

Germany: Unemployed man starves himself to death

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The demise of a 58-year-old unemployed man who deliberately starved himself to death in a remote hideout in the woods is both a personal tragedy and a devastating indictment of the current state of German society. It says more about conditions in Germany than all the pious speeches of professional politicians and academic studies into poverty and unemployment.

The emaciated body of Hans-Peter Z was discovered two weeks ago, in a forest area near Solling in Lower Saxony. It is estimated that Hans-Peter Z had already been dead for over two months. According to a police report he died after not eating for 24 days and drinking only a little water, while documenting his suffering in a diary.

The circumstances of his death and his diary entries indicate that he wanted his suicide to send out a message. According to the press reports available, his death was as calm and quiet as his previous life had been. Even if he had “only” wanted to draw attention to his personal fate, it is closely interwoven with the sorry state of society, which his suicide has now graphically illuminated.

Hans-Peter Z was born in April 1949 in Schleswig-Holstein, in West Germany. On finishing school, he served for 12 years as a soldier in the German Armed Forces. He completed his training as an office administrator, married and had a daughter. Like many others, after German reunification in 1990 he sought to build up his business in East Germany where there was much consumer potential.

As a self-employed person he initiated and organized trade fairs that were initially successful. For a long time, he was able to provide a living for his family, which many newspapers described as a “stable ordinary life.” But the constant travelling—only being able to see his family at weekends, if at all—seemed to take its toll. First, his marriage broke down, and later his relationship with his daughter.

In about 2000, he began to work as a representative for a company that manufactures hammocks, travelling to trade fairs throughout Germany. His boss remembers Hans-Peter Z as “extremely reliably, loyal and honest. If there was just the slightest danger that he would arrive too late in the morning for an appointment, he would drive there the evening before.”

In the meantime, he had moved to Badendorf, a small village

near Lübeck, where he attracted little attention in the multi-occupancy building in which he lived. Neighbours described him as reserved, neat, as someone who “left the house early on Mondays well turned out, and came back late on Fridays.”

But three years later, Hans-Peter Z lost his job again. From October 2003, the business cut back its involvement in trade fairs; the 54-year-old man was no longer needed. At this age, it was difficult to find a job. In 2003, only about 40 percent of all those aged 50-plus had work. One in four unemployed people belongs to this age group.

Like many others, Hans-Peter Z again tried to make a living as a self-employed person, this time without success. He had money problems and could no longer pay his rent. When he couldn't settle a hotel bill, he gave a false address. A few days later, he turned himself in to the police.

A new relationship failed. At this point, Hans-Peter Z was suffering from depression and had suicidal thoughts for the first time. He entered hospital to undergo psychiatric treatment. He lost his accommodation for non-payment of rent. In 2006, Hans-Peter Z found accommodation with friends in Seelze near Hanover.

Here also he attracted little attention in this simple postwar multi-occupancy building. Around the turn of the year 2006/2007 he then moved into a small two-room furnished apartment in Hanover. He was now living like a recluse, reading a great deal and riding his bike, surviving on his unemployment benefits. Again and again, he told his landlord and the advisors at the local unemployment agency about his job applications. But the 58-year old was only offered jobs on a commission-only basis by shady businessmen, which Hans-Peter Z rejected.

The unemployment agency was unable to help. He was told to consider early retirement. Hans-Peter Z was indignant: “I am not a candidate for a pension.” He was still optimistic, and hoped to find a proper job.

However, in October 2007 his unemployment benefits were reduced, and this previously successful self-employed man faced having to lodge a claim for welfare payments. His unemployment benefits now amounted to just €347 a month, but Hans-Peter Z did not make a claim for welfare.

Whether he actually had the prospects of a job in Cologne in

November last year, or whether he only mentioned it because he had already resolved to end his life, is not known. In any case, he quit his apartment in Hanover and euphorically told his landlord about a new job in Cologne, saying that all his applications had finally resulted in success in his old field of work—trade fairs. Hans-Peter Z paid his last rent and left a few cardboard boxes in the cellar, saying he would fetch them later.

