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The Death Wish of a Germanwings Co-Pilot Descent to Oblivion

3/27/2015

The flight was routine, but it ended in disaster. On Tuesday, a Germanwings co-pilot apparently intentionally flew Flight 4U9525 into the ground, killing 149 people and himself. It is unlikely we will even know why he did. By SPIEGEL Staff

The pressing question in the immediate aftermath was not initially "why?" The question, rather, was whether the passengers of Germanwings Flight 4U9525 suffered in the last moments of their lives. Whether they suspected, or even knew, that their plane's eight-minute-long descent over the Alps was not a normal course correction but was, in fact, part of the diabolical plan of a mass murderer. Whether people on board cried, screamed or prayed. Whether panic broke out on board. On Thursday, the tragic answers to those questions became known. And the question as to "why" returned to the forefront.

The French prosecutor in charge of the investigation was the first to provide certainty. It was, he said in a Marseille press conference, not an accident. It was a crime. The head of Lufthansa concurred as did, soon after, the German government.

Why would someone suddenly decide to kill himself and take the lives of 149 others along with him? Why was someone carrying the seeds of such lunacy able to become a pilot? Why did Andreas Lubitz -- the 27-year-old from Montabaur who had only been working for the airline for a year and a half -- become one of the most cold-blooded killers the world has seen in recent years?

It might sound cynical to say that, had a technical glitch been responsible for the crash, the tragedy would be easier to digest in the long term. But it's true. The search for concrete causes such as material defects and hairline fractures; the careful analysis of wreckage; the detailed review of maintenance schedules; the legal and journalistic hunt for those ultimately responsible: All of that would at least have provided a rational anchor to the deep mourning. Such an investigation would have provided a framework for the family members of those who lost their lives, and for a grieving society at large, to slowly move beyond the catastrophe. But this?

Andreas Lubitz would seem to have inflicted a tragedy whose ultimate source will remain a mystery. As of Thursday evening, it appeared that he left nothing behind that might provide further insight into his thoughts. He appears to have been a man without an agenda, without a motive and without a plan. Investigators and police who spent hours searching through his home on Thursday did find indications of a psychological illness, but details regarding what that illness might be were not forthcoming.

Furthermore, on Friday it became known that Lubitz had apparently concealed an illness from Germanwings. During the search of his apartment on Thursday, investigators found a "torn up, current sick note," one that also encompassed the day of the crash, Düsseldorf prosecutors said. Documents "indicating an existing illness and corresponding medical treatment" were also found. They did not, however, find a claim of responsibility for the crime.

Megalomaniacal Narcissist

Lubitz used the same weapon as the Sept. 11, 2001 attackers, but in contrast to them, there was apparently no larger message. He seems more similar to the Norwegian nutcase Anders Breivik, but in contrast to him, Lubitz didn't leave behind a muddled treatise. Perhaps he killed only because -- in the position he found himself shortly after 10:30 a.m. last Tuesday, in the air above France -- he could. Perhaps he was merely a megalomaniacal narcissist and nihilist.

Lubitz, of course, was the co-pilot of the Airbus A320, with the tail number D-AIPX, flying from Barcelona to Düsseldorf. In the cockpit with Lubitz was Captain Patrick Sondenheimer, 34, and the plane was carrying 144 passengers and four crew members. Shortly after takeoff, the plane turned to the northwest according to its registered flight plan and headed out over the Mediterranean as it climbed to its cruising altitude of 11,500 meters (38,000 feet).

It was the kind of routine flight that Lufthansa, which owns Germanwings, makes 2,000 times a day -- and the German flag carrier hadn't had an accident in 22 years. But at exactly 10:31, the plane began losing altitude at a steady rate of 1,000 meters per minute as though it were preparing for a normal landing. But below the jet, there was no runway. Just the mountains of the Alps.

French air traffic controllers, following Flight 4U9525 on their screens, were immediately concerned. They radioed the crew using a standard voice frequency, but received no response. They then tried to use the emergency frequency of 121.5 MHz, which all airplanes are required to monitor at all times. Again, nothing.

At 10:36, the air traffic controllers made a final attempt and again were met only with silence. A new routine was set in motion -- the one followed for emergencies. A Mirage fighter plane was scrambled from its base in Orange, France, to look for problems with the German passenger jet and civil defense groups on the ground were alerted. At 10:40 a.m., the Germanwings Airbus disappeared from radar screens. One-hundred-and-fifty people had perished.

