

The death of six-year-old Joseph Abdulla reveals dominance of extreme right in East Germany

Dietmar Henning
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The death of six-year-old Joseph Abdulla in the small East German town of Sebnitz is a warning. Regardless of what the final circumstances of his death prove to be, this case shows how far the dominance of extremist rightwing gangs in East Germany has progressed—with the support of the state authorities and the Christian Democratic Union (CDU).

Joseph was the son of an Iraqi-German married couple who in 1996 settled in this small town 50 kilometres southeast of Dresden, on the Czech border. Like some 200 other inhabitants of Sebnitz, Joseph visited the local open-air swimming pool on June 13, 1997 with his 12-year-old sister. The six-year-old boy died on this day—but how?

According to the official version, Joseph was the victim of a tragic swimming accident. The emergency surgeon, who tried to resuscitate Joseph at the swimming pool, wrote on the death certificate he completed while still in the ambulance that he was: “found drowned in the swimming pool, the resuscitation attempted for over one hour was unsuccessful.” He noted the cause of death as “drowning while playing in the water.” In his notes, a policeman wrote that Joseph was in the water without a rubber ring. He had swum away from his friend. His sister Diana left him unsupervised for 15 minutes in the non-swimmers' pool. The deepest point there is 1.35 metres. According to medical records Joseph measured 1.27 metres.

Doubts arose about this official version immediately after Joseph's death. There were clues indicating that Joseph had not suffered an accident, but was murdered—by a group of racist youth. His parents received indications that Joseph had been deliberately drowned. Just a few days after the death of their son, Saad Abdulla and Renate Abdulla-Kantelberg lodged charges that a “homicide” had been committed. The police investigated, but without success. On February 3, 1998 they halted the investigation and closed the case.

Forensic pathologists were also unable to establish that a violent crime had occurred. “The deceased was a non-swimmer. It cannot be excluded that he was submerged by other children.” The cause of death is “most likely drowning”. They “excluded gross violence by a stranger or strangers”. In the summer of 1998, the prosecutor general answered the parents' complaints against halting the investigation, saying that, “even if the course of the June 13 accident could not be clarified in every detail... it can certainly be excluded that any third person was to blame for the death of Joseph Abdulla.”

As a result, the parents continued investigations on their own initiative. They collected signed testimony from almost twenty people, youths and adults, who gave their observations. According to this evidence, the “swimming accident” took place as follows:

Several young people pulled Joseph “forcibly by his hands from where he was lying by the hedge” to the lunch bar at the open-air swimming

pool. “There, the rest of the group were waiting at the counter.” Joseph cried and tried to tear himself away. They shouted, “You foreign pig” at the six-year old. Then one held him tight while another opened his mouth and a girl “poured a liquid into his mouth”. Joseph tried to escape. He held on desperately to taps, which rose up out of the water. “He was wobbly on his legs. He howled again.” Then all the young people came from the lunch bar and went over to him using “force to release his fingers from the pipe”. They carried him wound up in a towel to the deep part of the pool. There a young woman cried: “Do it. Chuck him in. Shit foreigner.” The young people did this. Two jumped in afterwards and “hopped about on his back for approximately ten minutes.”

The 12-year-old boy who gave this testimony also reported that Joseph was abused with an electric-shock device. He received “several shocks,” one “in the lower stomach, one on the right lower arm, one on the neck, one on the ear, one on his private parts”. This description is confirmed by other testimony. Several witnesses came forward voluntarily to the Abdulla family. But none of them spoke with the police. Many told the family they were afraid, not only of the rightwing extremists; they did not trust anyone.

On the day after Joseph's death flowers, candles and posters were laid at the entrance to the swimming pool. One poster read: “Murderers, you are guilty of the death of Joseph Abdulla”. On the next day, these professions of solidarity and mourning had disappeared. Nobody knows who removed them. Joseph's gravestone lies in the cellar of the family home. Out of fear of vandalism by the extremist right, the small boy is buried in a West German cemetery beside his grandfather—anonymously.

In November 1999 the parents had their son's body exhumed at their own expense. The body was examined for a second time, this time at the Institute of Forensic Medicine at the University of Giessen. The Institute also had photos and blood samples taken two and a half years earlier. It reached the following conclusion: A haematoma is identifiable on the right ear in photos taken of Joseph just a few days after his death. They also noted a “blotchy change to the neck”, which was “not mentioned” in the first medical report. “Despite its advanced decomposition,” investigation of the blood sample revealed “increased levels of methylphenidate,” the active ingredient of Ritalin, used to calm down hyperactive children. A resumption of the preliminary murder investigation would seem “appropriate”, the institute concluded.

The renowned Criminological Research Institute of Lower Saxony, headed by Justice Minister designate of Lower Saxony Christian Pfeiffer, also reached this conclusion, after analysing 17 witness statements and the results of the Giessen University Institute study. On July 24, 2000, the Criminological Research Institute concluded that, “The statements of the boy... appear altogether convincing. The descriptions in both statements are rich in detail, and also bear other indications of their reliability.” The

“electric shock abuse” may be treated as “indisputable”, since an adult mentioned it straight away.

