsiders who had to be fended off through the virtue of residents and the police alike. The paper in several places thanks residents 'of all races' for maintaining order. By incorporating Hamtramck's Black population into the group of those who were peaceful and establishing a group of unruly outsiders as the perpetrators of the riots, the *Citizen* seems to reflect this distinction between Hamtramck and outsider Blacks.

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<sup>227</sup> This supposition is based on the format of Serafino's book as a whole, which often relies on the direct testimony of residents and city officials.

<sup>228</sup> *ibid.*, 83.

<sup>229</sup> *ibid.*, 83.



Another way of looking at race relations in postwar Hamtramck in terms of community identity is to consider how the aspects of the identity interact. The two aspects of relevance here are the ‘aversion to outsiders’ and the working class facet of the identity. Sociologist Michael Novak has a theory that most Catholics perceive three categories of Blacks. The first is the group of successful and famous blacks that they see in politics and the media. The second is the group of middle and working class Blacks that they see everyday and interact with in school and at work. The third is the ‘underclass,’ the ones mired in poverty and joblessness, dependent on either crime or welfare for their subsistence.<sup>230</sup> It is this second group that fits the category of ‘Hamtramck Black,’ the hard workers with a commitment to the community. The Blacks that were perceived as being outsiders, as being Detroit Blacks, were the ones fitting the definition of the third group. Public housing was opposed because it would bring this ‘underclass’ of outsiders into the city, and this ran contrary to the community identity. In this view the distinguishing factor between outsiders and potential Hamtramckans is class and status, not race.

### **Starting the Conversation**

What is the difference between racial discrimination and this ‘outsider distinction?’ Undeniably, the distinction between ‘Hamtramck Blacks’ and ‘outsider Blacks’ was racist in some aspects. Given the relative populations of Blacks in Detroit and Hamtramck, African Americans were probably more frequently associated with ‘outsiders.’ About nine out of ten Hamtramckans were

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<sup>230</sup> Michael Novak, “Black and White in Catholic Eyes,” *The New York Times Magazine*, November 16, 1975, p. 114. Quoted in Paul Wrobel, *Our Way: Family, Parish, and Neighborhood in a Polish-American Community*, 139.

white throughout the city's history. As the Black populations of Detroit and Highland Park began rising in the postwar era, their presence would have been more noticeable in Hamtramck. William Brooks commented on this situation in his oral history, saying that the increased number of Blacks on Joseph Campau (the city's central shopping district) made Hamtramck seem to be changing more than it really was.<sup>231</sup> Brooks' tone and word choice suggest that the influx of outsiders into the city was a concern of Hamtramckans.

It is clear then that the outsider distinction was a generalization about a group of people based upon the color of their skin: racism defined. However, the previous discussions indicate that the distinction operated differently than typical 'racism.' Thus, the discussion about the history of race in Hamtramck illustrates the problem created when we pigeon-hole ourselves with arguments about racism. This approach was what brought the discussion of the legacy of Hamtramck Blacks to the seeming impasse above. Asking whether Hamtramck's postwar development was driven by discrimination necessitates a 'yes-or-no' answer when it is now clear that the answer is 'yes-and-no.' When adopting the language of 'racism,' finding a way to describe situations like Hamtramck's unique development becomes incredibly difficult. There are a number of complicating factors that should be considered when attempting to understand the dynamic influences that shaped the fabric of the postwar Hamtramck. Generally speaking, this thesis has made appeals toward appreciating Hamtramck's unique community identity.

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<sup>231</sup> Lewandowski, *Julia's Prayer: Recollections of Hamtramck, MI a Polish-American Community*.

In arguing for the assessment of Hamtramck's postwar development in more complex terms, it is important to not lose sight of the city's history of discrimination. While it is tempting to emphasize such things as the city's legacy of relative racial harmony and explain negative events through subtle processes like the 'outsider distinction,' the facts must be faced. The outsider distinction can only go so far towards explaining the trends experienced in the city. For example, it is not applicable to such things as the segregated businesses that existed well into the postwar era. The goal of this thesis has been to start the conversation with the premise that Hamtramck had racist elements that shaped its postwar history. Accepting this premise allows us to move towards a nuanced understanding of the other factors that helped produce this unique city.