Left Unspoken

News of the crash spread quickly and reporters in France, Spain and Germany rushed to gather as much information as possible. Television stations went to live coverage and newspapers began churning out headlines, but initially, nobody knew that what had happened was no accident.

Experts, of course, began to suspect as much almost immediately, based on analysis of the flight. Had the pilots really sought to reduce altitude in response to a sudden loss of cabin pressure, they would have chosen a safer altitude. But initial speculation focused on the possibility of a technical failure and the possibility that the pilots may have lost consciousness. Or that they weren't able to bring the plane back under their control. The possibility that a pilot had intentionally crashed the plane was left unspoken.

That changed on Wednesday night. Citing investigators who had analyzed the cockpit voice recorder, the *New York Times* reported that the pilot left the cockpit and returned a few minutes later to find the door to the flight deck locked. In the recording, the paper reported, a knock could be heard as well as the pilot's voice asking his co-pilot to open the door for him. The knocking became louder and louder until, in the end, it sounded as though the captain was trying to break down the door.

Inside the cockpit, it was initially quiet, apart from Lubitz's breathing, which was picked up by the voice recorder. But the noise from the door became louder and louder, to the point that it's almost certain that all the passengers saw and heard what was going on -- and that they must have known that their situation was hopeless.

To understand why it wasn't possible to stop Andreas Lubitz in that moment, one must have a grasp of how cockpit doors were changed in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States. It is those modifications, designed to protect pilots from attackers, that transformed Flight 4U9525 passengers into Lubitz's hostages.

Under normal circumstances, the crew enters the cockpit by typing a code, known to the pilots and the flight crew, into a code pad. To prevent the possibility that hijackers might force a crewmember to divulge the code, the pilot(s) in the cockpit have ultimate control over whether the door opens or not via a toggle switch in the center console. If the toggle is pushed forward, the door opens. If it is pushed back, the door remains locked.

'Pull Up! Pull Up!'

For the eventuality that a pilot in the cockpit loses consciousness while the other is away, there is an emergency code. When it is entered from the outside, the door pops open after a 30 second

interval -- unless the pilot inside the cockpit uses the toggle to override the request. On Thursday, French investigators seemed certain that that is what happened aboard the Germanwings Airbus.

At 55 seconds past 10:30 a.m., Lubitz reprogrammed the autopilot. He retained the flight path, but changed the altitude -- from 38,000 feet to 96 feet.

The plane quickly began descending at a rate of 1,000 meters per minute. Lubitz was sitting in the right-hand seat and he ignored the banging on the door, he ignored the calls of his captain and he ignored the radio calls of air traffic controllers concerned by the loss of altitude. He ignored the plane's instruments and the electronic voice alerting him that he had come too close to the ground: "Pull up! Pull up!"

He continued breathing normally, and otherwise did nothing. And said nothing. Perhaps he watched as the Alps grew closer and closer out the window. Toward the end of the recording on the voice recorder, screams from outside in the cabin can be heard.

Lubitz comes from an unremarkable single-family home at the edge of Montabaur. When reports began to emerge on Thursday morning about the true nature of the crash, a thin-haired, medium-sized man quickly closed the door to the garden shed before fleeing inside the house. Shortly afterwards, he said two short sentences over the intercom: "We are endlessly sorrowful." And he asked for understanding that he wouldn't be making further comment.

The man's son, Andreas Lubitz, was 14 when he began flying. On almost every summer weekend, he went to the nearby knoll where the grass runway belonging to the local glider club, LSC Westerwald, could be found. He started out in a two-seater with a flight teacher before soon being able to go up by himself. "He loved flying," says Klaus Radke, 66, head of the club.

Often, Andi -- as they called him -- would make eight to 10 flights a day, using a winch launcher to propel his glider into the air above the rolling hills of the Mittelgebirge, a low-lying range in the German state of Rhineland-Palatinate.

There were several other young flying fanatics in the club with whom Lubitz learned to fly -- a group of 10 or 12 boys and girls who regularly met at the club's runway. "They also partied together or barbecued. They studied together for high-school final exams while waiting their turn for the next flight," says Peter Rücker, the club's technician. "Andi was a likeable guy; we laughed together a lot."

