

Blood will out

The strange, sad tale of Kaspar Hauser

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In the September of the year of Dickens's birth, 1812, another child was born whose life, apart from its wretchedly tragic ending and south German setting, could otherwise have sprung straight from the pages of a Dickens novel. The hero of this story suffered a fate comparable to but far worse than *Oliver Twist's*, was subjected to a schoolmaster not far removed from Mr Squeers, and was treated with that mixture of kindness and cruelty many of Dickens's heroes underwent and which interrogators use when they want to break their victim's spirit. His murder in 1833, just five years after his discovery, remains to this day an unsolved crime. The story of Kaspar Hauser is well-known only in Germany and still debated there with unremitting passion, despite the fact that in his lifetime he was given the title "The Child of Europe". In Britain, if he is known at all, it is probably through the film by Werner Herzog, but since this was a particular take on what for Germans was a familiar tale, it therefore dealt with the facts in a somewhat cavalier fashion.

On May 26, 1828, Whit Monday, a boy of around fifteen stumbled into a near deserted square in Nuremberg, holding a letter. He walked like a toddler and his speech made no sense, consisting of set phrases he had been taught but the meaning of which he did not understand. When he was taken to the police, it was found that he had also been taught to write, but only a name, Kaspar Hauser, by which he was from then on known. Recoiling in horror when offered meat and alcohol, he was unable to tolerate anything but bread and water. Judged a vagrant – and possibly a hoaxer – he was imprisoned in a high tower where his jailer, after prolonged observation, concluded him to be a total innocent with a mental age of three. As a consequence, he was released into the jailer's own family home.

Word spread fast about this mysterious boy, and he soon attracted visitors, at length turning into a tourist attraction for people all over Europe. This might have been the reason for the title he now acquired: "The Child of Europe", though some see a greater significance in this name.

The story he was later able to tell of his years before coming to Nuremberg was that, as far back as he could remember (and it is reckoned that this incarceration began when he was about three), he had been kept chained to a wall in a low-ceilinged chamber, where he could not stand but where bread and water were within his reach when he awoke. Apart from a toy horse and toy dog, he had come to believe himself to be totally alone in this twilight world, until, when the boy was fifteen, his jailer finally appeared. At that point he was given a crash course in walking, and taught to write his name and to parrot a few sentences. He was then half-dragged, half-carried to the quiet square in Nuremberg where he was left wobbling unsteadily with his letter.

During his time in the tower prison he attracted both compassion and cruelty, this dual reaction continuing right up to his death. Visitors made him eat and drink things that threw him into fits, or exposed him to loud explosions. His complete ignorance of fire and of mirrors provided the occasion for much callous hilarity. The boy's senses were abnormally acute: he could distinguish between colours in relative darkness; he had strong and

differing reactions to minerals even when they were covered; his sense of smell and sensitivity to movements were also highly developed; furthermore, he had a phenomenal memory. However, what struck discerning people most was the boy's sweet and loving nature, and his total lack of any desire to see those punished who had so maltreated him. For these people, Kaspar was an embodiment of Rousseau's idea of the Noble Savage.

The exploitation of his extreme sensitivity for general amusement led to a serious deterioration in his health, which would have resulted in his death had not a leading judge and criminologist of the day, Anselm von Feuerbach (father of the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach), intervened and arranged for his transfer to the home of a schoolteacher who had been teaching Kaspar while in the tower. This teacher, Georg Friedrich Daumer, took upon himself responsibility not just for the

Stanhope was the somewhat eccentric son of the even more eccentric third Earl Stanhope, known as Citizen Stanhope owing to his open and enthusiastic support of the French Revolution. This support, however, went far beyond the merely verbal, so his son had to take him to court to prevent his entire inheritance from being slowly dismantled in the name of *égalité*. The fourth Earl was Tory through and through, with a strong aversion to French republicanism. On his succession to the earldom, he found the family cupboard bare but, with the Stanhope family links to the Pitts, he was able to embark on a very lucrative career first as an agent for the British government and then to any party needing his services. In 1831, Stanhope appears to have been in the employ of the Royal House of Baden, and he succeeded in so impressing the citizens of Nuremberg with his apparent compassion, magnanimity and wealth that he was permitted to adopt Kaspar. Removing him from his friends in Nuremberg, he placed him instead



The face of a man drawn by Kaspar Hauser after a dream, 1820. Criminologists believed that they could see characteristics of the Grand Duke Karl of Baden and saw this as a sign that Hauser was related to him.

boy's education but also for his health and general welfare; he also wrote three books about his charge. The boy flourished under his care and, astoundingly, was soon able to write, paint, play the piano and even ride a horse. In October 1829, however, the boy was attacked while alone in the house by a would-be assassin. He suffered a cut to his head but survived, although he was ill for a long time. Speculation, as a result, intensified as to Kaspar's origins. He was removed to a more central part of town and thence to the home of Gottlieb von Tucher, a friend of Daumer's. Tucher sought to protect him from the damaging effects of public curiosity, and Kaspar thrived there until the arrival in May 1831 of an English lord, Philip Henry, the fourth Earl Stanhope.

in the house, in nearby Ansbach, of a dull, authoritarian schoolmaster. This Herr Meyer resented the affection Kaspar inspired and even before his arrival had thought him an impostor. Stanhope then left, promising to collect him later and take him back to Chevening House, his home in Kent. This promise never materialized: Stanhope never saw his adopted son again. When he did reappear in Ansbach, it was with quite a different agenda.