One thing that can be observed in Detroit's postwar history is that racism and discrimination alone are not enough to preserve a community. Thomas Sugrue's book *The Origins of the Urban Crisis* is a critical assessment of the postwar development of Detroit with significant attention paid to the housing trends in the city.<sup>232</sup> One of the central approaches Sugrue takes to this issue is to discuss the various ways white neighborhoods sought to prevent racial integration.<sup>233</sup> These communities implemented a wide variety of strategies to prevent the expansion of Detroit's Black population into their boundaries. One such strategy that was

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<sup>232</sup> Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. The emphasis on housing is only one aspect of a much more complex argument that ties in other aspects of economic, social, and historical elements. For anyone studying postwar Detroit or postwar urban history in general, this book is essential.

<sup>233</sup> The comparison between Hamtramck and individual neighborhoods in Detroit operates on the assumption that they can both be considered 'communities' as defined in Chapter Two. In other words, they are geographically local bodies within which residents develop bonds of familiarity and attachment to each other and the community itself.

prevalent by the 1940s was the restrictive covenant.<sup>234</sup> Restrictive covenants were clauses incorporated into deeds to maintain the desirable characteristics of a neighborhood by restricting occupancy of minorities and limiting actions that were thought to encourage racial integration (such as constructing multiple family homes).<sup>235</sup> When restrictive covenants were struck down as unconstitutional by the Supreme Court in 1948, white Detroiters began joining homeowners associations in larger numbers. These associations worked to mobilize grassroots efforts against integration.<sup>236</sup> Often times these actions involved protesting realtors who might sell to a Black family, but acts of vandalism, harassment, and intimidation were not uncommon.<sup>237</sup>

What would drive these presumably otherwise ‘good people’ to such outwardly unfair actions? For one thing, a racist fear of integration was at work, but what about a community was worth defending against this change? The behavior exhibited in defense of these neighborhoods speaks to a broader theme: the importance of the familiar, of a community, to individuals. Sociologist Paul Wrobel defined the nature of neighborhoods in setting up his study of a Polish-American neighborhood in Detroit:

It is now possible to identify a section of the city that becomes more than just a series of residential streets with rows of houses; a large segment of the network of nuclear families is localized in a defined geographic area. That area is what I shall call a *neighborhood*.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>234</sup> *ibid.*, 43-47.

<sup>235</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>236</sup> *ibid.*, 221.

<sup>237</sup> *ibid.*, 231-233.

<sup>238</sup> Wrobel, *Our Way: Family, Parish, and Neighborhood in a Polish-American Community*, 39. Emphasis in original. Wrobel’s definition of ‘neighborhood’ generally parallels my use of ‘community.’

This neighborhood would have been the primary area where residents experienced life; where they raised their children, bought their groceries, and returned every evening after work. Sugrue also identified this aspect of life in Detroit, observing how neighborhood life was very intimate due to the close proximity of houses and the common religious affiliations.<sup>239</sup> One would see their neighbors every day; they would become part of the intimacy of daily life. Due to the nature of neighborhood life, the process of defending these neighborhoods became a family affair. White women would picket outside houses that were sold to Blacks, bringing their young children along with them.<sup>240</sup> For many onlookers this was a stirring image of community solidarity, showing that the prospect of integration was perceived as a threat to the family and home.<sup>241</sup> These residents, especially those that had returned from World War II, felt as though they had fought to defend their way of life represented by their traditionally white neighborhoods.<sup>242</sup> While these sentiments might seem irrational and unfounded, they were real concerns of these residents who were attached to the familiarities in their lives.

An additional motivating factor for these families to defend their neighborhoods was the economic investment embodied by their homes. Defended neighborhoods in Detroit were largely working class, many of which had a strong ethnic amalgam and were defined by the boundaries of a Catholic parish.<sup>243</sup> Homeowners, especially working class homeowners, worked their lives to purchase and maintain their homes, and for them preserving this familiarity was a game for

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<sup>239</sup> Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, 213.

<sup>240</sup> *ibid.*, 250.

<sup>241</sup> *ibid.*, 250.

<sup>242</sup> *ibid.*, 219.

<sup>243</sup> *ibid.*, 241.

which the stakes could not have been higher. The slums of the inner city were among the worst fears for these homeowners and many saw this as the inevitable consequence of integration.<sup>244</sup> They justified their position with an appeal to their right not to have their life's investment depreciate in value upon integration. Since most could not easily afford to move to the suburbs, they thought that their only alternative was to stay and defend their communities.<sup>245</sup> When a block was "broken" and integration seemed to be an inevitability for that neighborhood, most families that could finance a move to the suburbs sought to sell while they could still get a decent price for their home.<sup>246</sup> The familiarity they desired was deemed a lost cause and would have to be sought elsewhere, out in the suburbs.

