

Of perpetrators and victims: the making of a German child killer

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At the end of February and the beginning of March the disappearance of a 12-year-old girl featured prominently in the German media. Up to 5,500 police officers were involved in the search for Ulrike, from the eastern German town of Eberswalde.

On 8 March her body was found. The young girl had been kidnapped on her way to a sports centre, sexually abused and killed. It would take three more weeks before the offender was found. With his arrest, the gutter press reeled off the usual headlines. “Ulrike’s murderer—let him never go free!” declared the *Bild*.

To assist in the search for Ulrike’s assailant, Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) politicians demanded the setting up of a DNA database, not just for known offenders, but for all men in Germany. There were hysterical demands for more severe punishments, including the death penalty.

However, the tumult quickly died down. This was not merely because the girl’s murderer was captured with the aid of a normal police computer search, but because the life of the 25-year-old perpetrator, Stefan Jahn, revealed all too clearly that profound social injustices were instrumental in creating the sort of person he had become.

Stefan Jahn’s biography encompassed all of the elements cited in textbooks by psychologists, therapists and teachers as factors fostering a tendency toward violence. *Focus* magazine ran an article headlined “A typical perpetrator’s biography.”

Stefan was born on December 17, 1975 in Strausberg, a town in Brandenburg near East Berlin, then the capital of the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). His mother’s health was poor and the unwanted son was pale and frail. He never got to know his biological father, whose identity remains unknown.

Stefan started school in 1981 in Werneuchen, where

his mother had moved with her new husband and Stefan and Stefan’s younger brother, Marcel. Stefan attended the Yuri Gagarin comprehensive school in the first form. Gagarin was a Soviet cosmonaut who, in 1961, became the first man to circle the earth. The progress embodied in this achievement had not reached the East German school where children as young as six made their first experiences of failure. According to the recollections of his former teacher, Stefan had to repeat his first year and his stepfather beat him “black and blue”.

Stefan began to draw attention to himself by stealing. He stole erasers and pencils from his fellow pupils. His teacher informed his stepfather, whereupon Stefan was beaten even more. He left the school after eight years of humiliation and failure.

Stefan’s mother died of cancer while he was still at school, after which he lived with his younger brother and his stepfather, who obtained custody of the children.

In 1989, at the age of 14, Stefan fled from his stepfather’s violence and lived for three years in the Lilo Hermann children’s home in Eberswalde. His next stop—in the meantime Germany had been reunited—was a “care home” in Bernau. The teachers there had difficulty getting close to him. At first they found him to be “sweet and nice”, but then discovered what they described as his “second ego”—“crafty, clever and deceitful”.

Stefan failed in several attempts to gain a foothold in professional life. Neither an apprenticeship nor a job was to be had during the devastation of the economy of the former East Germany at the beginning of the 1990s, especially for youngsters like Stefan. He began drifting from place to place, lived on social security and, until he was arrested, inhabited a dilapidated one-room flat

in a dreary concrete housing estate in Fürstenwalde. For a time he sought support from the local Nazi scene, had his head shorn and the word “hate” tattooed on his fingers. According to media reports, his flat was the scene of drunken parties.

In 1992, at the age of 17, Stefan got into trouble with the law. He was accused of car theft and driving without a licence. In the succeeding years he was accused of further car thefts. On the last occasion he was caught and in March of 1998 condemned to three years imprisonment. After serving two thirds of his sentence he was released, in March of 2000, for “good conduct”.

In his entire life Stefan had hardly travelled farther than a few small towns near the place of his birth. All of these places played a role in his murder of 12-year-old Ulrike. *Spiegel* magazine remarked that Stefan seemingly “wanted to re-enact his own broken biography. In a perverse symmetry the crime's circumstances and the sequence of events of Ulrike's martyrdom ... reflected the personal background of the suspected offender. As if Jahn had relived his twisted life of humiliation, hate and violence condensed in time—in the space of a few hours.”

On the morning of February 22 he left his current place of residence in Fürstenwalde. He went by train to Strausberg, his place of birth. He stole a Volkswagen Polo car and drove to Eberswalde, where he had lived in the children's home for three years. In the Finow district in Eberswalde he knocked down—unwittingly, according to his own testimony—Ulrike, who was riding her bicycle on the path in the forest to the gymnasium. In a panic, he took the crying girl with him to Werneuchen, where he lived when he was attending school.

A few hundred meters from the former house of his parents, he abused the child several times. Between the brutal rapes he assisted Ulrike with the help of a first aid kit taken from the stolen car. Finally, he strangled her to death with a gauze bandage. Afterwards he drove to Bernau, where he had lived in the “care home”, and burned the stolen car.

Spiegel magazine quotes a psychologist who explains that such acts are “often re-enactments of violence suffered by oneself” and resemble “in a surprisingly precise way” the acts of violence which have been “personally endured”. The psychologist presumes that

Stefan may have been sexually abused. It is in this context that the clues strewn about the scene of the crime should be considered. The murderer at some level wanted to be caught and punished.

Whatever additional insights the psychologists and psychotherapists may derive about the young offender, one thing has already become clear from the facts that have been publicised. German society—in the west as well as the east of the country—produces young people who, based on their life experience, become cold, insensitive, unscrupulous and unable to feel any sort of sympathy. Their pent-up aggression can burst out violently and randomly impact any innocent person.

When concerned people ask themselves what lies behind such dreadful crimes, which occur over and over again, and in which the perpetrators display a barely imaginable degree of cold-heartedness and brutality, the answer is: they are the individual, subjective product of a merciless and brutal society that denies them love, warmth and recognition.



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