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SPECIAL REPORT

OKLAHOMA CITY PROBE MAY TOUCH TENNESSEE

Two men are charged in the Oklahoma City bombing that killed 168: Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols.

But many people, including federal grand jurors, believe others were involved, based on eyewitness accounts. The grandparents of two children killed in the blast believe a German citizen with Tennessee ties, Andreas Strassmeir, may be able to shed light on a wider conspiracy. He says he knows nothing. Here's what witnesses say:

By Laura Frank
Staff Writer

Two weeks before a truck bomb crumbled the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, bombing suspect Timothy McVeigh telephoned a remote religious compound near Oklahoma-Arkansas border.

Records of the call, which have been widely leaked to the media and were obtained by The Tennessean, show it lasted 1 minute and 56 seconds. No one disputes this.

People at the religious compound, known as Elohim City, say the call was for "Andy"-Andy Strassmeir.

They say, too, he was not there and never took the call.

But many people wonder why McVeigh wanted to talk to Strassmeir in those last few days before the bombing.

McVeigh simply is not saying.

And Strassmeir, a former German army officer and the son of a prominent German politician, says he simply does not know.

Strassmeir, who obtained a Tennessee driver's license in 1992 claiming a Knoxville address, returned to Germany three months after the bombing.

At least three eyewitnesses say they saw Strassmeir in the tiny Kansas town where prosecutors allege McVeigh and Terry Nichols bought and stockpiled the ingredients of a bomb, and where McVeigh is charged with renting a truck and filling it with the explosive combination of ammonium nitrate and diesel fuel.

Strassmeir says he met McVeigh only once, casually in October 1994, at a gun show in Tulsa.

"I don't know this McVeigh guy," Strassmeir said in a telephone interview from Berlin. "We met at a gun show once and talked for five minutes."

Moreover, Strassmeir told The Tennessean he has never been to Kansas, claims to have an alibi for the weeks before the bombing and says he knows nothing about the fertilizer-and-fuel bomb that killed 168 people and injured more than 500 on April 19, 1995.

Glenn and Kathy Wilburn, whose two grandsons were killed in the blast, have deep doubts about Strassmeir's statements.

The image of the bloodied and broken bodies of their 2- and 3- year-old grandsons is seared in the Wilburns' minds. But they are haunted by the accounts of witnesses who say a man they have identified as Strassmeir appeared in central Kansas about the same time as McVeigh and Nichols.

The Wilburns believe Strassmeir's relationship with McVeigh goes deeper than Strassmeir is admitting and that Strassmeir may be privy to more information about the bombing than he is letting on.

They have no documentary evidence, like credit card receipts or photographs, to support their claim. But they cite statements by witnesses who describe a tall, thin, German man who, at least one witness claims, was a frequent face in the tiny towns that surround Fort Riley, Kan.

The Tennessean talked to some of those witnesses:

Catina Lawson, 23, who lived in Herington, Kan., during 1992, says she attended numerous parties in central Kansas that summer where she remembers seeing both McVeigh and Strassmeir.

That was the summer of her high school graduation and a time of newfound freedom, Catina recalls. There were lots of parties, at lakes and in pastures and at homes around Fort Riley, the Army base where McVeigh had been stationed.

Oftentimes, the local young women and the soldiers would get together to have some fun.

Lawson says she distinctly remembers McVeigh, thinking him to be "kind of cute" and assuming him to be a soldier.

She cannot, however, recall specific times or places she met the German man she knew as Andy.

"He was just someone you'd see every once in a while," Lawson said in a recent interview in Wheatland, Wyo., where she now lives.

Lawson says she is bothered that she can't remember the places or dates, but says she remembers details about Strassmeir that support her claim.

He liked to wear all black, she recalled. He was tall, skinny and pale, with crooked teeth and sunken eyes surrounded by dark circles.

"And he had this accent," Lawson recalls. "I remember thinking he was rude, Every time you talked to him, he wanted to argue with you."

Lawson says she cannot remember what they argued about.

Digging into what she says are sometimes hazy memories of those parties, Lawson cannot recall seeing McVeigh and Strassmeir talking to each other.

But when shown a photograph of Strassmeir, she instantly recognizes it, saying "that's Andy. I'm positive."

Larry and Cathy Wild are anything but reckless teen-agers engaged in the frolics of youth. He's a retired high school coach, she a housewife.

Yet, both say they saw and talked to Andy Strassmeir at a lake north of Herington the week before the Oklahoma City bombing.

"I said, 'Your dialect is really different. Are you a soldier?'" Larry Wild recalled. "He said, 'No.' I said, 'Do you work for the government?' He just kind of laughed."

Based on statements from these witnesses, and others the Wilburns have talked with, they believe Strassmeir has not been entirely forthcoming about his knowledge of McVeigh, and possibly the bombing.

The Wilburns would like to take his statement under oath. They might get their chance.

Their daughter, Edye Smith, has filed a \$30 million lawsuit against McVeigh and "unknown others" for the deaths of her two sons. As part of that, McVeigh's lawyer wants to question Strassmeir.

Strassmeir and his attorney suggest an alternative theory for how and why eyewitnesses claim he was in Kansas: McVeigh's defense team has sent an investigator around central Kansas with a photo of Strassmeir suggesting to people that they might have seen him.

Their goal, according to Strassmeir: To cloud the credibility of the witnesses, who also claim they saw McVeigh. Using this strategy, he believes, McVeigh's lawyers hope to spare him from the death penalty.

The Wilds and Lawson say they have been shown photos by McVeigh's defense team but were not led to identify Strassmeir. And, they note, the FBI showed them pictures of Strassmeir first.

