

'I didn't help McVeigh'

(cover story)

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by Roger Boyes and Margot Dunne

Andreas Strassmeir is a racist and white supremacist. But he tells Roger Boyes and Margot Dunne that he is not the 'brains' behind the Oklahoma bombing.

John Doe, the German variant, enters the Berlin cafe furtively as if expecting sniping fire. Andreas Strassmeir -Andy the German to his friends in the white separatist movement -does not feel entirely comfortable and the old military habits take over: a slight stoop, a lowered profile, a head that swivels like a submarine periscope.

As Strassmeir's acquaintance -some say accomplice -Timothy McVeigh counts the hours to his execution on Monday, the former German soldier has decided to break cover and talk to The Times. It could be that the pale, awkward man holds the key to the bombing of the Murrah Building in Oklahoma, America's worst domestic act of terrorism and the source of more conspiracy theories than the assassination of JFK.

Indeed, the German could be the missing piece in the puzzle for those who believe that McVeigh could not possibly have acted alone in planning and carrying out the Oklahoma massacre.

Shortly after the bombing, Strassmeir was named as John Doe II -the man many believe to have been McVeigh's accomplice in the bombing. A former German army officer and white supremacist, Strassmeir had become the "head of security" for the Oklahoma neo-Nazi community Elohim City from which, it has been alleged, the attack had been planned and executed.

These claims have persisted over the years, and have forced Strassmeir into hiding -until now. The legend of the solitary rebel striking a blow against corrupt central government is the one espoused by McVeigh and the FBI has been happy to accept it. Not that the FBI seal of approval counts for much at the moment. Again and again the agency has given the Keystone Cops a run for their money. Thousands of documents have turned up -six years after the massacre in Oklahoma -extending McVeigh's life a little bit longer.

"I'm really glad that these papers have been found," says Strassmeir. "Maybe they will show what garbage people have been talking about me." He sounds as if he means it. Branded by some as a right-wing terrorist, by others as a deep-cover agent provocateur, Strassmeir is reinventing himself as a crusader for the truth. He is doing so from the safe side of the Atlantic: though he faces no criminal charges in America, it is still too hot for him there.

Witnesses saw a dark-haired, swarthy man with a military bearing in a truck used in the Oklahoma bombing. Strassmeir has dark hair and the army background. True, he also has the pallor of a vampire.

While he lived in America, however, he sported a deep tan. So could he be the swarthy John Doe? An informer says she overheard him discussing an attack on the FBI, and claims that he undertook a reconnaissance trip to Oklahoma. Closed-circuit TV footage is also supposed to show him in a strip bar with McVeigh.

It is all circumstantial, says Strassmeir, for the most part the testimony of unreliable witnesses. The FBI let him leave the US unhindered and has held only one telephone conversation with him. There is no outstanding extradition request. Yet, like a vampire, Strassmeir inhabits an in-between world. McVeigh's death, with so many questions still unanswered, will leave Strassmeir in a limbo, neither proven guilty nor unambiguously innocent. The syringe that executes McVeigh will also drain Strassmeir of significance; give him the status of a footnote.

So we sit in the garden of Cafe Einstein, a fashionable latte macchiato kind of place, while Strassmeir delivers a polished defence speech that would more naturally be heard in a TV courtroom. "No, I am not John Doe II, III or IX . . . I was never in Oklahoma before the bombing...have never seen the Lady Godiva strip bar in my life," he says.

Those who knew Strassmeir in America describe him as a fit, tough-looking model of soldierly professionalism. He still affects military dress: olive green T-shirt, khaki vest, Action Man trousers -but the effect in Berlin is of an absent-minded fly-fisher who has misplaced his rod. That is the nub of the problem: how to judge a man ripped out of his habitat. To us, he looks harmless; to his racist, paranoid US friends, he looked mean, ready to take on difficult missions.

Somewhere between these two impressions lies the truth about Strassmeir. Andy the German has two biographies. The first, as a grandson of an early Nazi (with a rare two-digit number party card) and the son of a minister under Helmut Kohl, is that of a modern, privileged German.

"I was the black sheep of the family," he says, but only in the sense that he did not plunge immediately into a university career. Instead he began an apprenticeship as a gardener, became an expert on trees. Then he signed-up for seven years in the German army, worked his way through the ranks -and found, like many offspring of cold parents, a new family that swaddled him with ritual.

The army sent him to university where he took courses in theology and law. "The military was my job, my home and my family." Only the hostility of a senior officer curdled the experience. "I left as a mortar fire-control officer," he says,

leaving us to deduce that Strassmeir knew about automatic and heavy weapons, and probably about explosives too.

After the army, he travelled to the US, took part in a full-scale re-enactment of the Battle of Gettysburg -and began his second, American biography. He found friends easily -retired army officers, CIA veterans, history buffs -and became part of a network. One former CIA man, assuming that his old boss, George Bush senior, would soon be elected President told of plans to set-up a new drugs intelligence unit; they were on the look out, he said, for bright former soldiers like Strassmeir. The job never materialised, but another member of the war-games community offered him a job as a Texas-based cross country courier. The right-wing end of the military veteran network is powerful in the US, a web of influence that stretches into the Pentagon and the federal agencies, in churches and boardrooms, on the oil rigs and building sites.

