

Son of Sam arrested in Yonkers 40 years ago

A series of random shootings in New York City in the late 1970s terrorized the region - and redefined a Yonkers neighborhood.

MARK LUNGARIELLO
M.LUNGARIELLO@GLOBE.COM

YONKERS - After nights of murder in New York City, the killer commuted from his grisly, blood-puddled crime scenes to his apartment here on quiet Pine Street. Here, the "Son of Sam" slept on a mattress laid flat on the floor. Here, he posted sheets over his windows to block out a postcard view of the Hudson River and Palisades cliffs. Here, he worked on the anonymous letters sent to taunt detectives on his trail, tease the press and terrify neighbors.

"How dare you force me into the night to do your bidding," said one letter to downstairs neighbor Craig Glassman. "True, I am the killer. But Craig, the killings are your command."

It was here that cops finally arrested postal worker David Berkowitz 40 years ago, on Aug. 10, 1977.

In eight random attacks over the course of a year, he'd crept up on young victims late at night, then unloaded his .44 at close range. Six people died. One was paralyzed and another blinded. In total, he'd shot 13 people, all of them in New York City boroughs - the Bronx, Queens and Brooklyn.

Now in his 60s and locked up in Shawangunk prison in Wallkill, Berkowitz is serving a sentence of more than 300 years.

Pine Street is a narrow one-way clinging to a hill in a tucked away section of northwest Yonkers, less than 10 miles north from the New York City border. The whole street stretches less than 500 yards with little foot or car traffic.

The neighborhood hasn't changed much over the decades, although the address of Berkowitz's former building has been changed from 35 Pine St. to 42 Pine St. The idea was to erase the connection between the seven-story building and its most notorious resident, who lived on the top floor.

It didn't work. Ask people in the area and even all these years later most can point you to the Son of Sam building.

"Just last week someone asked me 'would you work there or live there?' and I said no way," said area resident Susan Torres, 54. "He's not there anymore but it gives me the heebie jeebies just thinking about it."

A sense of fear took hold of the region and grew more oppressive between the first shooting and Berkowitz's arrest.

The first shooting occurred on July 29, 1976, in the Bronx, and killed Donna Laura and injured Jody Valenti. After Columbia University student Virginia Voskerichian was shot dead on March 8, 1977, in the fifth attack, police confirmed a serial killer was on the loose.

News reports said the shooter was going after young women with dark hair who were often sitting in or getting out of cars.

By the summer of 77, women were cutting their hair short, wearing it up or dying it. Nightclubs were almost empty as the panic soared, even at the height of disco fever.

Kathleen Zaccagnino, a Yonkers native, was in her 20s and living in Barry town at the time. She remembers coming home late and remembering from her car to her parents' front door.

"You're not safe doing normal things," she said. "You're going out at night and something bad could happen."

New York City in the 1970s wasn't the booming real estate market with construction on every block that it is today. It was a city plagued by drugs and violent crime.

Last year, there were 335 murders reported in New York, according to local police data. In 1976, there were more than 1,600.

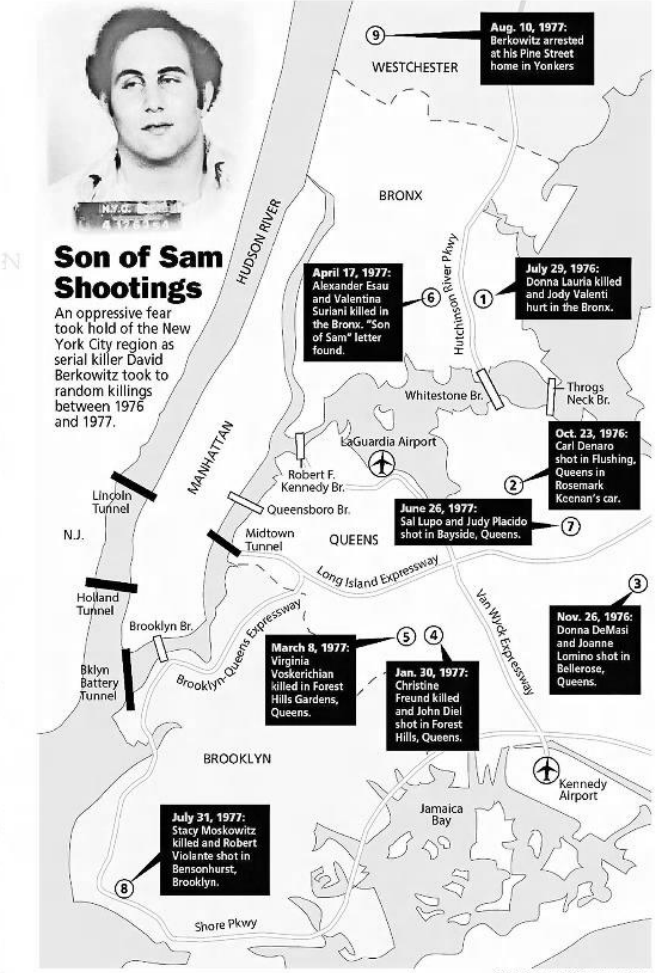
But the shocking randomness of the Son of Sam attacks and the fact the victims were "every Jane and Joe" terrified people, broadcaster Gerardo Rivera said during a panel discussion last month at Manhattan's Roxy Hotel Tribeca.

"The victims were people that everyone can relate to and everyone was subsequently fearful that they were next," said Rivera, who participated via Skype. The discussion was part of the premiere of a documentary airing on Smithsonian Channel called "The Lost Tapes: Son of Sam."