WHO IS ANDY STRASSMEIR?

Strassmeir says he first came to the United States in 1988 to attend the 125th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg. He traveled between countries for a few years, then returned to the United States in 1991 hoping to stay, adds his lawyer, Kirk Lyons of Black Mountain, N.C.

Vincent Petruskie, a retired Air Force colonel and father of an acquaintance and fellow Civil War buff, tried to help him get a job with the Drug Enforcement Agency or Immigration and Naturalization Service, Strassmeir says. But no job was offered.

In August 1992, Strassmeir got a Tennessee driver's license and registered his 1983 Chevrolet by claiming a residence at 7613 Thorngrove Pike on the eastern edge of Knoxville.

Strassmeir says he lived there "a short time." His lawyer says Strassmeir might have spent the night there a few times, but used the address mainly to circumvent stricter auto insurance requirements of other states where Strassmeir stayed.

The man who then rented the 1,300-square-foot house in Knoxville says Strassmeir never actually lived there - spending the night only once. But Ray Woodruff says Strassmeir was welcome because he was a like-minded "patriot," concerned about a government conspiracy to "take away our guns and invade our homes." Woodruff says he is on the board of advisers for the national Council for Conservative Citizens.

Woodruff, who now lives in Sevierville, Tenn., says he met Strassmeir at Lyon's home and offered to let him use his address. Woodruff says he has not talked to Strassmeir about the Oklahoma City bombing but does not believe Strassmeir had any knowledge of it.

"Nobody's advocating violence," says Woodruff, a retired exterminator. "We're trying to do things in a peaceful manner."

Strassmeir says he spent most of his time at Elohim City, a 400- acre Christian Identity community in Muldrow, Okla., where about 100 people live. Strassmeir went there to work for cash because he had no visa permitting hem to work legally, his lawyer says.

Elohim City is widely viewed as a white-separatist compound with an unorthodox breed of Christianity: Jews are the devil's children, white Europeans are God's chosen people, and blacks are sub-human, according to some of their literature.

Questions concerning Elohim City arose immediately after the bombing. Richard Wayne Snell, a white supremacist who killed a black police officer and a man he believed was Jewish, was executed in Arkansas hours after the bombing. Some conspiracy theorists believe the bombing was a sendoff or retaliation for Snell, who had close ties to Elohim City and is buried there.

WAS THERE A WIDER CONSPIRACY?

There is one detail of the bombing upon which many people agree - including the grand jury that indicted McVeigh and Nichols - two Army buddies who distrust the government they once served - could have acted alone.

The indictment of McVeigh and Nichols says they acted "with other unknown" to grand jurors to conspire to place a truck bomb at the base of the federal building, just below the second-floor windows of the building's day-care center.

"Whoever put that truck there had to have seen the children," Kathy Wilburn says, holding back tears. "We have a right to know who did this to our babies."

There are two primary reasons cited for the involvement of others:

* Several eyewitnesses saw McVeigh and someone known as John Doe No.2 at the federal building the morning of the blast. Other witnesses say they saw up to four people with McVeigh that morning.

Dozens of Doe look-alikes have been questioned. No one has been arrested.

Police sketches of John Doe No.2 bear no resemblance to Strassmeir and no one has identified him as being in Oklahoma City on the day of the blast.

* Grand jurors believe McVeigh and Nichols financed the bombing by "causing" the robbery of \$60,000 worth of guns, coins and precious metals from a Royal, Ark., gun dealer in October 1994.

Someone who does not match the description of either McVeigh or Nichols staged the robbery, but authorities have made no arrests.

Strassmeir's attorney says if the German national is brought to court to answer questions about the bombing, he will be able to show he was nowhere near Kansas or Oklahoma City in the two weeks before the blast.

His evidence, Lyons says, is a few notes scratched on a Norman Rockwell calendar. Strassmeir says he was mending fences near Elohim City for an elderly woman he and Lyons refused to identify. She kept track of the days Strassmeir worked by marking them on her calendar.

While Strassmeir and his attorney insist he was working the week before the bombing, they say there are no notations on the calendar between April 9 and 15, the same time period the Wilds claim to have seen Strassmeir in Herington.

The Wilds and Lawson all say the FBI has questioned them about Strassmeir.

Federal investigators will not comment on their work. Strassmeir and his lawyer say the FBI and U.S. attorney's office in Denver, where the bombing trial will be held, have told them Strassmeir is not a suspect.

Representatives from both offices questioned Strassmeir in a three-way phone conference in May, Lyons says.

"The FBI are not beginners," Strassmeir says. "They know eyewitnesses are not always reliable sources."

Staff Writer Kirk Loggins and Tennessean researcher Glenda Washam contributed to this report.

Photo captions:

"German citizen Andreas Carl Strassmeir, who used a Knoxville address at one time, has been questioned by the FBI about the Oklahoma City bombing." (Photo of Strassmeir by R.L. Sherrow)

Insert map showing Ft. Riley, Kan. to Oklahoma City in the OKLA., KAN., MO., and ARK. corner area. (Diane Nottingham / Staff)

"Colton Smith, 2, and brother Chase, 3, were among 19 children killed in the bombing. Their mother, Edye Smith, Has filed a \$30 million lawsuit against suspect Timothy McVeigh."

"Kathy and Glenn Wilburn look where the day-care center used to be in the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building Before the Oklahoma City bombing. Behind them are the remnants of buildings that were also destroyed in a blast that killed their two grandsons." (Rex Perry / Staff)