As a result, criminal investigations were recommenced in October. On November 21 and 22 the police arrested three young people against whom there were strong suspicions. Within five or six days they were set free, with the reason given that there were doubts about the reliability of the chief prosecution witness. The boy, who was 12 at the time of Joseph's death, had been unable to clearly identify two of them from three-year-old photos. One suspect had an “unshakeable alibi”. Investigations against the other two would continue, but did not justify them being detained, according to the authorities.

On the following day, the public prosecutor's office went even further and placed a question mark over all the witness testimony. “All the witnesses have said that the written statements were due to suggestive questioning by Joseph's parents,” claim the public prosecutor's office. Moreover, the witnesses were said to have received money for making their statements. The public prosecutor's office also said a connection with the right-wing extremist scene did not exist, although it admitted that one of the three suspects had been the subject of an earlier investigation on “suspicion of having committed a right-wing extremist criminal offence”.

The state government in Saxony then went on the counter-offensive. Shortly after the press conference held by the public prosecutor's office, Saxony's Prime Minister Kurt Biedenkopf (CDU) made serious attacks on the media and the Lower Saxony criminologist Christian Pfeiffer. The Abdulla-Kantelberg family were now presented as soiling their own nest and the inhabitants of Sebnitz as the victims—including those still under suspicion, who were received by the local CDU mayor Mike Ruckh after their release from remand. Sebnitz had suffered damage and East Germany as a whole was being reviled, railed Biedenkopf. Pfeiffer, Justice Minister designate of Lower Saxony, had dealt “negligently with such serious questions” so that Biedenkopf said he did not regard him as suitable for holding office.

Statements by the Dresden chief public prosecutor's office, which had halted the original investigations into the Joseph Abdulla case, bristle with obvious contradictions. It is unclear why the chief prosecution witness, who in a four-hour judicial hearing on October 16 confirmed his statement but five weeks later completely changed his story. Could the climate of intimidation, which has dominated Sebnitz since the case became known, have played a role?

Also the accusation that witnesses had words put in their mouths by Renate Kantelberg is hardly comprehensible, given the fact that the investigating authorities not only had their signed statements but also hours of audio and video footage. Besides, it is undisputed that the police investigation following Joseph's death was slipshod and did not follow up on numerous clues, although the suspicion a crime had been committed clearly existed from the outset.

Renate Kantelberg indignantly rejected the claim that witness testimonies had been paid for. Quite the opposite, she had insisted that witnesses state nothing that they could not remember exactly, and at most may have given them a packet of sweets or cigarettes in thanks.

What exactly occurred on June 13, 1997 in the open-air swimming pool at Sebnitz cannot be determined precisely at present, and since the chief public prosecutor's office in Dresden has taken charge of investigations again may never be. The fact, however, that neo-Nazis in this city continue to make mischief and feel even stronger to do so after Biedenkopf's appearance cannot be overlooked.

The National Party of Germany (NPD) has one of its strongest regional organisations in Saxony, with approximately 1,000 members. It is represented on the Sebnitz town council by the physician Johannes Mueller, who gained 6.5 percent in the local election. Sebnitz lies in Saxony's “Little Switzerland,” which is considered a centre of neo-Nazi activities. The “skinheads of Little Switzerland” are considered to be the

best organised, and, as a recent police raid showed, they are a heavily armed militant Nazi group. The “Sebnitz White Warrior Crew,” an organisation close to the NPD, is also active in this area.

Since Joseph's death, the Abdulla family are living in fear of the rightwing extremists. They have received telephone threats saying, “You are next.” The doors and windows of their house are kept locked and they open the front door only reluctantly.

After the case became known, in the presence of the media, a rightwing mob openly threatened the family and all those who got involved in the affair. In front of the cameras, a young person stood before the Abdulla's window and shouted, “You will die tomorrow.” He then tried to intimidate the television crew when they spoke to him about it. He bawled at the reporters and obviously expected them to retreat.

He also received support from Prime Minister Biedenkopf, who told the press that there was evidence that such actions were paid for by the media. *Spiegel* TV, who had recorded the scenes, rejected this allegation with disgust.

The reaction of the CDU, which dominates Sebnitz town council and Saxony, can only strengthen the self-confidence of the extreme right. Evidence that a murder had occurred also reached the town council three years ago, but was rejected and those who made the accusation dismissed as “cranks”.

According to information from Thomas Jurk, chairman of the Social Democratic Party's parliamentary faction in the Saxony state legislature, the state government were also informed soon after Joseph's death about the fact that it did not concern a swimming accident but murder committed by right-wingers. Jurk referred to a letter from state parliamentary delegate Joachim Richter, who is now deceased, to then Justice Minister Steffen Heitmann (CDU), who ignored this evidence.

On November 27, Heitmann's successor, Manfred Kolbe (CDU), recommended Sebnitz lodge a compensation claim against *Bild* newspaper, which had published the initial story on the possibility of a right-wing crime. Such an utterance by the Justice Minister, the official overseeing the public prosecutor's office, will neither strengthen the eagerness of the state lawyers to investigate further, nor the willingness of witnesses to come forward. In the midst of continuing legal proceedings it borders on obstructing the course of justice.



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