

OVERSHADOWED BY HISTORY

By Bill Jensen

Henryk Siwiak Died in New York on 9-11 ... From a Bullet to the Chest

Henryk Siwiak's trip to America in the Fall of 2000 was not the oft-fabled journey of an immigrant to the land of opportunity. He didn't come to the United States, alone, to earn enough money to be able to reach back across the Atlantic and deliver his family to the New World from their native Poland.

Henryk Siwiak came to America because he was desperate.

He had lost his job, and Poland's failing economy and 15-percent unemployment was making it hard to find another. He had a wife and two children, one of whom was college bound.

On the morning of September 11th, Siwiak was scouring downtown Manhattan looking for work when the Towers fell. He walked across one of the bridges connecting Manhattan with Brooklyn and got back to his apartment on Beach Street in Rockaway, Queens. Then he made phone calls to his wife and son back home in Poland.

"I'm OK," he told them, before recounting the story of how he saw one of the planes go into the Towers, and how he heard the rumble when they fell.

But as the rest of America was reeling, helping with rescue efforts, fixed on the television, collapsed from a day of physical and mental exhaustion, Siwiak set out to work again. The same desperation that brought him to America would have him on the A-train at 11 p.m., heading toward the Utica Avenue stop in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. There he was to meet a man with whom he would clean a supermarket on the graveyard shift. At 11:45 p.m., on a pleasant tree-lined street three-and-a-half miles from the World Trade Center, Henryk Siwiak, 46, fell, a bullet in his chest.

There were 2,820 people murdered in New York City on September 11th. The public and the authorities know who killed 2,819. But the only other homicide reported in New York City other than those related to the attacks remains unsolved. The murder of a simple man on his way to a simple job.

Coming to America

In her hot-pink apartment overlooking Rockaway Beach, Lucyana Siwiak sits at her kitchen table, a soap opera playing on the television behind her, her brother's death certificate on the table in front of her.

When Henryk lost his job as an inspector with the Polish National Railroad and made the decision to come to America, he settled in the same neighborhood as his sister (who came to America seven years ago after her health food store in Poland went under), living a few blocks away from her in the Polish community of Rockaway.

"He saw possibility for [him]self," says Lucyana, her English aided by a handheld translator.

Though he had a fevered interest in science, Siwiak failed to go to college after high school. Instead, he earned a technical school degree. He married a scientist named Ewa, who is now a middle-school biology teacher, and the couple had a son, Adam, now 11, and daughter, Gabriela, now 19, who is to enter college this October. One of the main reasons Siwiak came to America was to earn enough money to send Gabriela to a good university in Poland.

"He lost more than one job," Ewa, from her home in Krakow, Poland, says, almost with a laugh. After losing his inspection post, Ewa said Henryk "decided to go and try something else," and he came to America.

What little English Henryk knew came from television. "He enrolled in English school," says Lucyana, "but never began it. Destiny got in the way." Even with the language barrier, his plan for his family was working. Siwiak would perform odd jobs, do temp work in construction, laboring at a determined pitch. He would earn close to \$1,000 every month, and send half back to his family.

Lucyana brought her brother's ashes back with her to Krakow, where the Siwiak family, and Gabriela and Adam's schoolmates, attended a funeral. "My mother [tries] to understand his death," says Lucyana. "In ocean of death, his death was just one drop more. But she can't understand. She saw the TV. She thinks he died in the World Trade Center."

Lucyana says Ewa is coping the best she could as her children live life without a father.

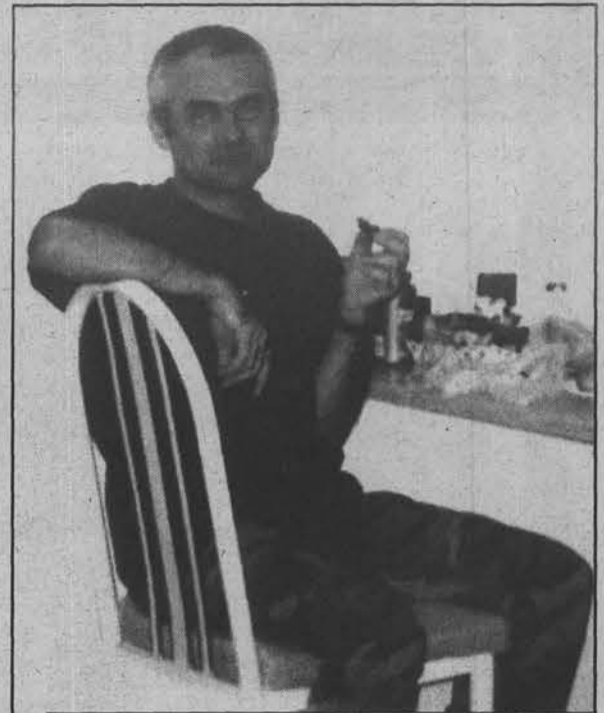
"[She] told me about son. He's thinking about father's death. [He keeps saying] that 'I was very, very bad boy, and God said —'" Lucyana opens up her handheld translator, types in the word "Kara" and presses translate. The word appears on the screen in English — "Penalty, Punishment."