These communities lacked what Hamtramck had: a bond stronger than just a neighborhood familiarity or an economic investment. Hamtramck was at its roots a Polish ethnic community, and this community had a much broader and deeper significance to its residents. Hamtramckans were attached to their community in ways unique to the Polish immigrant experience. A Polish immigrant community provides many things for its residents, the various necessities for adjusting to life in a new country. Many Hamtramckans came to rely on the relationships and institutions of the city in order to navigate their world. Residents embraced the community identity, recognizing the unique aspects of living in Hamtramck. The result of this community identity founded in the Polish immigrant tradition was a community stability unparalleled in most of the Detroit area.

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<sup>244</sup> *ibid.*, 216-7.

<sup>245</sup> *ibid.*, 233.

<sup>246</sup> *ibid.*, 257.

Before continuing this discussion of Hamtramck's stability and identity, it is important to return to the hypothesis that Hamtramck's existence as an independently incorporated city made it a more stable entity. While this likely played a role in facilitating Hamtramck's stability, it should not be seen as a necessary or sufficient quality for community stability. Highland Park was itself a separately incorporated city, one that was even more predominantly white than Hamtramck entering the postwar era (8.4% Black in 1950 compared to Hamtramck's 10.9%<sup>247</sup>). According to William Brooks, Highland Park used to be the segregation center of the Detroit area and Blacks were afraid to go there.<sup>248</sup> However, by 1970 Highland Park went from 8.4% to 55.3% Black, an incredible turnover in population for a mere twenty year period.<sup>249</sup> Despite the alleged racist tendencies of the city, its residents partook in the same White Flight as Detroit's white neighborhoods.<sup>250</sup> A city changing this rapidly would remove the familiar aspects of community, destabilizing the ties that bind. Highland Park was more like the communities in Detroit (as exemplified in Sugrue's book) than Hamtramck in this respect.

Further testament that the stability provided by the Polish immigrant history is the community described in Paul Wrobel's *Our Way*. The community described in this ethnography is a Polish-American parish north of Hamtramck in Detroit.<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> United States Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population*.

<sup>248</sup> Lewandowski, *Julia's Prayer: Recollections of Hamtramck, MI a Polish-American Community*. Oral history of William Brooks.

<sup>249</sup> United States Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population*.

<sup>250</sup> Detroit went from 16.2% to 43.7% Black in the same period.

<sup>251</sup> The parish was given the alias 'St. Thaddeus' to protect the identities of those quoted in the study.

In 1970, this ethnic community had a Black population of 1.6%.<sup>252</sup> This neighborhood had defied the racial trends going on around it, just as Hamtramck had. The forces of racial change were nearby, as the surrounding neighborhoods to the north and south went from 10 to 20% and from 5.9 to 23.1% Black between 1960 and 1970.<sup>253</sup> This community had the same aversion to integration that the neighborhoods depicted in Sugrue's book had, but there was a deeper motivation for Wrobel's community. Residents in Wrobel's community were against large-scale integration because they desired to live in a Polish neighborhood where their culture could be preserved by the Catholic parish and its parochial school.<sup>254</sup> There were also the same economic considerations at stake for this community, but it was the ethnic component that truly united these neighbors.

The fundamental familiarity of the ethnic community could not be sought in the suburbs or anywhere else for that matter. These urban enclaves were the unique product of early twentieth century urbanization. They formed at a time when a substantial number of Polish immigrants were flowing into the country. The compact nature of their construction made for an even more intimate community experience. Postwar suburban life offered no sufficient alternative for the urban Polish enclave. The only choice for their residents was to stay put, united in the knowledge that there was something irreplaceable in the community they inhabited.

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<sup>252</sup> Wrobel, *Our Way: Family, Parish, and Neighborhood in a Polish-American Community*, 136.

<sup>253</sup> *ibid.*, 136.

<sup>254</sup> *ibid.*, 152.



