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ANDY SKRZECZ was born 64 years ago in a rowhouse in the 3700 block of Leo Street, the son of Polish immigrants. He and his wife, Jeanette, raised a family one block south. While Andy worked at Maryland Shipbuilding and Drydock in nearby Fairfield, Jeanette worked at florist shops in Brooklyn and Glen Burnie. (Many of their relatives worked for the Wagner family at the cannery and box factory.) After leading many community fights against the city and chemical companies, Jeanette succumbed to cancer last April at age 56. Andy, a member of the Fairfield/Wagner's Point Committee, is helping to negotiate residents' terms for relocation with city, state, and federal governments and the chemical companies.

"Just the last couple of years, the accidents have gotten really bad. We used to have people who wanted to stay, but now we have about 95 percent of them on the side of moving out. I think the Condea Vista explosion [last Oct. 13] had a lot to do with that.

"It's gotten a lot harder to live here, in a way. There used to be ballparks for the kids to play at, and even when the [sewage-treatment plant] started getting bigger, kids could swim and everything. Now, tanks cover the ball fields and kids have to cut holes in Citgo's fence just to fish at Curtis Creek. And the people have changed. It used to be we'd come up with things for kids to do. Now, people seem to just want to get rid of their kids. Still, I'll miss the neighbors—at least the ones on my block.

"I'd like to find a bungalow or something in Brooklyn Park for around $60,000, $70,000. I'm not worried about making a buck on the side. I get a lot of mail from Realtors now. If another accident were to happen, I'd get mail from lawyers."

HARVEY SMITH, 37, was born and raised on Leo Street, where he lives with his father, Herbie, who uses oxygen to get through the day. Along with his brothers, Thomas and Jimbo, Harvey Smith breeds and raises homing pigeons. The three brothers, each with a coop in his backyard, live within a block of each other. The "flyers" will always consider Wagner's Point their home—returning there from wherever they're released—thereby losing their value if the Smith brothers are forced to move.

Harvey Smith says he and his brothers have invested "about two houses' worth" of money into their 150 pigeons in a quest for "a strong breed." Unlike most of his neighbors, Smith, a construction worker, prefers to stay in Wagner's Point, where he's been known to sit drinking Bud in an alley while waiting for his birds to return from more than 500 miles away. When they appear over the roofs of Leo Street, he says, "it's the greatest feeling in the world.

"You couldn't give me $3,000 for any of my breeders—I've worked five years to get them where they are. The flyers I might have to kill or just set free, which would be a big loss. I got to find a new place to take my pigeons and all and that bothers me. It's shit I don't want to have to deal with. I might be the last person out of here—I don't want to miss old-bird [racing] season [in July].

"I think if they do move us out, me and my neighbors'll never be as sure of ourselves as we are now. To me, all [the city] thinks it's buying is bricks and mortar. But they're buying human lives. . . . They want people out, but they don't want them to know what they've been exposed to. The whole deal doesn't add up. Why would the city want this little strip to make the sludge plant bigger when they have all that other land alongside of it? It's because they don't want to tell you, 'Hey, man—you might start glowing in the dark one day!'"

erations and became FMC Corp. The newly named firm continued to make Sterno and pesticides, and added new pesticides to its roster of products. In 1958, over community objections, Texaco built tanks behind a row of houses on Leo Street. Wagner's Pointers hired Hyman Pressman, the future city comptroller, as their attorney to fight Texaco, but the tanks went up anyway. "Texaco came by and bought $1 options on all these homes," says John Regiec, Louise's husband. "After the tanks were up, they stopped by and told everyone to keep the dollar."

The company town was being consumed by companies. Residents who prided themselves on knowing many of their neighbors by their first names wondered whether they had any say in their neighborhood. "We always had tanks down here, but never right on top of us," Skrzecz says. "It was hard to feel safe." Louise Regiec recalls, "That's when we first started thinking seriously of leaving."

When the Wagner's Point story reaches the 1960s, pastoral tales of cavorting with nature or living close to the church yield to grotesque reminiscences and a sense of loss. In the community's collective memory, this was the beginning of the end—when block parties ceased and kids began finding bodies along the shore; when children were made ill by a sewage-spewing sludge pipe near where they swam; when a new group of people began moving into the area, replacing the old-line sons and daughters of immigrants who were by now moving to Brooklyn Park or Pasadena. Rose Hudgins, Louise and John Regiec's daughter, recalls neighbors rescuing a young girl who happened upon a quicksand-like sludge pit in the 1960s. "We held the top half of her above the pit because we couldn't pull her out," Hudgins recalls. "We had to wait for the fire department to get her out."

By 1964, when Catherine Prichard, owner of a neighborhood general store, wrote to to Gov. Millard Tawes, Mayor Theodore McKeldin, and City Council President Thomas D'Alesandro III urging that residents "be offered fair compensation for their homes—not just market value," Wagner's Point was hardly the proud community of the previous 66 years. After a nine-alarm blaze at Continental Oil Co. injured 32 in 1965, city officials began thinking along the same lines as Prichard. The city's urban-renewal agency recommended that Wagner's Point and nearby Fairfield be "phased out." In 1967, with only 30 families as members, St. Adalbert's Church closed; Lawrence Cardinal Shehan delivered the last mass. The church was torched by arsonists in 1968. "You could hear the bells ringing when their ropes burned," Hudgins says. "It was eerie."

With their neighborhood's best years behind it, Wagner's Pointers had to deal with further encroachments from the city and a new slew of problems from industry, which they say had appropriated the area as its own. But the community still had some fight left. Jeanette Skrzecz, Andy's wife, helped organize the East Brooklyn Civic League, and successfully petitioned the Mass Transit Administration to include Wagner's Point on the number-64 bus route. When the community's last point of access to the water was closed off in 1972 after an expansion of the Patapsco Waste Water Treatment Plant, residents picketed, to no avail.