Kaspar's champion and chief friend in Ansbach was Feuerbach. He had written the first book about Kaspar, now regarded as a German classic, *Beispiel eines Verbrechens am Seelenleben des Menschen*, the title of which indicates what most horrified people about this story: a crime against the human soul. But Feuerbach died suddenly in May

1833, believing himself to have been poisoned. At the end of this same year, on the afternoon of December 14, Kaspar was lured into Ansbach's town park with the promise of revelations as to the identity of his mother. There he was presented with a silk purse inside which was an intricately folded piece of paper, and on it a message in mirror writing. While trying to open and read this, he was stabbed in the chest. The boy managed to struggle home but then returned, dragged back by the schoolteacher, Meyer, who didn't believe his story and wanted proof. The purse and note were found but the boy collapsed on his way home. Meyer continued to encourage the belief that he had stabbed himself in order to revive interest in himself, an opinion that has twice been presented recently as the truth in the British press. Since the first attempt on his life, the boy had had a horror of all weapons, especially knives. All those who knew him in both Nuremberg and Ansbach were adamant that he could never have taken a knife to himself. But the story was convenient for some and has persisted. Tormented to the very end by those interested parties trying to make him confess to suicide, he died three days later on the night of December 17, 1833.

When Stanhope did finally turn up again in Ansbach, it was to begin an eighteen-month campaign to persuade the world that his beloved son, Kaspar, had been an impostor.

After extensive research before his sudden death, Feuerbach had come to believe that Kaspar was in fact the eldest son of Karl, Grand Duke of Baden, and his wife, Stéphanie, a relation by marriage of Napoleon's wife, Josephine de Beauharnais. Napoleon had had to make Stéphanie his adoptive daughter before the Zähringer dynasty in Baden had been willing to accept this match, all part of Napoleon's policy to create a buffer region in Southern Germany between France and her arch-enemy, Austria. On September 29, 1812, a healthy baby boy had been born to Stéphanie. At that moment Napoleon was holed up in Moscow, uncharacteristically dithering as to how to proceed with his fateful invasion of Russia. However, in Karlsruhe two weeks later the baby (his grandson, in effect) was declared to be sick and dying, with both the mother and wet-nurse prevented from seeing the child, ostensibly to protect them from a sight that might upset them. In Moscow at the same time, Napoleon decided to make the long retreat through the fast-encroaching Russian winter back to France, reducing an army of approximately 500,000 to just 10,000. As expected, the child in Karlsruhe died. Napoleon's own downfall, though protracted, was sealed.

This healthy son, who had supposedly died suddenly a few weeks after his birth is, however, believed by many to have been substituted by a servant woman's dying child and then later removed to various places of hiding. He was kept alive perhaps as a pawn in a game of dynastic intrigue, until released, irremediably brain-damaged and therefore considered harmless. The first Zähringer line thus died out and the children from the second, morganatic marriage of Karl Friedrich (Kaspar's great-grandfather, if true) succeeded to the throne of Baden.

There have been two DNA tests conducted in order to try and either prove or disprove this theory. The first was financed by the

German magazine *Der Spiegel* and involved the analysis of the bloodstains on the undergarments Kaspar was wearing when he was stabbed. *Der Spiegel* proudly trumpeted the negative results of this analysis when these were compared to the blood of a living descendant of Stéphanie. The question remained, however, as to whether the bloodstains were Kaspar's or blood used to touch up the stains for the delectation of those visiting the place where they had been on display.

A second more rigorous and less partisan test took place a few years later in Münster, when several samples were first compared (two separate locks of hair and sweat residues from the inside of his hat brim) and, when these were all found to be of the same origin, were compared to the descendant's. Though not conclusive and certainly not widely trumpeted, the result of this second test strongly supported the substitution theory.

The Church authorities in Ansbach have

stubbornly refused to allow the exhumation of the grave where Kaspar is buried. Equally stubborn was the refusal of the Baden Grand-Ducal descendants to allow the family vault in Pforzheim to be opened and investigated, to see if the dead prince is in fact the son of Stéphanie. All this changed, however, at the beginning of this year, when jurisdiction over the vault was declared to pass to the state of Baden-Württemberg. The vault was finally opened, but the coffins containing the remains

of the child who had supposedly died after two weeks, along with that of a younger brother, Alexander, who had also suddenly died, had both disappeared. It was claimed that these coffins had been looted in the chaos of Germany's collapse at the end of the Second World War. But there are photographs of the vault, taken well after the end of the war, that show the two missing coffins in place. Who are the interested parties 200 years later who continue to wish for the Prince theory to be buried?