It is for these reasons that Wrobel observes that only the family is more important to Polish Americans than their community.<sup>255</sup>

There is some objective evidence that indicates that Hamtramck did have an unusually stable urban community other than the fact that there was no White Flight. As Figure 4.3 illustrates, Hamtramck's population was getting consistently older throughout the postwar era. The percentage of the population under twenty years of age remained constant at about 30% from 1950 to 1970, but the most dramatic changes are observed in the young adult (ages 20-39) and the senior citizen (60 and older) categories. The portion of the city comprised of senior citizens doubled from 10 to 20% over this period, while the population of young adults dropped from 38 to 18%. These trends suggest that the Polish homeowners from the prewar era remained in the city while their children moved out after reaching maturity. That the Polish homeowners stayed speaks more to a stable community than their children's departure does to its instability. As observed in the discussion of the urban renewal lawsuit, the vacancy rates in the city around this time were around 3%. Upcoming generations simply did not have many options for relocating in the city, and those that did found themselves living in an aging community. In the oral history of Hamtramck resident Robert Braman, interviewer Thomas Lewandowski shares the reason he moved out of Hamtramck. Lewandowski had grown up in Hamtramck and his father was mayor in the

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<sup>255</sup> *ibid.*, 140. The full quote is: "It is difficult to quantify the meaning of community in the social and psychological sense of the word, but to Polish Americans, only the family is of greater importance. This is why members of that ethnic group react as strongly as they do to a perceived threat from outsiders."

**Figure 4.3 - Age of Postwar Hamtramckans by Percentage of Population**

| Census Year/Age Group | # of Residents | % of Total Population |
|-----------------------|----------------|-----------------------|
| 1950                  | 43,355         |                       |
| Under 20 years        | 12,495         | 28.8%                 |
| 20 – 39 years         | 16,742         | 38.6%                 |
| 40 – 59 years         | 9,523          | 22%                   |
| 60 and older          | 4,577          | 10.6%                 |
| 1960                  | 34,137         |                       |
| Under 20 years        | 10,983         | 32.2%                 |
| 20 – 39 years         | 8,188          | 24%                   |
| 40 – 59 years         | 8,700          | 25.5%                 |
| 60 and older          | 6,266          | 18.4%                 |
| 1970                  | 27,245         |                       |
| Under 20 years        | 7,789          | 28.6%                 |
| 20 – 34 years*        | 4,913          | 18%                   |
| 35 – 59 years         | 8,869          | 32.5%                 |
| 60 and older          | 5,675          | 20.8%                 |

\*The 1970 census divided its age groups differently, necessitating this category alteration

1930s.<sup>256</sup> When he decided to move out of Hamtramck, Lewandowski’s father accused him of leaving “because the Blacks are moving in.”<sup>257</sup> Lewandowski denied this, saying that the people in Hamtramck were too old and he wanted to live by people his own age with similar interests.<sup>258</sup> This state of affairs would have drastic implications for Hamtramck’s future.

<sup>256</sup> Serafino, *West of Warsaw*, 53.

<sup>257</sup> Lewandowski, *Julia's Prayer: Recollections of Hamtramck, MI a Polish-American Community*. Oral history of Robert Braman.

<sup>258</sup> *ibid.*

Residents were aware of the consequences of these trends for the fate of Hamtramck. It seems that every person interviewed in 1973 for the oral history series *Julia's Prayer* who commented on Hamtramck's future mentioned the desperate need to attract young married couples to the city.<sup>259</sup> While some residents were still holding out hopes for the promises of urban renewal, others had become much more melancholic about the prospects of the city. Walter Paruk lamented that the 'young people' left because of the shortage of housing and admitted that he did not think they would be coming back. Paruk went on to cite a study that predicted that by 2000, Hamtramck would be a city of apartments or a city of warehouses, proclaiming that the days of private one-family homeownership were gone.<sup>260</sup> It would turn out that Paruk and this study were both wrong about what the future would hold for the community.

For the older generation though, Hamtramck was a true community. Neighbors had lived by each other for years and they looked out for each other. Lifelong resident Iris Butler recognized this intimacy, symbolized by a personal memory: her 80 year old neighbor bringing an umbrella out to her car during storms so she would not get wet.<sup>261</sup> The intriguing part about this affirmation of Hamtramck's community stability is that Iris Butler was one of Hamtramck's Black residents. (Recall that she was one of the Black Hamtramckans listed by Greg Kowalski as having had an impact on the community.) While it was the city's roots

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<sup>259</sup> *ibid.* For example, William Brooks, Robert Braman, Walter Gajewski, and Walter Paruk all see this as the key issue to Hamtramck's future.