Writer Lawrence Klausner who also participated in the panel, said the constant media coverage contributed to the collective anxiety, Klausner, whose 1980 book "Son of Sam" was re-released as an e-book Monday, said circulation shot up for The New York Post and Daily News as they traded scoops about the investigation into the shootings.

"Their actions and their words, the reporter's, created death and havoc," he told The Journal News.

Both papers sold more newspapers



Son of Sam Shootings
An oppressive fear took hold of the New York City region as serial killer David Berkowitz took to random killings between 1976 and 1977.

the morning after Berkowitz was arrested than when President John F. Kennedy was shot, he said.

Omega, an NYPD task force eventually involving 200 officers, was assigned to find the serial killer. The police "were going through hell" as they were unable to break the case and media attention was frenzied, Klausner said.

"The cops were being harassed by their own families," he said. "Why don't you catch him? You're big time, you have a gold shield, you're a detective."

Mich Stein was following the case closely as he studied law in school at the time. One night in April 1977, while his parents were away in Florida, he brought his future wife Susan to his parents' home at 1950 Hutchinson River Parkway in the Bronx. They fell asleep, then woke up late and he offered to take her home.

While she fixed her hair in the bathroom, the lights flickered. "I made a joke: King Zeus is saying something to us," Stein, now 63 and living in Ardsley, said.

Susan stayed overnight instead of venturing out at what they believed was a dangerous time of night, Stein said. The next morning, April 17, they learned that overnight Alexander Esau and Valentina Suriani were shot dead in a car nearby.

Stein would be shocked months later when he read about Berkowitz's arrest and realized they'd gone to school together as children in the Bronx. Stein described him as no crazier than an average young boy.

Near the April 17 murder scene, police found a letter in which the killer first called himself "Sam of Sam."

"GO OUT AND KILL COMMANDS FATHER SAM," the letter stated, in part. IT WAS SIGNED, "YOURS IN MURDER MURDER MURDER."

About a week earlier, a dog was shot with a .22 caliber bullet in a Yonkers backyard down the hill from Pine Street. The dog's owner, Sam Carr, had been receiving cryptic, anonymous letters in the mail. Harvey, Carr's black Labrador, sur-

vived. The dog was later blamed for ordering Berkowitz to kill.

Carr, the "Sam" in Berkowitz's alias, tipped off the Omega team about Berkowitz in July 1977. A week after the complaint, on July 31, the killer claimed Stacy Moskowitz's life in a shooting in Brooklyn.

Near the site of that shooting, Berkowitz's car was ticketed for parking near a fire hydrant. It was through tracing the ticket that Omega detectives put Berkowitz at the top of their list of suspects.

Bill Clark, a retired NYPD homicide detective and member of Omega, said he'd always expected the shooter would be found to be a resident of one of the five boroughs.

"Yonkers came out of nowhere," he said.

But when a New York City detective called Yonkers police to discuss Berkowitz, he found local cops had already taken an interest in Berkowitz.

Answering the phone was Wheat Carr, Sam Carr's daughter, who worked as a civilian dispatcher in Yonkers. She reportedly told the detective they thought Berkowitz had shot the family dog and maybe other dogs in the neighborhood, too.

Two Yonkers officers, Pete Intervallo and Tom Chamberlin, said in a 1993 interview that they had visited Berkowitz's apartment earlier in the summer about the dogs and letters but he wasn't home. Intervallo said they found his windows covered on one of the hottest days of the summer.

"That made us suspicious," he told a columnist for the Gannett Suburban Newspapers, now called The Journal News. "What was he hiding? 'Could this be the Son of Sam?' I asked Tommy."

The Westchester County sheriff's office, now the Department of Public Safety, had also opened an investigation into Berkowitz for harassing his downstairs neighbor, Glassman, who was also a volunteer deputy.

Glassman had received four anonymous letters dating back to June - the

same month Daily News columnist Jimmy Breslin received a letter from the killer that started, "Hello from the gutters of N.Y.C. which are filled with dog manure, vomit, stale wine, urine and blood."

One Saturday in August 1977, Glassman woke up to the sound of cracking outside his front door. Someone had started a fire and thrown handfuls of 22 bullets into the flames. Yonkers police who took the report mentioned the similarities between Glassman's letters and Carr's.

Late at night on Aug. 10, New York City police swarmed Pine Street and the surrounding streets. There were several unmarked cars in the quiet neighborhood said residents immediately knew something was up.

David O'Gorman, who has lived across the street from Berkowitz's former home for most of his life, called it an "event" as neighbors sat in their front yards with lawn chairs to see what the buzz was about.

After police saw what appeared to be a rifle in the backseat of Berkowitz's yellow Ford Galaxie parked out front, they waited for a Yonkers judge to sign a search warrant.

Before they got it, Berkowitz, then 24 years old, walked out the building at around 10 p.m. and got into his car. Police surrounded him, guns drawn.

When Detective John Falotico went to the driver's side, Berkowitz was reported to say "You got me."

"Who do I have?" Falotico said. "You got the Son of Sam," Berkowitz said, according to the account the late Detective Joe Coffey gave this newspaper 10 years ago. The Charter Arms .44 Bulldog gun was in a brown bag in the car.

Pine Street was mobbed by press and spectators late into the night and into the next morning. The Yonkers Herald-Statesman, a predecessor of The Journal News, reported a young woman saw the

See SAM, Page 11A

