

Five killed in racist shooting rampage in Pittsburgh

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Richard Scott Baumhammers, 34, was arrested Friday, April 28 following a shooting rampage that left five dead and one seriously injured in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania area. The victims were Baumhammers' next-door neighbor Nicki Gordon, a 63-year-old Jewish woman; Theo Pham, a 27-year-old Vietnamese restaurant delivery man; Ji-ye Sun, 34, the owner of the Chinese restaurant where Pham worked; Garry Lee, 22, a student at a Karate center; and Anil Thakur, 31, who was shot at an Indian grocery store. Sandip Patel, 25, the manager of the Indian grocery, was shot in the neck and remains paralyzed.

After shooting Mrs. Gordon six times and setting her house on fire, he drove about a mile to the India Grocers and shot two workers. Next he fired on two synagogues, painting swastikas and "Jew" on the buildings. He then drove to the Ya Fei Chinese Cuisine restaurant at Robinson Town Center, about 10 miles from his home, where he fired on his victims in front of onlookers. The last shooting took place at the C.S. Kim School of Karate in Center Township, Beaver County. Police apprehended Baumhammers in Ambridge, a few minutes after the final victim, Garry Lee, was shot.

Baumhammers, the alleged gunman, held a law degree and had practiced law in the Atlanta area several years ago. Sometime over the past few years he moved to his parents' home in the affluent Virginia Manor neighborhood of Mount Lebanon, about 15 minutes south of Pittsburgh, and he had allowed his county bar association membership to lapse. Since moving back to the Pittsburgh area, he had apparently been unemployed and had sought treatment for psychiatric problems. His parents, both Latvian immigrants and successful dentists, were described by neighbors as "pillars of the community."

When police searched Baumhammers' Mount Lebanon home they found a document for the "Free Market Party," written by Baumhammers, which read like a manifesto

and listed him as the "chairman." According to the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, the document champions the rights of European Americans and complains that they are being outnumbered by minorities and immigrants. Baumhammers had also reportedly established a web site earlier this year for this party, although it is presently unavailable.

Only two months ago, on March 1, a rampage in nearby Wilksburg, Pennsylvania left three dead. The shooting rampage by 39-year-old gunman Ronald Taylor, who is black, was clearly racially motivated. Police and FBI agents searching Taylor's apartment found writings referring to "white trash" and denouncing Asians, Italians and the news media. All of his victims were white.

Last Friday's shootings and the March 1 rampage in Wilksburg have much in common. Both were carried out by mentally disturbed individuals, who seemed obsessed with racist hatred. Ronald Taylor had spent time last summer at the St. Francis Medical Center, and acquaintances described him as extremely unstable.

Although records of Baumhammers' treatment for psychological problems are unavailable, some details shed light on his mental state. George Naruns, a chiropractic neurologist and a former acquaintance of Baumhammers, had traveled with him two years ago to the Latvian capital of Riga. After returning to the United States, Naruns heard a strange report from friends they had made in Latvia that Baumhammers believed Naruns had him under surveillance, and he broke off contact with him. "It was delusional and paranoid," Naruns commented. "I was shocked by it and I realized if I took this at face value, he was a troubled individual."

But while Baumhammer and Taylor had racial bigotry and mental instability in common, their backgrounds and living conditions were decidedly dissimilar. Richard Baumhammer came from a quiet, upscale, suburban community. Ronald Taylor lived in predominantly black

Wilkinsburg, an economically depressed area, where 70 percent of children live below the poverty line.

Media coverage of the Baumhammers shootings has been notably low-key. Network news coverage of the killings last Friday evening was relegated to little more than a footnote to the day's events. Indeed, such violent incidents have become more and more commonplace.

On Tuesday, April 18, two women died in a shooting at a senior citizens residence in Lincoln Park, near Detroit. The following day, a man shot and killed one woman and injured four other people at a retirement community center in Peoria, Arizona. On Monday, April 24, seven youth were injured in an evidently gang-related shooting at the National Zoo in Washington, DC, leaving one 11-year-old in critical condition.

April 20 also marked the one-year anniversary of the shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, which left 12 students, one teacher and the two teenage gunmen dead.

Incidents of mass shootings have touched so many sections of American society—from impoverished neighborhoods, to schools in rural areas and quiet suburbia, to urban business districts. The motivation of those responsible for the violent outbursts range from racial hatred, to job-related stress, to family problems, to name only some of the contributing factors. This latest case took a particularly reactionary form, while in some instances the motives seem less clear.

But to explain the phenomenon simply as "senseless violence"—which the media are quick to do—blocks an analysis of the deeply troubled society which at the most basic level drives these individuals to carry out desperate actions. Under conditions where the majority of people can find no political representation in the political establishment, and no outlet for their frustrations, the most hopeless and disturbed respond with individual violence, with tragic consequences.



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