<sup>260</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>261</sup> *ibid.*

as an ethnic enclave that compelled the loyalty of residents, one did not have to be Polish to contribute to the community stability.

As the figures on the aging population indicate, the same residents that helped build this community were the ones that remained through the postwar era, and this had ramifications for the postwar development. The campaign literature from 1972 discussed in Chapter Three illustrates that vestiges of the immigrant community existed well into the postwar era. Half of the fliers were printed in Polish, a tactic utilized to reach out to the Polish immigrants. For those residents that relied on Polish translations to participate in local politics, Hamtramck was likely still serving other traditional roles of an ethnic community.<sup>262</sup> The continuing importance of Hamtramck as an ethnic community would also help solidify the commitment of residents to the city's future. These Hamtramckans needed the city just as much as Hamtramck needed them to maintain the city's stable identity. It was this symbiosis that enabled Hamtramck to survive the pressures facing urban communities in postwar Detroit.

What did this stable community identity mean for race relations in postwar Hamtramck? After all, in the preceding discussion saying Hamtramck had 'community stability' is essentially the same thing as saying it did not integrate to the extent that surrounding communities did. Sociologist Milton Gordon summarized this duality as "the built-in tension between the goals of ethnic

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<sup>262</sup> In 1970, 33.8% of Hamtramck's total population was Polish foreign stock. (Foreign stock is the combination of those foreign born immigrants and their native born children.) Foreign stock of all nationalities made up an even 50% of the total population.

communality and desegregation.”<sup>263</sup> This is, however, a tension that exists for us as historical interpreters of the motivating forces of a community’s development. The conflict is created by an approach to these issues that seeks to make normative assessments of Hamtramck’s history. In doing so, the complexities of Hamtramck’s postwar existence are obscured in favor of simplistic generalizations about issues of race and discrimination. The purpose of this thesis has been to move the discussion past this tendency towards one-sided interpretations and to promote an appreciation of the complicating factors encapsulated by the broad term ‘community identity.’

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<sup>263</sup> Milton Myron Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* (New York : Oxford University Press, 253. Quoted in Wrobel, *Our Way: Family, Parish, and Neighborhood in a Polish-American Community*, 152.

## **Epilogue – The Immigrant Legacy**

Hamtramck stumbled through the 1970s, starting the decade off on the wrong foot with the urban renewal lawsuit. The city's population continued its plunge, which began in 1930 and showed no signs of abating. The energy crisis that started in 1973 had drastic ramifications for the auto industry and its older, fuel-inefficient factories and essentially condemned Dodge Main to death.

The future of Hamtramck was incredibly uncertain. Prospects grew bleak when the last car honked its way off the assembly line at Dodge Main in 1980, depriving the city of largest taxpayer. The obstacles the Polish enclave faced were much more than just black and white economics. Younger couples simply were not looking to Hamtramck as a place to start a family. The uniqueness of Hamtramck's existence seemed moribund, its fate linked to an aging population of committed residents, set to die off when they did. The city seemed destined to succumb to these external and inescapable pressures.

On the path to this expiration of 'Hamtramck' traditionally conceived, something wholly unexpected happened. From 1990 to 2000, for the first time in 60 years, Hamtramck's constant stream of exiting residents was reversed and a population increase was observed, increasing by 4,604 persons. (The population had bottomed out at 18,372 in 1990.) Considering the developments in Detroit and Highland Park and appreciating that Hamtramck's traditional Polish population was waning, it should come as no surprise that the city's demographics changed, dropping from 84% to 61% white from 1990 to 2000. Over this period, the total number of white residents decreased by 1,361 persons while the city as a whole was

growing. In other words, nearly 6,000 ‘non-whites’ moved into the city. Of these 6,000 non-white new Hamtramckans, only 895 were Black.