Low-Key, Happy and Average

Lubitz passed his final exams in 2007 in Montabaur and soon thereafter his career dream came true: He was accepted to the Lufthansa flight school in Bremen. He celebrated his achievement at the glider club. Later, he told his friends that he had been offered a job as co-pilot with Germanwings and not, unfortunately, with the well-respected parent company Lufthansa, which offers better terms to its young pilots. Club leader Radke, though, says that Lubitz was lucky anyway. Young pilots who now finish their training with Lufthansa often have to wait extended periods for jobs to open up.

Radke says he last saw Lubitz at the club last autumn. He and others in his group of friends needed to renew their glider licenses and had come together on several successive weekends to perform the necessary take-offs and landings. Andi, Radke says, had seemed "completely normal" and didn't look at all unhappy or otherwise in need of help. "They sat together happily and barbequed after flying just like they always had," Radke says.

Radke's account is consistent with all that is known about Lubitz's life. He was apparently a low-key, happy, average guy, which is exactly how he looks in photos from his high school yearbook. In his portrait, he has short hair and appears to be in good spirits. Nothing stands out. Of his future, the year book notes that he "will become a professional pilot so as to sell his cocktails around the world. ... After years of training, he will participate in the Iron Man in Hawaii." On the back of the yearbook is a Lufthansa ad claiming "fascinating opportunities." The ad was placed by the company's recruiting department; Lufthansa, it said, was looking for candidates for its training program.

Such artefacts and images from the past seem not to fit with the present. Nothing is there that might provide an answer to the question: Why? None of the past clues help to explain why a young pilot would do something so horrific. And it could be that none will be found that might lead into the mass murderer's deeper thoughts -- because there may not be any deeper thoughts to be found. Not even when the mountains and valleys of the Trois Èvêchés Massif grew larger and larger in front of the cockpit windshield. Others must now live with the consequences.

On Thursday, two days after the disaster, Max Tranchard stood on the scruffy meadow next to the Le Vernet campground. Nearby, low wooden houses are built into the hillside and in front of him, two blue vans belonging to the Gendarmerie are parked, along with two red SUVs from the fire department. Mountains are all around, Tranchard's mountains. With decades of experience as a mountain guide, he knows the area better than anyone.

Steep Mountain Walls

Countless times, he has trudged up the plateau to Col de Mariaud, behind which the rugged terrain of the Trois Èvêchés Massif begins. It is an area of gray ravines of marlstone, sandstone and limestone, many of them filled with scree. There are few trees. In the local dialect, Mariaud means "*mauvais pays*," or bad land. There are few trails in the craggy hills and the ground is too barren even for sheep or goats. It is here where the Germanwings Airbus shattered into thousands of small pieces, spread over an area of more than four hectares (10 acres). Workers now have the task of finding and recovering 150 bodies, or whatever is left of them. Exactly as many people as live in Le Vernet.

On the day of the crash, 63-year-old Max Tranchard got a call from his friend François, who has been the mayor of Le Vernet for three decades. The mayor informed him that a German plane had crashed and asked if he could lead 20 members of the Gendarmerie, France's federal police, to the site where they suspected the crash had taken place.

An hour and a half later, four all-terrain vehicles spent 40 minutes driving along dirt roads. Another hour was spent on foot, trudging through rugged terrain. The area doesn't even have trails, just rough slopes and steep mountain walls.

When they arrived at the site, they discovered wreckage so fragmented that it bore little resemblance to an aircraft, Tranchard says. He says it looked more like the mountain had swallowed the plane whole and only left a few crumbs behind. There were bits of the plane's body and unidentifiable scrap, much of which had melted together into clumps. The gendarmes then moved to secure the site, which is the habitat of vultures and wolves.

A narrow, winding road connects Tranchard's village, Le Vernet, with Seyne-les-Alpes, a hamlet of 1,400 residents living in weathered, stone homes with colorful window shutters and paved alleys between them. The crash has transformed Seyne into a makeshift logistics center. A helicopter carrying the French president and the German chancellor landed on Wednesday on a field between the supermarket and the lumber mill that normally wouldn't be used for much more than glider take-offs. Surrounded by mourners, helpers, officials and local residents, they created one of those touching European moments together with Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy. At the time, they still spoke of an accident, not yet knowing that they were, in fact, visiting a crime scene. But the politicians' solidarity and dismay felt authentic and palpable. It's the same spirit that has characterized the people helping in Seyne-les-Alpes.

