

The Shot That Pierced Brooklyn

The Jewish community of Brooklyn was deeply shaken 22 years ago this month. The violent crime that reigned free in New York City suddenly penetrated deep into the heart of the community, touching a widely respected and deeply beloved community activist. Zman spoke to some of the people most closely involved in that incident. We uncovered a startling and dramatic account of the tragic events that left a deep scar on the heimishe community—a scar that remains until this day.

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That tragic Thursday morning, February 8, 1990 (*Shevat* 13, 5750), will remain forever etched in the minds and hearts of those who experienced it. It was the day a shot was fired that pierced the hearts of *heimishe* Brooklyn.

New York City was experiencing an upsurge in violent crimes. Still, when the news broke that one of Brooklyn's most respected and beloved activists, Rabbi Yechezkel Wertzberger—popularly known as “Reb Yechezkel *shamess*”—had become the latest victim of New York's wave of violence, everyone was shocked.

As soon as the news broke that a popular rabbi had been critically wounded in a violent attack, New York City's media thronged to the area. The stricken neighborhood in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn was flooded in minutes. For days afterward, news reports were filled with details and commentaries on the incident, accompanied by the latest update on Reb Yechezkel's condition.

The police initiated an intensive search to find the perpetrator, goaded on by the extensive publicity and the public's shock at what had happened.

Chaim Weinberger Speaks

In fact, Rabbi Wertzberger was not the one the gunman was after. His intended victim was Chaim Weinberger, today of Miami, whom we visited recently for our interview. Here, in Chaim's own words, is the description of what took place that fateful Thursday morning:

We often make decisions in life that seem insignificant at the time, yet they actually have far-reaching consequences. When this story that I am about to tell you took place, I was at the beginning of my career as a courier for a company named Pan American Diamonds, which belonged to one American Jew and three Tunisian Jews.

My job required me to get up extremely early a few times a week and go to the airport

where I was supposed to catch a plane to the Dominican Republic. The suitcase I was given was supposed to be delivered to the Jewish factory in Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic. I delivered raw diamonds there and brought back the cut and polished stones.

It was a difficult and draining job and it involved considerable risk. I was much younger then, however, and I had plenty of energy, so I liked my work.

Each time, the night before I was to fly, I would go and pick up the suitcase at 5 PM from Pan American Diamonds, which was on 5th Avenue, between 14th and 15th in Manhattan. They would hand me an open suitcase and I never had to sign for it. Then I would put my own lock on the suitcase. They trusted me because I had developed a reputation as a reliable person who would watch over this treasure like the apple of his eye. They told me, “See you tomorrow, when you get back with the other suitcase.” And that was it.

Someone would accompany me downstairs, where I placed the suitcase in a taxi and traveled home to Williamsburg. From there, I was responsible for it until it was delivered to its destination.

I always knew that I was carrying around probably hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of diamonds, and if I would look away for a while someone could lay hands on the suitcase. I was always very careful not to leave the suitcase unattended for a second. Even when I went to eat I took my suitcase along with me.

At night I would go to sleep with the suitcase next to my bed and when I woke up in the wee hours of the morning I was always careful not to turn on the lights. It's not that I was paranoid; there was just no reason that people in my neighborhood needed to know when I got up and left my home. It's an old rule in the diamond business. “The less information people have, the healthier it is.”

I can't say that I was never worried for my life. The fact is that it was a dangerous job. I had a friend who worked in the

diamond industry. He was a salesman. When I was offered the job he told me, “Chaim, I'm warning you: you must be very careful. This job comes with serious danger.” When I asked him how serious the danger was, he responded: “For example, when I travel to Atlanta on a business trip, I check into a Holiday Inn and if they give me, say, Room 307, I don't even go up there. I just give the impression that I'm going up and actually I go down and leave the hotel using the back entrance. Then I go two miles further to a Day's Inn where I take out a room under an assumed name. That's how dangerous it is!”

Over the coming years, I did experience several frightening incidents. The first time I slept over in the Dominican Republic I left the hotel at night to get some fresh air. After strolling around for a while I came to a dark street. I hadn't gone more than 20 feet when suddenly three people sprang out and jumped on me. Just their murderous appearance was enough to give someone a heart attack. They grabbed me and dragged me into an alley. I was scared that they were going to finish me off.

Then one of them pulled out a knife and brandished it at me while the others began feeling me to see if I had a gold necklace or ring. I quickly sized up the situation and I realized that I really didn't have much choice but to cooperate with them if I wanted to live. A life has very little value when you're dealing with such people and trying to resist means a ticket to the next world. Instead, I decided to try speaking to them.

“Listen to me,” I told them, “I'll give you everything in my pockets and then you can go wherever you like.” They looked at me slightly confused, not believing what they were hearing. I didn't give them too long to think it over. I pulled out of my pocket a thick wad of one peso banknotes and I stuffed it into one of their hands. In the darkness the wad looked exactly as if it were American \$100 bills.

“Where is the money?” the man with the knife asked me. I answered, “I gave everything I have to your friend.” Then



Manhattan's diamond district on 47th Street.



Working out a deal in the diamond district.



Diamond merchants in Manhattan's diamond district.

I told them, “Run away before I start shouting.”

They thought I had given them a huge sum of money—in the dark they couldn't see that all that they had dragged from me was a bunch of pesos which all together weren't worth more than \$15 in American currency—so they decided to accept my “advice” and left me alone.

If they would have forced me to lead them to my hotel room—which they might have done if they hadn't found anything on me—and open up the safe, they would have