The influx of over 5,000 non-Black, non-white residents could not have been more unforeseen.<sup>264</sup> This third category of race, a sort of ‘other’ for the purposes of this thesis, is the same population that was dismissed from consideration from the entire preceding analysis because it was not a statistically significant demographic. Hamtramck had always had a significant number of non-Polish immigrants throughout its history, but these persons were usually from other Eastern European nations.<sup>265</sup>

Hamtramck historian Greg Kowalski described the transitioning nature of Hamtramck in 2002, saying how the traditional Polish contingent was being supplanted by the “new influx of immigrants, mainly Arabs, Bengalis, and Eastern Europeans, including Bosnians, Yugoslavians, and Albanians.”<sup>266</sup> A cursory glance at the 2000 census figures for Hamtramck shows the increasingly diverse ancestry of the city’s inhabitants. Of the residents that chose to identify their ancestry, 22.9% were Polish, 12% were Yugoslavian, 9.4% were Arab, 7% were Asian Indian, 5% were Bangladeshi, 3.2% were Ukrainian, and 15% were Black.<sup>267</sup> Hamtramck had traveled a long way from its situation in 1940 when 81% of Hamtramckans identified themselves as having Polish ancestry.

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<sup>264</sup> To be fair, some of this dramatic change can be ascribed to the refining of racial categories for the 2000 census. The 2000 census introduced a ‘Multi-Racial’ category, and 12% of Hamtramck’s population in 2000 identified themselves this way.

<sup>265</sup> Wood, *Hamtramck, then and Now; a Sociological Study of a Polish-American Community*, 20. Russia was the second biggest contributor to Hamtramck’s immigrant population.

<sup>266</sup> Kowalski, *Hamtramck: The Driven City*, 142.

<sup>267</sup> United States Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population*, 2000.

The most telling example of the changing focus of Hamtramck's ethnic identity is the adjustment made to the city's slogan. In the 1980s bumper stickers were printed as part of a publicity campaign with the phrase "Hamtramck: A Touch of Europe in America."<sup>268</sup> Visiting Hamtramck's official website today, the city is described as "A Touch of THE WORLD In America".<sup>269</sup> In twenty years Hamtramck officials no longer classified the city as a center of European immigration, but as a magnet for immigrants coming from around the globe.

The changes in Hamtramck seem to be solidifying in recent years. Kowalski observed that as of 2002, no non-Poles had been elected to the city council. The council at the time of writing consists of Robert Zwolak, Timothy Nowalkoski, Rob Cedar, Scott Klein, Shahab Ahmed, and Abdul Al-Ghazali.<sup>270</sup> The first two on that list and the mayor, Karen Majewski, have unmistakably Polish names, while the last two readily reflect the growing political power of Hamtramck's new wave.

Hamtramckans hypothesizing on the future of their city in the 1970s were correct when they foresaw the fleeting days of Polish dominance in the city. As the old guard of Hamtramck slowly faded, however, the legacy of the ethnic enclave was rejuvenated by the new nationalities that perhaps saw in Hamtramck the preexisting structures for a successful immigrant experience. After all, the Polish immigrants had spent 75 years building and maintaining the city to fulfill their various needs. The 9,432 foreign born residents that call Hamtramck home (41% of the total population) have certainly benefited from Hamtramck's immigrant

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<sup>268</sup> Serafino, *West of Warsaw*, 53.

<sup>269</sup> <http://www.hamtramck.us>, accessed March 9, 2007. Emphasis their own.

<sup>270</sup> <http://www.hamtramck.us>, accessed March 9, 2007.



tradition, opening numerous shops around the city to fulfill their specific needs.<sup>271</sup> Many of these are markets and restaurants where ethnic foods can be purchased, but some such as the Rima Sari Center serve more specialized interests, in this case traditional Indian clothing.<sup>272</sup> The Hamtramck public schools also facilitate the adjustment process. In 2002 only about 38 percent of the students in the Hamtramck public schools spoke English as their primary language.<sup>273</sup> Hamtramck children of all ethnicities help facilitate each other's adjustment to American life, bound together in their common immigrant condition as the Polish generations before them were.<sup>274</sup>

While an assessment of the current state of racial and ethnic relations of Hamtramck is outside the scope of this thesis, the intrigue created by the unforeseen nature of these population trends cannot be overstated. Undoubtedly, they are cause for serious reflection on formative potential of a community identity. The mechanism by which Hamtramck transitioned from a Polish ethnic enclave to a more generalized immigrant community is certainly worth considering. When Polish immigrants in the early twentieth century were constructing their ethnic enclave to serve their needs, whom among them could have expected that they were establishing an institution stable enough to maintain the loyalties of its Polish inhabitants but flexible enough to be adopted by future ethnic groups? After the days of Polish dominance have long passed, the immigrant legacy lives on in this ethnic enclave.

