

Courtroom murderer sentenced to lifelong imprisonment in Germany

Justus Leicht

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The verdict has been reached in the murder trial of Alex W, a German-Russian citizen accused of killing a 31-year-old Egyptian woman, Marwa El-Sherbini. W was sentenced to life imprisonment for murder with “malicious intent”, as well as for the attempted murder of El-Sherbini’s husband, Elwy Okaz.

In a courtroom of the Dresden District Court on July 1, W launched a tirade of anti-Islamic curses at the pregnant woman, attacking and killing her with 16 knife wounds. The court deemed the crime “particularly grievous”. This means that the possibility of the sentence being commuted to parole after 15 years has been virtually ruled out.

By affirming that the murder had been carried out with “malice forethought”, the court also attempted to let itself off the hook. The phraseology implies that the deed was entirely unforeseeable because the victim was completely guileless and thus defenceless, and that this condition was exploited by the perpetrator.

Actually, the court was fully aware of the perpetrators racist frame of mind. It knew that he hated Muslims and non-Europeans, and denied their right to exist. Nevertheless, he was able to bring an 18-cm-long knife into the courtroom, without being searched beforehand. There were no security checks, guards or police officers in the courtroom.

The subsequent hearing, also held in the Dresden District Court, shed little new light on the deed and its background. The defendant had met El-Sherbini in a playground, where she asked him to give her child the place he was occupying on a swing. He then insulted and swore at her because she was wearing a headscarf. Witnesses tried to calm him down.

A woman from Russia gave the Egyptian her mobile phone to call the police. Alex W also cursed her in Russian for offering help. “Our soldiers” were being killed “there” by Muslims, he said. Whether or not he was alluding to the war in Chechnya is unclear. It is more likely he meant the German occupation forces in Afghanistan.

Alex W was charged with insulting behaviour and had to pay a fine. He appealed against this ruling. During the appeal proceedings, Marwa El-Sherbini was asked to give an account of the incident. According to a statement by the judge in the case, she spoke very objectively, even disputing the police account that W had called her an “Islamic slut”. Instead she said he had called her an “Islamist” and a “terrorist”.

Reacting to another tirade from W, who claimed that Muslims were monsters and since September 11 no longer had a right to live in Germany, the woman merely replied that Islam was a peaceful religion. As she was then about to leave the courtroom with her husband and three-year-old son, W lunged at her with a knife and stabbed her.

The 28 year-old W was born in Perm, Russia, and settled with his mother—as emigrants of German origin from an eastern European state—in Dresden in 2003. His parents had previously separated. Apparently the trained painter and plasterer was unable to find employment or establish a circle of friends. He undertook a course in social integration and further vocational training as a warehouseman, but was forced to draw the lowest

level unemployment benefits. His former headmaster at the time said that he wanted to speak perfect German. Acquaintances characterised him as intelligent but lacking in self-esteem.

Several witnesses stated that W identified himself completely with German nationalism, disputed the right of Muslims to live in Germany and supported the fascist NPD (National Party of Germany). They claimed he had also expressed this outlook just before committing the bloody deed.

Ten years ago, W was exempted from Russian military service on suspicion of suffering from schizophrenia, and thereafter placed under treatment. However, confirmation of this, arriving a few days before the verdict, failed to alter the court’s decision on the murder case. In the heat of the proceedings, the defence pleaded “diminished responsibility” due to a psychological disorder and called for a verdict of manslaughter.

Alex W’s mother refused to make a statement to the court, but gave an interview to the newspaper, *Bild am Sonntag*. In contrast to her son, who admitted to the manslaughter but showed no sign of remorse and expressly acknowledged his hostility to foreigners, his mother expressed her sympathy for the victim. She reported that Alex’s father had disappeared when the boy was two years old. At school he was teased and beaten on account of his German descent.

The media reaction

At first, media and political circles in Germany gave scant attention to the murder of Marwa El-Sherbini. Maria Böhmer, the CDU (Christian Democratic Union) federal spokesperson for integration, only made a comment 10 days after the murder, and Dresden’s Mayor Helma Orosz (also of the CDU) found it unnecessary to interrupt her holiday for the funeral service held eleven days after the crime.

The situation changed following repeated protests in Egypt and increasingly critical reports in the Arab media. Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) and Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the former SPD (Social Democratic Party) foreign minister, then contacted the Egyptian embassy and the Egyptian foreign ministry—without, however, making any official comment on the murder. They obviously felt that Germany’s economic and strategic interests in Islamic countries were in danger.

Before the trial began, the foreign office arranged meetings in Germany with, among others, Böhmer and Orosz, who until then had taken hardly any interest in the case.

Egyptian journalists were issued with a dossier concerning the German legal system prior to embarking for Germany. The conservative *Welt* newspaper reported, “The German embassy in Egypt has sent information material to all editorial offices: How do trials proceed in Germany? Why is there no death penalty here? What does ‘lifelong’ mean? It’s important

to avoid misunderstandings and discord”.