That is the last time Hans-Peter Z was seen alive.

In mid-November, he left his small apartment and rode on his bicycle the approximately 100 kilometres to Solling in Lower Saxony. With a backpack and a water bottle, he began his last journey.

At a certain point, he left his bike and continued on foot. When he climbed into the hideout in the woods, he must have decided he was not going to leave it alive. In his diary, he documents in detail each day up to his death.

He writes how his organs slowly stop working, his skin dries up, how he becomes increasingly emaciated, losing bodily sensation, and his mental faculties diminish. At one point, a young boy tries to climb into the hideout, but his father calls him back. At the beginning of December he loses track of time. On December 6, he writes that it must be Christmas. He eats nothing, only occasionally drinking some water. In the end, he asks that his diary be handed over to his daughter. The last entry is dated December 13. His final wish is to be buried at sea. The police later establish that Hans-Peter Z must have resided in his hideout in the woods for at least 24 days before he died.

For over two months, his dead body lay untouched, until it was found two weeks ago by hunters. Hans-Peter Z had not been missed.

The 58-year-old seemed to have internalised all the “virtues” that businesses expect of their employees. He did not work in order to live; he lived in order to work. When society refused him the chance to work—a man who had always worked for his living—his world collapsed. At 58, he considered himself neither superfluous, nor a “candidate for a pension.” He was too proud to ask for welfare payments and face the degradation of cheap-wage labour.

Just as society was denying him work and a means of living, so he denied himself water and food. He showed the same discipline in the manner of his death that had distinguished his working life. “One has to be very disciplined to end your life this way,” said Professor Michael Manns from the Hanover University Medical School (MHH).

First, a person’s fat is consumed; then the body begins to consume the muscles. At the same time, the body lacks vitamins, protein and electrolytes, according to Manns. The level of uric acid builds up; kidney stones can form, unleashing colic attacks. “This leads to weak circulation, the blood becomes more concentrated, and the body dries out.” The person suffers general weakness, and has strong stomach pains. Muscles became weaker, until the person falls unconscious. Finally, there is heart failure.

Hans-Peter Z suffered all these agonies, finally lying down to die, as if to sleep. The two hunters found him lying on his back, legs bent and with his hands behind his head.

His death is a personal tragedy, but even more so, it is an indictment of the inhuman treatment meted out to the unemployed (and in particular the long-term unemployed) introduced by the Social Democratic-Green Party government under Gerhard Schröder (SPD) with its so-called “Hartz welfare reforms.” Older people who have worked all their life and then become unemployed rapidly lose their benefits and become dependent on welfare.

Once a person has to claim welfare under the “Hartz IV” rules, the chicanery begins. The individual has to provide comprehensive information about all their possessions and property. All their savings must first be exhausted before they can receive welfare payments. A car or more than a one-bedroom apartment is only deemed appropriate for the single “long-term unemployed” in exceptional cases. The person has to report frequently to a job centre and must accept any work, including cheap-wage jobs for which they may be overqualified. If they refuse to accept a job or do not attend an appointment they face cuts in their welfare payments. In brief, since the introduction of the Hartz legislation, to be unemployed is one long humiliation.

Hans-Peter Z’s is not an isolated case. The constantly rising physical and psychological pressures and the rapid development of technology in the workplace mean many people aged over 50 find themselves pushed aside and dependent on welfare. In the light of personal or relationship problems that arise or are caused by this situation, it is remarkable that there are not more suicides. In Germany, there are nearly 1 million people aged over 50 who are unemployed and dependent on welfare, most of them for longer than one year.

The parlous state of German society was also revealed by the media bidding war that ensued for the rights to publish Hans-Peter Z’s diary. According to press reports, his daughter has already been offered a five-figure sum for her father’s diary. A movie director and a writer have also shown an interest in his story. Before they turn to the diary of Hans-Peter Z, they should read a powerful historical precedent—Arthur Miller’s play “Death of a Salesman,” in which the main character Willy Loman eventually kills himself after losing his job in the harsh conditions of 1940s America.



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