

Did agents bungle US terror bomb?

By Ambrose Evans-Pritchard and Andrew Gimson
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ANDREAS Strassmeir lives quietly with his parents in a well-to-do area of West Berlin. His father was once a top aide to German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. His brother is a city councillor. For seven years he served in the German army, at one point doing a tour of duty as a liaison officer with the Welsh Guards.

It is hard to imagine a more unlikely figure to surface in the drama of the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, the worst act of terrorism ever committed on US soil. But last week an Oklahoma couple, Glenn and Kathy Wilburn, announced that they were going to name Strassmeir, 36, in a lawsuit as a "US federal informant with material knowledge of the bombing". They say that Strassmeir became involved with the far-Right underworld when he lived with the Elohim City "Christian Identity" sect on the Arkansas-Oklahoma border from 1991 to 1995.

The Wilburns lost two grandchildren in the attack on the Alfred Murrah federal building, which killed 168 people including 19 children. After taping more than 300 hours of testimony in their own investigation, they have concluded that the government had prior knowledge of the blast.

They say that the FBI has refused to pursue and arrest a number of suspects seen near the crime scene with Timothy McVeigh, who is said to have been in contact with paramilitary groups in the area and has been charged with the bombing. The Wilburns say the refusal is presumably because the FBI is afraid of exposing the government's negligence. "This was a sting operation that went berserk," said Glenn Wilburn.

The family has accumulated evidence which they claim indicates Strassmeir was an undercover US agent who, while based at Elohim City, penetrated the white separatist movement and alerted the authorities about the impending attack. "Andy did his best, he tried to stop this thing, we're not blaming him for what happened," said Wilburn. "But we're going to sue the US government to break this wide open."

The Wilburns now believe that they have evidence from witnesses that five to seven men were involved in the bombing, and indications that several of these had connections with Elohim City. So far only two people have been charged: McVeigh and Terry Nichols. The FBI now says that nobody else was involved. Strassmeir denies that he was an informant. "I've never worked for any US government agency, and I've not been involved in any intelligence operation since my discharge from the German army in 1988," he said. "This family [the Wilburns] is on a fishing expedition."

"The FBI asked where I was on the day of the bombing"

The decision to name him in the lawsuit comes after witnesses allegedly identified him at the end of April as one of a number of men seen in Junction City, Kansas, when McVeigh was also there during the days leading up to the bombing. One of the witnesses said she contacted the FBI as soon as she was shown a photograph of Strassmeir by a US news organisation investigating the Oklahoma affair.

Within days, a US Justice Department team questioned Strassmeir, calling him in Berlin on April 30 and again on May 1 to ask about his alleged ties to McVeigh. "The FBI asked where I was on the day of the bombing," he said. "They wanted to help debunk the rumours spread about me." Strassmeir said he was at work near Elohim City at the time of the blast.

In a series of five interviews with The Telegraph he said that he first lived in the US in 1989 because he was planning to work on a special assignment for the US Justice Department. "I discussed the job when I was in Washington. I was hoping to work for the operations section of the DEA [Drug Enforcement Agency]," he explained. "It never worked out."

Vincent Petruskie, a retired US Air Force colonel, said that he helped Strassmeir try to get a job in the DEA and the US Treasury. "We took him under our wing when he first came to the United States, and to be quite honest he's a little immature," he said. "I mean he's a good kid, but he fantasises." In the end, Strassmeir says that he went to Texas and started working as a salesman for a computer company. From there he seemingly drifted into the sub-culture of the Ku Klux Klan, the Aryan Nations, and the extreme fringes of the Christian Right. In 1991 he went to live in Elohim City, a primitive community of huts, guns and impenetrable theology. He established himself as chief of security and weapons training, he said.

"I met the guy once at a gun show. We spoke for five minutes, that's all"

On April 5 1995 McVeigh - or somebody using his telephone billing card - telephoned Elohim City. It was minutes after McVeigh had reserved the Ryder rental van that was allegedly used to blow up the Oklahoma City building. According to Joan Millar, who answered the telephone, the caller asked to speak to "Andy".

"I don't know why McVeigh was trying to contact me," said Strassmeir. "I met the guy once at a gun show. We spoke for five minutes, that's all. I sold him a US Navy combat knife."

Without identifying himself, McVeigh also called the offices of Strassmeir's American lawyer, Kirk Lyons, for 15 minutes on April 18, 1995, the day before the bombing. He apparently talked about the controversial raid by federal agents on the Branch Davidian compound near Waco, Texas, which resulted in more than 80 deaths, and the need to "send a message to the government".

Strassmeir says that McVeigh never visited Elohim City. But McVeigh was stopped for speeding on October 12 1993, 10 miles from Elohim City, on the road to the compound. Strassmeir says that his four years at Elohim were among the happiest of his life. But it was a curious existence for a man who had once been a lieutenant in the Panzer Grenadiers. He told The Sunday Telegraph that he had received military intelligence training. Part of his work was to detect infiltration by Warsaw Pact agents, he explained, and then feed them disinformation.

He is scathing in his criticism of the ATF - the US Treasury's Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms - saying that it did not have the anthropological skills to infiltrate the Christian militias. "The Right-wing in the US is incredibly easy to penetrate if you know how to talk to them," he said. "Of course it's easier for a foreigner with an accent; nobody would ever suspect a German of working for the federal government."

"He was just a weird cookie"

In February 1992 Strassmeir's maroon station wagon was impounded by the Oklahoma highway patrol for a traffic violation. The police found in his briefcase a collection of documents, some of them in German. According to the tow-truck driver, Kenny Pence, Strassmeir soon brought heavy pressure to bear. "Boy, we caught hell over that one," he said. "The phone calls came in from the State Department, the Governor's office, and someone called and said he had diplomatic immunity. He was just a weird cookie."

Strassmeir said the man must have been confused about some of the details. "Some calls did come in to rattle their cage," he said. "Something may have been said about my father's position."

In hours of conversations with The Sunday Telegraph, over several days, Strassmeir remained adamant that he had met McVeigh only once. He also claimed that he had copper-bottomed information about the bombing, but seemed torn over how much he felt able to impart.

"The ATF had an informant inside this operation. They had advance warning and they bungled it," he said. "What they should have done is make an arrest while the bomb was still being made instead of waiting till the last moment for a publicity stunt."

Asked if he thought the alleged informant would ever speak out, he replied with passion: "How can he? What happens if it was a sting operation from the very beginning? What happens if it comes out that the plant was a provocateur? What then? The relatives of the victims are going to go crazy, and he's going to be held responsible for the murder of 168 people? Of course the informant can't come forward. He's scared stiff right now." Before and after this outburst he kept repeating that he was not making veiled references to himself.

Lyons, Strassmeir's lawyer, says that his client has been dragged into the Oklahoma bombing story by McVeigh's defence team. He says the defence tactic is to muddy the waters by sketching a vast conspiracy involving neo-Nazis in Europe and even Middle Eastern terrorists. "I call it the Space Alien Elvis Presley theory, and it's been fuelled by nutcases and conspiracy theorists," he said.

"Andy has been damaged. Anybody who puts out the lie that he was linked to the Oklahoma bombing in any way is going to pay for it."