While Marwa’s murderer had been able to walk unchecked into the courtroom with a long knife, the district court was transformed into a high-security installation for W’s own trial. A metal detector was installed at the entrance, and belts, jewellery and shoes handed over at the control point. This applied to everyone involved in the trial, including judges and attorneys.

The courtroom was sub-partitioned by a huge wall of bullet-proof glass—at a cost of €50,000—and metal barriers were erected around the district court. Some 200 police guarded the building. The state criminal investigation office justified this by citing the “general threat of danger”—i.e., there was no concrete danger.

Although the trial concerned a murder motivated by anti-Islamic hostility, it was used to further heighten fears of Islamic terrorism. The *Bild* press referred to the case as “the most dangerous trial of the year”, and the supposedly liberal *Zeit* newspaper warned, “Wide realms of the Middle East are under the yoke of a judicial culture which continues to be influenced by a principle of retribution that is alien to us. Consequently, not only Egyptians but whole sections of the Islamic world claim for themselves the right of revenge that is due to the offended family of Marwa al-Sherbini, and regard—in their view—any insufficient punishment of the culprit as an attack on Islam”.

Der Spiegel magazine also reported that an obscure Islamic sheikh in an Egyptian province had called for the murder of the defendant. Investigations carried out by the *taz* newspaper revealed that the sheikh is virtually unknown even among Islamic fundamentalists in Egypt. The *taz* also commented, “It is true that *Der Spiegel* is in possession of information about the incitement to murder—but the Muslims in Germany, whom the sheikh appeals to and who supposedly might carry out the deed, were not informed. Nor can the call for murder be tracked down via a simple search in the Internet”.

The subsequent verdict against Alex W received effusive praise in the media. Böhmer said she regarded it as an “important signal for people in Egypt and other parts of the Arab world”. The message was that, “there is no place for xenophobia and Islamophobia in our country”. This was the tenor of almost all the commentaries.

The political environment

However, hardly any commentator posed the question as to what kind of political environment could enable such a murder to occur. Alex W’s deed was certainly an abhorrent crime, but the fear of Islam and the xenophobia, which produced in him the rage to kill, did not simply arise out of the brain of a psychologically disturbed and socially displaced individual.

His mother gave *Bild am Sonntag* a simple answer to this question: “His view of Islam, his hatred Alex must have got that from television.” One of Alex’s defence counsels also said something very similar, as reported by *Der Spiegel*: “But there is also the picture of Islam presented by politicians and the media. I’m not speaking about the attacks of 2001, but the daily reports about murders.” The notion of Islam is coloured by honour killings and calls to violence, he said.

Politicians and the media have indeed created an atmosphere in which Alex W could feel that he was acting on their behalf. From *Der Spiegel* to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) newspaper and from the CSU (Christian Social Union) to the Greens, hardly any opportunity has been missed in recent years to call for an “end to the tolerance” of Muslims and immigrants. “Multi-Kulti” (multi-cultural) has become a swearword. Alice Schwarzer, Germany’s most well-known feminist, has called the

headscarf, similar to that worn by Marwa, the “flag of Islam”. Women wearing it in many German states are not allowed to be either teachers or any other kind of public employee.

A commentary on the verdict in the rather conservative *Tagesspiegel* daily newspaper pointed out that W’s attitude to Muslims largely corresponded to that of the German establishment: “Whether we are talking about the characterisation of Islam as a ‘dangerous and insane religion’, whether he (W) spouted on about Muslims who don’t want to fit in, but rather infiltrate society, whether he saw tolerance as a dangerous risk or the headscarf worn by Marwa El-Sherbini as a symbol of oppression, as an insult to his—i.e., to German—culture, as a sight he should not have to bear: The basic ideological scaffolding of Alex W’s mind has been bolted into the heads of many of our citizens and, with the coming of the headscarf law in the German states, elements of this kind of thinking have become legally binding”.

Thilo Sarrazin (SPD—Social Democratic Party), a former finance senator and current board member of the German central bank, claimed months after Marwa El-Sherbini’s murder that, “90 percent of the Arabs and 70 percent of the Turks” were social parasites and enemies of the state, “neither desirous nor capable of integration”, and seeking to “overrun” Germany by bringing “ever more headscarfed-girls” into the world.

Some politicians and sections of the media certified that Sarrazin had perhaps formulated his comments rather crudely, but had “had kicked off a necessary debate”. *Stern* magazine wrote, “Sarrazin is right”. He was even declared a hero in the *FAZ* newspaper and compared to a man who had died courageously defending children from thugs in a Munich train station.

In the 1990s, whole families died in xenophobic arson attacks in the towns of Mölln and Solingen. Sharing responsibility for these atrocities were sections of the media and political establishment, who months before had whipped up sentiments against “asylum-seekers” and “economic refugees”. The same role was played in the murder of Marwa El-Sherbini by those who currently agitate unceasingly against Islam and foreign communities in Germany.



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