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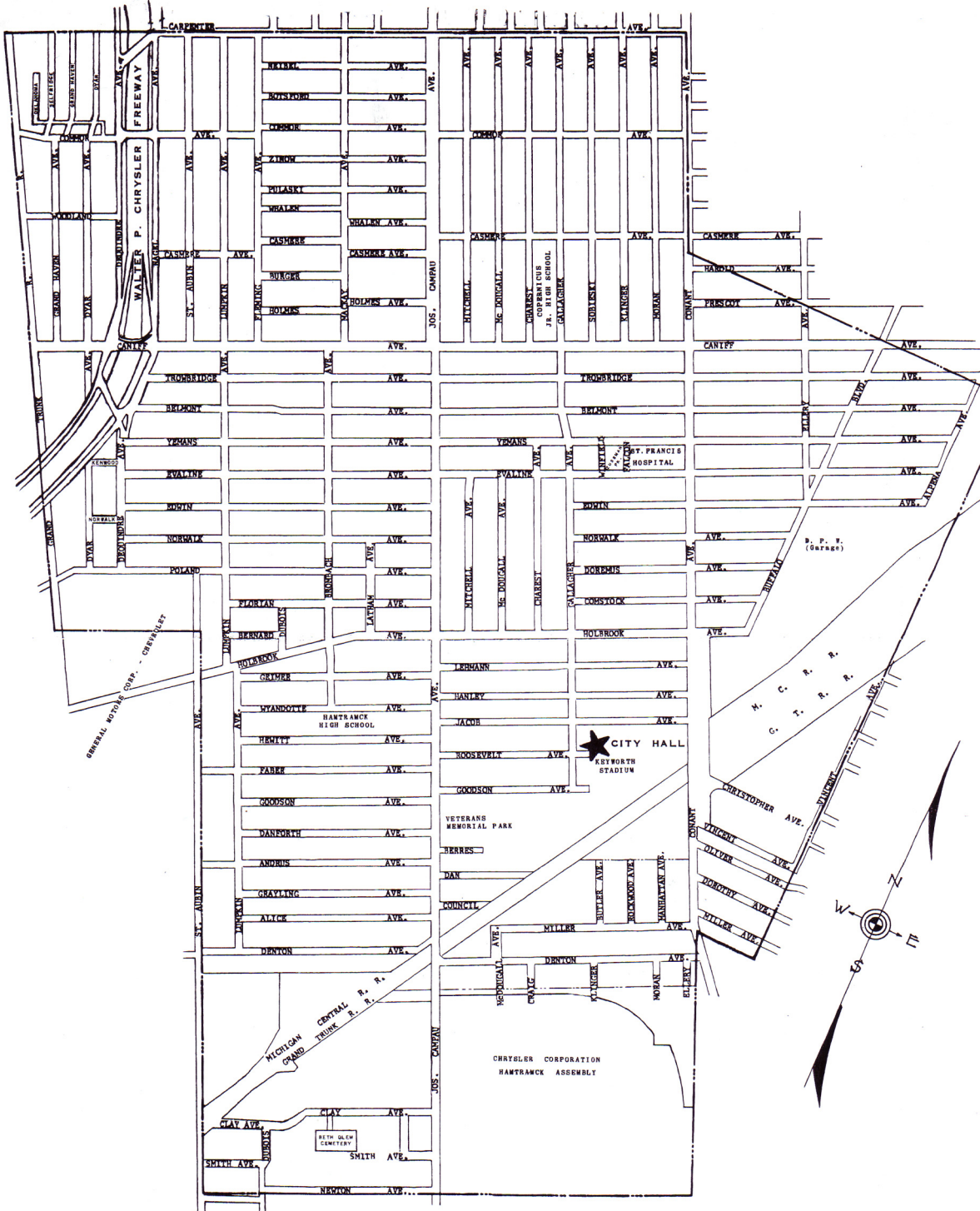
<sup>271</sup> United States Bureau of the Census, *United States Census of Population*, 2000.

<sup>272</sup> Kowalski, *Hamtramck: The Driven City*, 142.

<sup>273</sup> *ibid.*, 150.

<sup>274</sup> *ibid.*, 150.

# Appendix – Map of Hamtramck



## CITY OF HAMTRAMCK MICHIGAN

COURTESY OF HAMTRAMCK BOARD OF COMMERCE

C. 5

Source: Map Collection, Library of Michigan, Lansing, MI.

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