The death of Joseph Abdulla: German Christian Democrats encourage anti-immigrant blacklash

Peter Schwarz
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"Anger Is Growing in Sebnitz," was the recent headline of a major German newspaper. The anger, however, is not directed against neo-Nazis who foul-mouth their way around the town and log onto its web site to fill the visitors' page with racist slogans and calls for the assassination of government members.

Nor is the anger directed against the police and the public prosecutor's office, who both stand exposed of sloppy work in dragging out for three years their investigation into the death of Joseph Abdulla, the six-year-old son of an Iraqi-German couple. And certainly the anger is not aimed at those long suspected of drowning the six-year-old child. What is growing is anger against the Abdulla-Kantelberg family who suffered the death of their child and afterwards found the courage to insist upon a thorough investigation of the case.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* quoted a Dresden police officer carrying out investigations in Sebnitz as saying, "If the family returns to this town, things could become critical". He described "the anger which has been building up in the small Saxon town of Sebnitz in eastern Germany and which many people fear could explode. It is feared this violence might not just take the form of extreme right-wing e-mails threatening the family, whose small son Joseph was drowned in 1997, but also the form of outright acts of violence.

In the meantime, police have responded to this climate of anger by making inquiries, not only into the suspected murder of Joseph, but also into the activities of the child's mother and three of the witnesses she has produced, who are now suspected by the police of making false accusations. Joseph's mother is suspected of inciting others to make false accusations. Last Thursday night a massive force of police, accompanied by the local state attorney, conducted a seven-hour raid of the family's house and confiscated all of the material collected by the Abdulla-Kantelbergs into the circumstances of their son's death.

The situation instinctively reminds one of the play *An Enemy of the People* by the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen. In this play, a town meeting declares a certain Dr. Stockman a public enemy for having revealed the local spa waters—the source of his community's economic prosperity—to be contaminated. The mob screams, "Smash his windows! Throw him into the fjord!" His family is alienated from society and financially ruined.

Up until now, there is no real clarity about what happened at Sebnitz's open-air swimming pool on June 13, 1997—and, in view of the three-year delay of the inquiry and the present volatile political atmosphere, it is extremely questionable whether there ever will be. Even if for a moment one supposes that Joseph did die as a result of a swimming pool accident and that his mother got carried away in her efforts to expose the tragedy—which, considering the facts and protests that have surfaced so far, seems extremely unlikely—reactions to the reporting of the case show that a crime as described by the witnesses *may have taken place* and, furthermore, *could take place in the future.*

The reaction to the case on the part of state authorities, politicians and sections of the media says more about the structure of the brown neo-fascist swamp (currently manifest over wide areas of eastern Germany) than the terrible crime in and of itself could have—if it did indeed occur. This reaction demonstrates how and why it is possible for neo-Nazis to dominate and intimidate whole towns, although they constitute an insignificant minority of the population.

When the tabloid *Bild* made the Joseph Abdulla case public on November 23, under the headline "Neo-Nazis Drown Child and a Whole Town Keeps Quiet", the story seemed perfectly tailored to fit into the SPD-Green government's campaign against right-wing extremism. A group of young skinheads commit a gruesome crime, the community turns a blind eye, and finally the local authorities and the government gravely assume their responsibility and appeal to all citizens to "make a stand" against the outrage.

A wave of initial sympathy was extended towards the Abdulla family. The local CDU (Christian Democratic Union) mayor organised a candlelight procession. Chancellor Schröder met with the mother in his capacity of SPD (Social Democratic Party) chairman and even Kurt Biedenkopf, the CDU prime minister of Saxony, saw fit to attend a church service in Sebnitz accompanied by his wife. The public prosecutor had resumed inquiries shortly before and three suspects were apprehended.

However, it soon became obvious that the CDU—whose comfortable parliamentary majority enables it to govern Saxony without a coalition partner—and the local authorities were not interested in an impartial clearing up of the case but were waiting for the opportunity for a counteroffensive. This came when the public prosecutor released the suspected offenders in response to allegedly dubious statements on the part of the main witnesses for the prosecution. Together with the investigating state attorneys, Minister of Justice Manfred Kolbe (CDU) appeared before the press and set in motion the campaign that was to give free rein to the outpouring of anger against the Abdulla family.

Kolbe delivered a sharp attack on the *Bild* newspaper, complaining that it had unfairly condemned a whole town. He told the people of Sebnitz they should consider suing for damages. The office of the public prosecutor insinuated that the Abdulla family had bribed witnesses.

By this time investigations were still under way and many of the witnesses were still to be questioned. According to the public prosecutor, two of the people arrested were still being treated as suspects. Apart from the testimonies gathered by the Abdulla family, there were plenty of other indications that Joseph had not died a normal death. These ranged from the rumours circulating the town immediately after his drowning—although the investigating authorities made no effort to pursue them—to a blood clot

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on the child's right ear and residue of a tranquillising substance discovered in the blood during a second autopsy of the child's body, which was financed by the family. The agent found in the blood occurs not only in the tranquilliser Ritalin; it is also used by young people in eastern Germany as a substitute for the drug Ecstasy.

