

Remembering Sacrifice in New York

By Bruce Bawer

I grew up in New York City, in Queens, in a neighborhood that few people outside of the borough have ever heard of: Middle Village.

It's relatively unknown because it's always been relatively quiet and peaceful. It consists of tree-lined blocks on which the narrow brick houses, built just about a century ago, all look almost exactly alike. It's a place where people keep an eye on one another's homes when they're away on vacation and where they fly the flag on the Fourth of July. (READ MORE: [Willie's Joy Was Contagious](#))

In establishing shots in some episodes of [The King of Queens](#), you can actually see the house I grew up in.

Most of the thoroughfares in Queens have numbers, not names. The ones that run roughly north to south are called streets, places, or lanes, and the ones that run east to west are avenues, roads, drives, or courts. I grew up on 82nd Place, on a block bounded by 63rd Avenue and Penelope Avenue, which many of the locals pronounced to rhyme with "cantaloupe."

When I was growing up, one of my friends on the block was a boy called Peter Schmiemann. He was a nice kid from a nice family. He was one of five siblings. His older brother and sister were Matthew and Mary. He had a twin brother, Tommy. And the youngest of the five was Paul. Their mother, Marilyn, was kind. She was a friend of my mother's.

And their dad was a cop, Hank.

Hank was one of two members of the NYPD who lived on our

block. The other was Pete Conticelli, who lived two doors up from the Schmiemanns and directly across the street from us. He and my dad were good friends. He gave my dad one of his old badges to keep in his wallet so he could flash it to a police officer in case he got stopped for a busted headlight or something.

Pete and my dad used to talk a lot about how one day they would retire and get the hell out of New York. Pete actually did it. He, his wife, and their three kids moved to Socorro, New Mexico. By all accounts, he had a great life there.

Hank Schmiemann wasn't so lucky. Early on the morning of June 20, 1974, during the ignominious mayoralty of the lilliputian – in every sense – Abraham Beame, Lt. Henry Schmiemann was a few blocks from home on his way to work when he was shot to death in cold blood by a man with the most banal name you can imagine: John Smith.

Everyone who lived on the block at the time remembers that day and the days that followed vividly. I remember sitting in the Schmiemanns' kitchen an evening or two after the murder with a bunch of other neighbors when a clownish character named Jerry Rosenberg – who was a New York celebrity at the time because of the TV commercials for his chain of appliance stores, famous for the catchphrase, "What's the story, Jerry?" – showed up, uninvited, purportedly to give his condolences, and hung around for a while and made a lot of noise and pretty much took over the situation. That's life, I guess: Tragedy is always mixed, to some extent, with farce. **(READ MORE: [New York Businesses Are Fleeing Wall Street. Blame Bad Policy.](#))**

I also remember the funeral at Resurrection Ascension Church on Woodhaven Boulevard, where most of my Catholic friends went to school, and where on that beautiful sunny morning 1500 police officers lined up to pay tribute to their fallen colleague. As the *New York Times* reported at the time, the mourners included "members of the Federal Bureau of

Investigation and 18 other police departments from Long Island, Westchester County and New Jersey. The Suffolk County police provided a motorcycle escort of 36 officers, who later accompanied the cortege to Pinelawn National Cemetery, in Suffolk County, for burial.”

The extraordinary spectacle of all those men in blue uniforms, lined up along the narrow street facing the church and standing at perfect attention with solemn looks on their faces, has never left me. Never before had I experienced such a moving sign of respect, of solidarity, and of perfect brotherhood.

One person who didn't bother to show up for the funeral was the mayor, Abe Beame, a despicable little party hack who in his campaign ads had emphasized his supposed support for the police.

Anyway, all that happened 50 years ago. Half a century. For many, a lifetime. Since then, a lot of people on the old block have died or moved away. And many new people have moved in.

But some of the old neighbors remain and still remember. My sister, who after decades in California moved back into our family home after our father died, is one of them.

Another is Paul Schmiemann, Henry's youngest son, who now lives with his wife and children in the house in which he grew up. Middle Village, I should say, is a neighborhood – and I think this is probably very unusual in New York City – where houses aren't constantly being sold and resold, but are typically passed down from generation to generation. It's a neighborhood with an unusually strong sense of community – and an unusually strong sense of communal memory.

So it was an event of very special importance to many people on 82nd Place when, on Saturday, June 22, the block I grew up on was renamed – or, more correctly, given an extra name – in honor of our long-since fallen neighbor. It



Dedication ceremony for the renaming of 82nd Street for state lawmaker Lieutenant Henry O. Schmiemann (Carol J. Bauer for The American)

is now not only 82nd Place. It is also Lieutenant Henry O. Schmiemann Way.

Renaming streets, or parts of them, after worthy New Yorkers is a time-honored tradition. The block of 50th Street in Manhattan between 8th Avenue and Broadway, for example, is also called Gershwin Way, after the songwriters George and Ira Gershwin. Now Henry Schmiemann, who dedicated his life to the safety and security of his fellow New Yorkers, has also been accorded this honor.

On Saturday there was a ceremony at the corner of 82nd Place and Penelope Avenue to mark the occasion. My old friend Peter delivered what my sister described to me as an eloquent tribute to his father. Another part of the event was especially meaningful. Paul, the youngest of Henry's five children, has a son whom he named after his father. Young Henry, it turns out, is a recent graduate of the Police Academy and a new member of the NYPD. At the ceremony honoring his grandfather, he was presented with a shield bearing his grandfather's shield number. **(READ MORE from Bruce Bawer: [Nostalgia Is Coming Back to New York City](#))**

The *New York Post* [quoted](#) him as saying: "I feel like I've been given a responsibility greater than what is behind the NYPD, which is immense." Isn't it moving, encouraging, and (yes) surprising to hear a fledgling police officer, in this day and

age, talk like that? My old friend Peter told the *Post*: “Our father left way too early, but we know that Henry is going to get the guidance and help from my father as he does his job.”

And given what New York is today – namely, something not terribly unlike the hellscape presided over by Abe Beame, in which Henry Schmiemann was gunned down senselessly in what, then as now, was one of the city’s most tranquil quarters – young Henry will need all the guidance from his grandfather that he can get. May he have a long, happy, rewarding, and safe career in the noble service of what was once, and what may yet again, God willing, become the world’s greatest metropolis.

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