The area's suitability as a place for people to live continued to be tested. Andy Skrzecz recalls a multialarm fire involving gasoline tanks

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in 1979 that "got our car handles so hot we couldn't even get into them and get out of here." Around the same time, Jeanette Skrzecz told reporters that 25 of the area's 350 residents had died of cancer in the preceding 10 years. DDT, DDE, and other chemicals were found in a pond on FMC Corp.'s property, leading to fears in the community and a long period of oversight of the company by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The neighborhood's viability was reflected in the values of its homes, which in 1982 sold for as little as $8,000.

By the mid-80s, Wagner's Point was in many ways a shadow of its former self. Only about 250 residents remained, and an increasing percentage of them were impoverished and had only grade-school educations. According to the 1990 census, 23.5 percent of the the Point's families were on public assistance, 64 percent of the children were living in poverty, and every resident between 16 and 19 was a high school dropout. Old-timers bristled at the newcomers for not cleaning their stoops or gutters. And the community continued to fight companies for which many of its residents worked.

The past decade has been marked by an increase in reports of chemical-company troubles and increased community vigilance. FMC Corp. has been the site of numerous accidents, some of which have injured workers. And residents claim these accidents have made them sick. The government has further staked claim to the area, naming Wagner's Point part of a federally backed Empowerment Zone. In 1995 one resident, Debbie Hindla, was named to the board of the Empower Baltimore Management Corp., the company set up to administer the Empowerment Zone grants, but she quit soon after, citing what she characterized as a surfeit of benefits for industry but none for residents. In 1996, Wagner's Pointers withdrew from an EPA-fostered group of business representatives, government officials, and residents, claiming the group favored the chemical industry.

Amid plans to expand the Patapsco Waste Water Treatment Plant, the state Department of the Environment and EPA sued the city in 1997 for the plant's excess discharges of fecal coliform, phosphorus, and chlorine. The suit cheered residents who had grown tired of the stench that emanates from the facility.

Last year brought Wagner's Point's storied first century to a head. Soon after Jeanette Skrzecz died of cancer at age 56 in April, community residents demanded out, sending a $16 million buyout proposal to the city May 15. That day FMC Corp. released a plume of clomazone, an herbicide, that gave Debbie Hindla's son uncontrollable nosebleeds which sent him to the doctor. In a modern example of company largess, FMC paid for his doctor visits.

Evidence kept amassing in favor of residents who wanted out. A joint report by the Maryland Public Interest Research Group and the National Environmental Law Center released in July named the area surrounding Wagner's Point as one of the country's 10 most high-risk places for chemical accidents. The state levied $14,000 in fines against FMC Corp. from 1996 to 1998 for a variety of environmental offenses. In June 1997 a report from the Community Partnership for Environmental Protection claimed the area had elevated levels of eight toxic pollutants. In August 1997, Condea Vista reported to the EPA a discharge into the air of 3,400 pounds of benzene, a carcinogen.

Last Oct. 13 an explosion at the Condea Vista plant injured five workers, sent three Wagner's Point residents to the hospital, and focused public attention on the neighborhood's plight. At a press conference two days later, Mayor Kurt Schmoke contended the city had been working "for 10 years" to get residents out to free up space for an expansion of the Patapsco sewage-treatment plant. Residents, rebuffed by the city in the past, balked at the claim, and at the city's plans to take their homes via condemnation rather than a negotiated buyout. (Condemnation legislation was introduced in the City Council six days after the explosion and is due for a vote by spring.)

At Christmas, Santa Claus handed out oranges and apples to neighborhood kids and food baskets to indigent families—courtesy of Delta Chemical Co., which sits on the site of the old cannery. But as it enters its second century, Wagner's Point has a godforsaken feel to it. Graffito on an asphalt-company sign at the neighborhood's entrance reads WELCOME TO HELL?!? Drugs have arrived; vial-slingers stand pensively on corners in the cold, well into the night. More than a dozen properties are vacant, some of them burned out. On a lazy Saturday, kids stand in the shadows of a gasoline tank and throw rocks at a stop sign. Three smaller kids watch from across the street. Often a thick stench from the wastewater-treatment plant overcomes the neighborhood. More acrid smells from origins harder to pinpoint serve as a harsh reminder of what encircles the community.

Computer-generated signs reading WE WANT OUT! adorn most of the windows in the 3800 block of Leo Street. Alleyways are strewn with trash, along with the bones and, occasionally, carcasses of deer shot in West Virginia—home in the past for many current residents, and perhaps home again in the future. Door-to-door salespeople canvass the neighborhood selling "cancer insurance," telling residents, "We'll pay you $25,000 to get cancer."

Even though many houses remain well-kept and nicely appointed, the Wagner's Point of 1999 is shriveling; it looks as if it's willing itself out of existence. Under the condemnation bill, properties are to be appraised to determine how much residents receive in the buyout; sources say that figure is expected to be between $50,000 and $60,000 per home, with as much as $20,000 more per household for relocation. The state is offering to kick in some low-interest loans to help residents afford a new mortgage, and the federal government will provide $750,000 in grants to disabled people and the elderly. Condea Vista Co.—recently fined $75,000 by the state for the Oct. 13 accident—has offered an as-yet-unnamed amount of money unconditionally to the cause. Other companies have been decidedly less generous.

As long and hard as residents have labored to escape Wagner's Point, the prospect remains "very frightening," Debbie Hindla says. It's not possible for them to move en masse to another neighborhood where, as in Wagner's

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The Life and Death of Wagner's Point

PHOTOS BY MICHELLE GIENOW

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