Also to be considered is the 23-page analysis of the case by the renowned criminologist Christian Pfeiffer, who came to the conclusion that the witnesses were generally to be seen as credible, but that the police, on the other hand, had proceeded “with a lack of interest and professionalism”. The superintendent of criminal investigations—who was based in Pirna—has recently been suspended from duties because of other procedural violations.

Under these conditions, the intervention of the Minister for Justice (the official overseer of the investigating state attorneys) constitutes an inadmissible intervention into the ongoing proceedings. It is not difficult to imagine what effect his intervention is having on the investigators, the witnesses and, above all, the right-wing radicals in Sebnitz.

The Dresden chief public prosecutor's office can no longer be regarded as an objective authority. Moreover, now it will be even less interested in clearing up the case, because that would mean discrediting its own role in the affair. In the summer of 1998 it had rejected the Abdulla family's appeal and defended the Pirna public prosecutor's move to suspend proceedings, although the sloppiness of the investigation was quite apparent.

The witnesses—some of whom are juveniles—face the prospect of being treated like the Abdulla family if they maintain their testimonies. Given the volatile atmosphere in Sebnitz, any of them adhering to a version of events that supports the accusation of murder will be seen as troublemakers and traitors to the community. Not only will they have to count on being socially despised and alienated; they will also have to contend with murder threats from right-wing radicals.

These right-wing thugs can only interpret the state's about-turn in the case of Joseph Abdulla as evidence of their own unqualified triumph and as confirmation of their influence. It is not they who currently stand as objects of opprobrium, but those who pointed to their crime. The threats they made against the family—which felt forced to move out of the town—have paid off. As in Ibsen's play, the right-wing scum now speaks out against the “enemy of the people” alongside respectable citizens for whom the town's tourism trade is more important than revealing the truth.

Even if one subscribes to the improbable hypothesis that no one was responsible for Joseph's death and that the despairing mother overstepped the mark in her investigations, the question still has to be asked as to why she was so sure about the murder and was able to bring together close to 30 certified testimonies to support her conviction.

A motive for the murder is not hard to find. The German-Iraqi family came to Sebnitz in 1996 to escape hostilities in the Persian Gulf and find a peaceful place to live and work as chemists. But in Sebnitz they were confronted with an atmosphere of hostility and intolerance. The report of the criminologist, Christian Pfeiffer, takes up this point: “Further statements describe an oppressive atmosphere of ... fear, hostility towards foreigners and organised mobbing of Mr. and Mrs. Abdulla by the community.”

If the family had been granted the human sympathy normally shown in such instances after the loss of a child, then the case would have been cleared up relatively quickly—in one way or another. Instead, they had to barricade themselves in their flat for three years and hardly dared to walk through the streets. When the case became public, they were finally driven out of the town.

The area of Saxony where Sebnitz is situated has long been known as a stronghold of right-wing radicalism. It is a centre for right-wing elements particularly prone to acts of violence. Here the NPD (the extreme right-wing National People's Party of Germany) has more members than the SPD (the majority coalition partner in the federal government) and boasts numerous representatives in town councils—including the one in Sebnitz. As in many towns in eastern Germany skinheads are part of the local scenery. The case of the Abdulla child exposes the way in which bourgeois politicians are creating the conditions for the extreme right to prosper.

One day after the intervention of his Minister for Justice, Prime Minister Biedenkopf also appeared before the press and took the same line: Sebnitz's reputation had been violated, the whole of eastern Germany had been defamed. He attacked Federal Chancellor Schröder for holding a personal meeting with Joseph's mother and went so far as to claim that television reporters had paid out money to brawling right-wing radicals in front of the Abdulla's household. Now the victims were not the family that had been mobbed after losing their child, but “the citizens of Sebnitz” and “east Germans in general”.

This is not the first time that Biedenkopf has reacted sympathetically to right-wing agitation. When a violent mob drove asylum-seekers out of Hoyerswerda in 1991 and police looked on passively, not a word of protest came from Saxony's head of state.

The government of Saxony under Biedenkopf's leadership for the last 10 years has long been regarded as a haven for right-wing politicians. From 1990 until September of this year the Ministry of Justice was headed by Steffen Heitmann, whose name cropped up in headlines in 1993 on account of his expressions of hostility towards foreigners. At the time, former federal Chancellor Helmut Kohl caused a sensation by nominating this eastern German Church legate for the office of federal president.

Following a visit to Stuttgart and other west German cities, Heitmann remarked on the large numbers of immigrant workers to be found and said he found “to be threatening the alienation which one encounters” arising out of the “cultural mix of the most varied peoples” and “curious appearance of the city centres”. He had come to the conclusion that “the Germans have to be protected against too much foreign influence.”

After his comments became public he was forced to withdraw his candidacy for Germany's highest state post, but he was allowed to remain as Justice Minister in Saxony. He occupied this office at the time of Joseph's death and allowed the investigations to dry up. He was eventually forced to resign when it became known that he had leaked details of a criminal investigation to a party colleague implicated in the case.

Heitmann's successor Manfrede Kolbe is a member of the right-wing CSU in Bavaria, but with family roots in Saxony. His family moved from East to West Germany in 1959 and he began his political career in Munich, taking up senior government posts in the eighties. In 1990 he returned to Saxony and gained a parliamentary seat representing a community in Saxony.

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