Families of the victims have been received in the local youth center and the local gymnasium has been converted into a temporary chapel. Bouquets of flowers and floral Arrangements were lined up beneath a basketball hoop and a German flag was placed in the corner. As the first German family arrived on Wednesday, psychologists and their interpreters were on hand to provide support.

City Hall, a simple stone building in the Grand Rue with France's tricolored flag flying over its entrance, has become the catastrophe response operations center. With the mayor is constantly on the move, his deputy, Michel Astier, 66, has moved into his office. Astier shakes his head and says he's never experienced anything like this. "And I don't ever want to experience something like this again," he says.

Tracing the Path

Two soldiers guard the entrance and stone steps with wooden railing lead to the first floor. Astier peers out a long window over the rooftops of Seyne all the way over to the youth center. He and his secretary have pushed their desks together and laid maps out on them. The office has also become the home of those deployed with the French mountain Gendarmerie who are coordinating the salvage effort. A red star on the map marks the site of the airplane's impact, a mountain ridge at an altitude of about 2,100 meters (6,890 feet). Two members of the mountain infantry lean over the maps and trace a path with their fingers.

The remains of the dead are being brought to a site on the outskirts of Seyne -- located just 200 meters away from the place where the victims' families are being brought -- and forensics detectives take delivery of the body parts. White tents, cooled by generators, have been set up in

a lumber yard that is shielded from view by surrounding structures. Forensics detectives wearing white overalls and face masks have outfitted the tents with technical equipment. The property is guarded by a dozen gendarmes and they wave away anyone who gets too close to the site.

Among those who perished in the crash are Maria Radner, 33, an alto opera singer from Düsseldorf, and Oleg Bryjak, 54, a bass baritone born in Kazakhstan. They also include Manfred Jockheck of Dortmund, a married man and father, local politician, artist and college lecturer with myriad honorary posts. His wife Sabine also died in the crash. Ramón de Santiago, a 60-year-old entrepreneur from the town of Mataró near Barcelona who goes by the name Don Ramón, also perished along with his son of the same name, a nephew and his company's head of manufacturing. The dead include Josep Borrell, a 66-year-old mechanical engineer from Angles, Spain, a man regarded as hard-working and conscientious. There's Mohamed Tahrui, 24, an immigrant originally from Morocco living in La Llagosta near Barcelona who had just found a job in Duisburg, Germany. He died together with his wife Asmae Ouahhoud, whom he had only married days prior to the crash. Marina Bandrés, a 38-year-old woman from Jaca, Spain, perished together with her baby en route to Manchester in Britain. Laura Altimira Barri, an executive at high street fashion chain Desigual who had wanted to visit one of the company's stores near Düsseldorf, also died.

The dead also include Sonja Cercek and Stefanie Tegethoff, teachers at the Joseph König Gymnasium in Haltern am See in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia and 16 boys and girls who were their students. Yvonne and Emily Selke, a mother and daughter from the United States who were touring Europe, perished. Gabriela Maumus and her boyfriend Sebastian Greco of Buenos Aires died too. They had been on vacation in Spain. Paul Bramley, a 28-year-old studying hospitality and hotel management from Kingston upon Hull, died. Milad Hojjatoleslami, an Iranian journalist with the news agency Tasnim, died together with his colleague Hossein Javadi of the Iranian newspaper *Vatan Emruz*. The two had traveled to Barcelona to cover a match between the football teams FC Barcelona and Real Madrid. The victims included Japanese, Colombians, Brits, Germans, Americans, and Spaniards.

They all died because of Andreas Lubitz. But as unimaginable and singular as the crime may appear, there have been similar incidents in the history of air travel.

Progressively Lower

In November 2013, a LAM airlines Embraer 190 jet took off in Mozambique on a flight to Angola. The jet was only one year old and was free of technical problems, but the plane crashed in Namibia, halfway to its destination, killing 33 people.

Investigators were able to accurately reconstruct the events leading up to the crash. The machine flew to a cruising altitude of 38,000 feet -- the point at which the co-pilot left the cockpit and took a break to go to the lavatory. The captain remained in the cockpit, a man investigators would later discover had marital problems and had lost a son. He programmed three successive flight altitudes into the auto-pilot, each progressively lower.

Data from the cockpit voice recorder provided clear evidence in the case. For minutes, the co-pilot could be heard pounding against the door, to no avail. The captain also didn't respond to air traffic control's attempts to communicate with him. He activated the spoilers on the wings, putting the aircraft into a faster descent. In this instance, the co-pilot finally managed to get back into the cockpit, but it was too late. The plane shattered on impact.