"I'm OK"

It was three o'clock in the afternoon in Krakow when television programming was interrupted with news of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

"Oh, it was horrible," says Ewa, who was watching with her son. "We thought about our own husband and father."

Ewa and Adam waited for two hours before Henryk got back to his apartment and phoned them. "We were very happy when he called us." Like many New Yorkers, even though he had seen the plane hit the Towers, he was still unaware of the magnitude of the situation. Ewa filled him in and Henryk comforted his son.



The last picture of Henryk Siwiak (wearing his camouflage pants), taken the weekend before his death

Siwiak settled in when his phone rang. It was a callback from the help wanted ad he had answered in New York's Polish newspaper *Super Express*: "Men to Clean Stores in Brooklyn and Queens. English Not Necessary."

Siwiak was told by the employment agency, Intera, to meet a man named Adam in a white car at a Pathmark at 1520 Albany Avenue in Brooklyn.

Because he had never met the man, Siwiak told the service he would be wearing his favorite outfit — a camouflage Army surplus jacket with matching pants that he had bought at a local Salvation Army store.

"He liked very much these clothes," says Lucyana. "[They] were very comfortable."

A woman who lived in Siwiak's building had "showed him the subway map and showed him to get off at Utica [subway stop]," according to Lt. Tom Joyce, commanding officer of the 79th detective squad, "and then she showed him on the map where Albany Avenue was. But, unbeknownst to her, the point she was directing him to was Six Albany, the start of Albany Avenue ... that's what's so sad about this, that he was so far off."

Around 11 o'clock that night, Siwiak got off at a subway stop — either Utica, Ralph, Kingston or Throop St. stops — over four miles away from where he should have been. According to Joyce, "Adam" told police he waited for Siwiak for an hour outside the Pathmark before going inside to clean.

Meanwhile Siwiak, four miles from his destination, in a neighborhood he had never visited, walked down Decatur Street in Bedford-Stuyvesant.

White Guy in Fatigues

The police chokeholds and burning buildings of the Bed-Stuy of Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* are vanishing, replaced by quaint

coffee shops and bookstores. Violent crime is down 61 percent since 1993, its "Bed-Stuy: Do or Die" reputation shrinking from block to block.

The residential blocks surrounding the quiet intersection of Albany and Decatur feature brownstones and gated gardens, a stone church and a funeral home. Residents say a drug problem had been wiped out a few years ago, and the sound of gunshots is rare.

The neighborhood on September 11th was like every other neighborhood in America.

"Things were a little tense and everything," says Sharoni Perry, district director to Congressman Ed Towns and resident of the Decatur area. Late into the night, there were "at least 25 to 30 people outside," according to Perry, discussing the events of the day.

In his Army surplus outfit, Siwiak walked east on Decatur and found the street he was looking for, Albany Avenue. He turned south, and perhaps realized then how far off he was, as numbers to apartment buildings read Six and Eight Albany.

"I saw the gentleman walking down Albany to Atlantic," Perry remembers.

Perry says the man she saw was carrying a bag and holding a piece of paper in his hands, as if he was looking for an address.

She also says other people were looking at him too: A white man, walking through Bedford-Stuyvesant at night, wearing Army fatigues and carrying a bag 14 hours after the worst terrorist attack in U.S. history.

Perry says Siwiak walked south on Albany to a phone booth at the corner of Albany and Fulton. Then he returned, walking down Albany back toward Decatur.

"I saw him coming up the block," Perry recalls. "There were some guys following him."

Perry saw that they had been following him from south of Atlantic Avenue, home to what she calls the "very desolate" Albany Projects.

According to Perry, it was three men, following at least a building length — around 50 feet — behind him.

She didn't see the shots, but she heard them. When she looked toward 119 Decatur, she saw people scattering. On closer inspection, she saw the man on the ground.

"He still had the paper in his hand when he got shot."

Across the street and 10 doors down, a man sleeping in bed heard the shots. "Six, seven, eight shots, one after another [though] not a machine gun, more like a 9mm," he recalls. He got up and dialed 911. He looked out the window and saw no one running.

"The cops came pretty quick. There was a body across the street. The guy was dressed in Army fatigues, lying on the sidewalk in front of the steps. His backpack was up on the step, at the door." As if he had walked up the steps.

The neighbor, who has since moved from New York and asks to not be identified, said the police canvassed the area. "They were talking to people. But they were almost not expecting to get a lot of information.