Strassmeir was adopted by these people and through a friend of a friend found a second family in Elohim City, a Mennonite community on the border of Oklahoma and Arizona. It was as self-appointed security officer of this religious-cum-racist community that he first met Timothy McVeigh. The gun fairs of America bristle with posers, well-oiled beer drinkers oiling their automatics and bragging about their army pedigree; a kind of Crufts with Kalashnikovs.

The mood at the Tulsa gun fair in 1993 was more assertive than usual. The militias were arming up, so were members of cult religious communities and sects around America.

The FBI raid on Waco, the killing of dozens of members of the Branch Davidian sect, triggered alarm, and had stirred up an almost revolutionary sentiment. Strassmeir's brief was to train a small defence force for Elohim.

"My idea was to create a defence instrument such as every country has -even if you are not going to use it, it gives you freedom of decision." Elohim members were Baptists and Pentecostals and, according to Strassmeir, essentially pacifist.

Waco, and the presence of a trained soldier like Strassmeir, persuaded them to trade in their ancient Winchesters and buy modern, more effective weapons. At one stand Strassmeir met McVeigh. They talked and got on. McVeigh, who had fought well in the Gulf War, even captured Iraqis, could talk soldier to soldier with the German. A bond was struck. Strassmeir bought a combat suit from McVeigh -"the trousers are still hanging in my cupboard" -and a pair of heavy-duty gloves used in laying barbed wire. McVeigh bought Strassmeir's navy combat knife. "I was really happy about that, nobody else seemed to want it."

Strassmeir handed McVeigh a business card and heard nothing more from the Oklahoma bomber for two years. A fortnight before the bombing McVeigh rang

Elohim City and asked for Strassmeir, apparently looking for a hideout. The German was not in, the message was not passed on.

That, according to Strassmeir, is the sum of his relationship with McVeigh. Certainly it seems to be all that can be proven in a court of law -there were witnesses at the gun fair and the FBI have McVeigh's phone records. Everything else that has been said about this relationship, central to the whole Oklahoma drama, is too flimsy for the courtroom. Much depends on the testimony of Carol Howe, a young blonde woman who informed on the activities in Elohim City to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the agency that most closely monitors gun sales. Her story is that McVeigh visited Elohim, that there was talk of hitting at federal targets, that Strassmeir was part of a conspiracy.

Strassmeir says she made up stories to boost her importance and to wreak revenge on the German who had snubbed her sexually. "She was a little blonde girl with a swastika on her arm, kind of irritating," he says. "She arrived with two feet in plaster and said that she broke her ankles after some negroes tried to rape her on a roof. But you don't break ankles that way, it was a typical parachute injury."

Howe, he says, was a trained infiltrator, unstable and unreliable. FBI investigators have broadly agreed with this assessment. Once the Howe accusations have been filtered out of the case, not much remains of the accusations against Strassmeir. The strip-club sighting -based on gritty closed circuit TV footage -and some wild talk from an eccentric racist called Dennis Mahon.

Yet there is more to the Strassmeir story than can be deduced from the FBI files. Was there really only one conversation with McVeigh or was it the beginning of a dialogue between would-be revolutionaries? The value of someone like Strassmeir to the ragamuffin conspirators would have been huge. The Oklahoma bomb needed a brain, a military planner. That is why the conspiracy theorists crowding the Internet keep returning to the idea of an FBI insider, an agency penetration that went wrong. McVeigh was by most accounts a brave and competent, if disturbed, soldier. But there is nothing in his biography that indicates an ability to launch such a complex operation.

Strassmeir's biography suggests just such an ability He is extremely bright; he can read Japanese and Hebrew (having had an Israeli army girlfriend -not exactly the typical choice of a neo-Nazi). His knowledge of infantry tactics and of counter-guerrilla operations is excellent. Nowadays, he studies archaeology while working in a Berlin museum; his apartment is full of painted panoramas of ancient Sumeria. Strassmeir is a man who thinks deeply about detail.

And he was so often in the wrong place at the right time. His alibi for the day of the bombing holds good; he was painting the fence of an elderly neighbour of the Elohim community. The woman carefully marked down the hours spent on the

job as well as Strassmeir's name. Strassmeir is angry with McVeigh not because he committed a grossly immoral act -168 people died -but because it was irresponsible and counter-productive, bringing down the wrath of the FBI. "He made it easy for them."

No, we don't believe Strassmeir is John Doe II. There is a feeling, though, that in the huge cast of characters, all the losers, and fanatics that make up the opera bouffe of the Oklahoma investigation, only Strassmeir has the brain to be the Brains.

As he reels off his litany of denial, it is the blanks that come to matter most. He is a racist, a white supremacist, yet this is only hinted at in our three-hour conversation, in passing references to "negroes" and the unsuitability of mixed-race marriages. Strassmeir has learnt, in Europe at least, to hide his beliefs.

For the same reason he has spread a verbal camouflage net over Elohim City. As he describes it, it was a rural idyll where money played no role, children frolicked and the pastor, Reverend Millar, looked after his flock. But the same pastor was the father-in-law of Richard Wayne Snell, who once planned an attack on the Murrah Building. Snell was executed, for two racially motivated murders, on the day of McVeigh's bombing, having watched the aftermath on CNN in his death cell.

Snell is buried in Elohim and one thing is clear: the community was bound by a deep hatred and suspicion of central government. Strassmeir felt at home there, became the eyes and ears of the Reverend Millar as well as his military commander. Simple journalistic intuition suggests that some plot was hatched in Elohim.

Strassmeir, however, is saying nothing more. For the time being he is focusing entirely on archaeology, the study of ruined civilisations. 2