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## 3 Men Die in Toxic Well in Queens

By [ROBERT D. McFADDEN](#)

Three workers at a waste transfer station in Queens were overcome by toxic fumes Monday afternoon and died, apparently falling one after another into the Stygian gloom of a putrid, manhole-size, 18-foot-deep well they were trying to vacuum, fire officials said.

A rope and ladder dangling into the hole, which was filled with deadly concentrations of hydrogen sulfide gas, and the accounts of witnesses at the scene suggested to the authorities that one victim had fallen first to his death and that the other two had followed in successive, futile rescue efforts.

Firefighters found the bodies — including those of a father and son — floating face down in four feet of murky water at the bottom of the hole at the Regal Recycling Company at 172-06 Douglas Avenue in Jamaica, an ugly street of waste plants, garbage scows and sheds enclosed by chain-link fences and topped by fluttering American flags.

“I don’t know if they knew the exact danger,” John Sudnik, deputy assistant fire chief of the Queens Borough Command, told reporters at the scene. “In that type of atmosphere, it’s very toxic.”

The police identified the victims as Shlomo Dahan, 49, of Flushing, Queens, the owner of the S. Dahan Piping and Heating Corporation, the South Ozone Park contractor hired to clean the well; his son Harel Dahan, 23, of East 73rd Street in Brooklyn; and Rene Francisco Rivas, 52, of Jamaica Avenue in Queens, a native of El Salvador who was an employee of Regal Recycling.

The bodies were raised to the surface by firefighters using a hoist and ropes and harnesses that were carried into the well by Firefighter Robert Lagnese, 33, of Rescue Squad 270, a six-year fire veteran trained to work in confined spaces. He wore protective clothing and an enclosed breathing apparatus, and though he suffered no apparent ill effects, he was taken to Jamaica Hospital Medical Center for observation.

Chief Sudnik said the concentration of hydrogen sulfide in the hole was measured at 200 parts per million, double the amount that environmental experts consider “imminently dangerous.” He said an exposure to 50 parts per million could be lethal within 10 minutes, suggesting that concentrations four times that amount would be deadly in a much shorter time.

While the source of the hydrogen sulfide in the hole was unknown, the chief called the gas a common byproduct of the decomposition of organic matter. Employees at Regal said the hole was a catch basin for runoff water that was probably laced with chemical debris from the recycling yard, where trucks deliver garbage and other materials, much of it from construction sites.

Behind the hole is a 40-foot multistory shed, with bays where the trucks pull up with materials to be sorted for recycling. Signs indicate the types: "Putrescible" and "Non-Putrescible," separating solid wastes from those that are likely to become rotten. Another sign at the gate says: "No drums, asbestos, hazardous materials, medical waste or tires."

The industrial neighborhood, which stands on the south side of Douglas Avenue opposite the [Long Island Rail Road](#) tracks, is crowded with waste collection companies and adrift in odors that suggest rotting food and oil. The avenue is littered with oil stains, broken glass and dirty piles of something resembling eggplant.

Mr. Dahan and his son, who arrived at the well in a truck equipped with suction equipment to vacuum it out, were joined by Mr. Rivas. Reconstructing what happened from witness accounts and other evidence at the scene, Chief Sudnik said that Harel Dahan apparently went first into the hole, which is about 3 feet in diameter, descending a ladder affixed to a rope shortly after 2 p.m.

It was unclear how far down he went before being overcome by the toxic fumes, and it was unclear if he was killed by the fumes or drowned in the water at the bottom, officials said. In any case, when he did not return, his father went down after him. He, too, was overcome and fell into the water below. Mr. Rivas, in turn, went down, apparently in an attempt to rescue the others, and was overcome and fell to the bottom.

Oscar Rivas, 27, Mr. Rivas's son, said firefighters told him that his father had been the third to die, in an attempt to save the others. "They told me it was an accident, that he saw two men fall into the hole, and he jumped in to try and help them," Mr. Rivas said. "He was always like that, always helping people. He was a good person."