"Everyone was kind of shocked about it. The people congregating outside the police tape were asking 'Who knew him?' It was strange to see a white guy. At first, I thought he was a soldier."

According to Joyce, the police responded within one minute of the first 911 call, and canvassed the neighborhood for three days. They recovered multiple casings, all from the same gun, indicating Siwiak was fired at multiple times, and found only one witness who remembers seeing Siwiak walking in the neighborhood.

When *The New Island Ear* spoke to neighbors on the block of Decatur and Albany, most residents claimed no knowledge of the shooting. Those who did remembered it only as "the Polish guy with fatigues on."

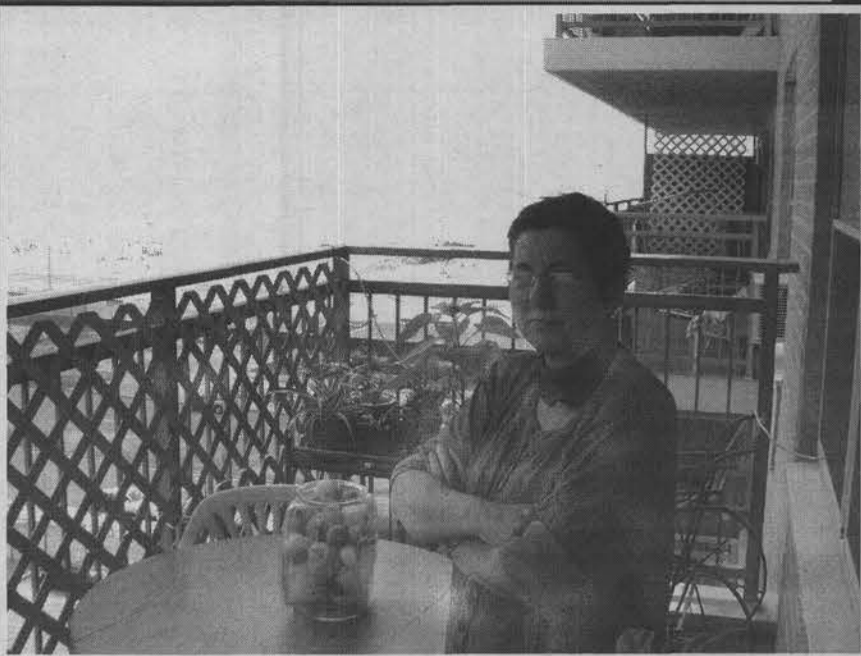
In fact, according to a local politician, many people thought Siwiak was a terrorist. "That kind of climate prevailed," says State Assemblywoman Annette Robinson (D-56), of the mood of her district in the days after the shooting. "He looked menacing."

Many Theories, No Leads

Siwiak was fired at several times, but hit only once. According to the Certificate of Death, M.E. case No. K01-4192, death was caused by "Gunshot wound to the chest with lung and musculoskeletal injuries." Siwiak's wallet, with cash, was found on his body.

Lucyana Siwiak has written to the Polish Consulate, with the only results being a 20-minute meeting and no follow up. She contacted the police, whom she said told her: "probably a black criminal that shot him, and that's it."

But Lucyana doesn't believe it. "Criminals stop it this evening [September 11th] in New York, almost completely.



Siwiak's sister, Lucyana, outside her apartment in Rockaway

"I think you see, he was in this Army jacket and pants. There were many, many policemen came from other states. And probably they met him and ask him. Maybe [he was], looking like Arab. He have ID in pocket. He never understood about if police say 'hand up.' Maybe he want to explain and show ID and put his hand in his pocket and they shot in this moment."

Ewa Siwiak concurs. "Police in New York said it was a robber and nothing more. But my husband had five dollars in his pocket."

According to the police, Siwiak actually had close to 70 dollars in his back pocket. And the idea he was shot by a cop is quickly rejected by Joyce.

He was four miles from where he was supposed to be. "That's what's so sad about this."

"It was a unique caliber gun," says Joyce. "If it was a cop, it definitely wasn't a cop's firearm."

One year later, with no eyewitnesses, the case has few leads and no suspects. But Joyce, who has worked the 79th precinct of Bed-Stuy for years, is hopeful.

"Do I believe there is someone out there that saw something? Yes."

The Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood, for all its good press and revamped image of late, is still a place where you can get shot for looking at someone the wrong way. But whether it was someone who had lost someone at the Towers and was angry, or someone who thought the fatigue-dressed Siwiak was a terrorist, or someone who shot him by mistake, Lucyana Siwiak doesn't want to know who killed her brother.

"What for?" she shrugs. As the sole representative of her family in the United States, she tries to gather information for the sake of her family. And for a brother who died too soon. ■