There are also further examples of murder-suicides of this type. In December 1990, soon after takeoff en route from New York to Cairo, a life and death battle ensued aboard Egyptair Flight 990. The co-pilot suddenly pushed the control yoke sharply forward as the captain used all his strength to pull his control yoke as he tried to pull up the nose to keep the plane from crashing. But the co-pilot, who was clearly disturbed, prevailed. Calling out "I trust on God," he drove the plane into the ocean, killing all 217 passengers on board. US investigators at the time concluded they had sufficient evidence of a murder-suicide, but Egyptian authorities never accepted the finding.

A Silk Airways Boeing 737 jet from Singapore had only been flying for a year and was in perfect flying condition when it began plunging from an altitude of 10,600 meters in December 1997. Only a minute later, it crashed into the ground, killing all 104 people on board. The investigation concluded that Captain Tsu Way Ming had forced the aircraft into a nose dive, causing it to break the sound barrier before it crashed.

Of course, there's also the mystery of MH370. Over a year after its disappearance in March 2014, nobody really knows that happened aboard the plane. A technical malfunction remains a possibility, but investigators are also pursuing the scenario of a possible pilot suicide.

Pilots struggling with mental illness have a good reason to hide it. As soon as they inform their employers, they are stripped of their suitability for flight and thus lose their jobs. In the case of Andreas Lubitz, there are indications that he had to suspend his pilot training for a short time because he was battling with depression. Later, however, Lufthansa doctors determined him to be "fit to fly." The airline is certain to face further questions about its diagnosis, but even if Lubitz were found to have been suffering from depression, such an explanation would hardly be satisfactory. The crime is simply too horrendous, combining as it does two of the greatest fears of our times: mass murder and airplane crashes.

Suicidal Tendencies

People who knew Lubitz as Andi -- people like classmates from his school days and his teachers -- say they are unable to explain how he could have done something like this. A former teacher of Lubitz's at the Mons Tabor Gymnasium said he had not spoken to a single former classmate of the co-pilot who had heard anything about possible depression, behavioral problems or suicidal tendencies.

Of course, that doesn't mean much and a person's life can go off the rails from one day to the next. For the moment, though, it appears that no one is able to make sense of what happened. "Everyone has incredibly positive memories of him," says the former teacher. They are memories of a man who was a blank canvas. Lubitz had no criminal record, his name cannot be

found in major German police databases, and he's an unknown quantity to state criminal police as well as the domestic intelligence agency, which is in charge of monitoring possible extremist activity in Germany.

If there are any lessons to be learned from this tragedy, it is in the organization of the work that takes place in the cockpit. Many US airlines dictate to their crews that no pilot can be left alone in the cockpit. If one of the two has to go to the bathroom, a member of the cabin crew takes that person's seat as a watchdog. Lufthansa didn't have such guidelines, though many companies have now changed their rules, requiring that two crew members be in the cockpit at all times.

As tempting as it may be, one shouldn't imagine the people in the cockpit as teams or partners who know each other well and have done so for a long time. The opposite is actually true. At major airlines, pilots often aren't very familiar with each other, if at all. The pilot and co-pilot are often teamed up for a flight by throw of dice. Afterwards, they have a few days off and then fly again with a different colleague. The lack of familiarity is deliberate because the airlines want to avoid situations where too much trust gets built up. Everyone is meant to work as dictated by the rules and not like some old couple who create their own. This lack of familiarity is considered to be beneficial to safety, but is it? Could problems with a man like Lubitz have been detected earlier if someone had been more closely associated with him?

In many ways, the fact that taking a closer look at the life of Andreas Lubitz may not get us closer to solving the mystery is even more disturbing than it would have been if a convincing motive could be found. A closer look at the life of a co-pilot who became a murderer shows a lot of signs of ordinariness, with nothing to indicate he might be close to the abyss. Throughout his life, Lubitz cracked ordinary jokes, he listened to ordinary music and he wrote ordinary things. By all appearances, he seemed to be just a normal guy.

It's possible that his insanity was buried so deep in his head that even his girlfriend had no idea about it. It has been reported that the two lived in Düsseldorf and that they wanted to get married. She worked as a math teacher and was reportedly already on her way to the site of the crash in southern France when she learned that her boyfriend had not been a victim, but rather a likely perpetrator responsible for killing 149 people.