Witnesses were heard screaming, and a call was made to 911 at 2:32 p.m., fire officials said. The first trucks arrived at 2:39 p.m., but apparently it was already too late.

But firefighters called Consolidated Edison and asked for assistance in a rescue operation. Con Edison sent two vacuum trucks to help clear debris, but while they were en route the request for assistance was canceled. D. Joy Faber, a utility spokeswoman who talked to a Con Edison worker at the scene, said "it was discovered that there were three victims that had expired."

The task of recovering the bodies, with a device called a high-point anchor rescue system — a rig that holds hoisting ropes steady over a hole — took about 20 minutes, Chief Sudnik said.

As a crowd of people gathered at the gates, Abe Rosenthal, who identified himself as a longtime friend of Shlomo Dahan, said the contractor had been born in Israel and owned his own company, which cleaned storm drains. It was unclear how much experience the Dahans had in dealing with highly toxic material, and it was unknown if they had been warned of the dangers.

Mr. Rosenthal speculated that "they had no idea that there was gas."

"He was a very sweet guy," Mr. Rosenthal said of the elder Mr. Dahan. He said Mr. Dahan was married and the father of three sons and a daughter. "I can't believe that it happened," he said.

Peter Ferrier, 49, a neighbor of Rene Rivas, said Mr. Rivas lived with his wife, a son and another family, and

recalled that he had seen him going to work on Monday, clad in jeans and a T-shirt and carrying his customary black and red backpack.

"I saw him with his bag," Mr. Ferrier said. "He was taking off, and he said, 'What's up, Papi?' Mr. Ferrier said he rarely saw Mr. Rivas because he was always working. "This man always works, every day he goes to work."

Efforts to reach officials of the company were not immediately successful. Calls to Regal Recycling and to Royal Waste Services, an adjacent plant at 172-08 Douglas Avenue that is believed to be affiliated with Regal, were answered by people who declined to speak. Regal is owned by Michael Reali.

According to state records, the commercial plant is run by M. & P. Reali Enterprises, doing business as the Regal Recycling Company. A man who answered the phone at the plant said the company had no immediate comment.

The [Web site of the State Department of Environmental Conservation](#) describes the plant as a solid waste transfer station and recyclables handling and recovery plant, which is authorized to handle putrescible waste, as well as construction and demolition debris.

From 2000 to 2002, according to government records, the plant petitioned the Department of Environmental Conservation and the city's Department of Sanitation for permission to increase its capacity for the management of putrescible solid waste more than threefold, to 1,200 cubic yards (600 tons) per day from 355 cubic yards (177.5 tons) per day.

The proposal, which the two agencies found would not have a negative effect on the environment, called for maintaining the plant's capacity for handling construction and demolition debris but decreased the permitted on-site storage capacity for such debris.

According to the [Environmental Conservation Department](#), the company has had a permit to manage solid waste since 1991. Its current permit allows for a daily capacity of 600 tons per day of solid waste and 266 tons per day of construction and demolition debris. The department intends to send staff members to inspect the plant, said a department spokeswoman, Maureen Wren.

In 2006, the federal [Occupational Safety and Health Administration](#) fined the plant \$1,500 after a worker was crushed to death by a Caterpillar wheel-loader the previous year, according to federal records. The Daily News reported that the worker, Effraime Calderone, 46, an immigrant from El Salvador, had been leaning against the wheel of the massive tractor when the driver put the machine in gear and rolled over him.

Records from the most recent OSHA inspection, conducted earlier this year, show that the federal agency identified several serious violations at the plant, including violations concerning floor and wall openings and holes, industrial stairs, respiratory protection, medical services, and oxygen-fuel gas welding and cutting. The company was directed to pay thousands of dollars in penalties in connection with those violations.

*Reporting was contributed by Sewell Chan, David W. Chen, Christine Hauser, Ethan Wilensky-Lanford and Margot Williams.*

