



Axel Petermann reconstructs a criminal case in which the victim was bound and gagged.

Axel Petermann loves puzzles—as long as the parts fit together to produce an overall image. In his work as a profiler, he tries to figure out how criminals think, to imagine the world from their perspective, and to reconstruct their actions.

He is considered one of the best in the field.

NO CLUE?

THINK AGAIN

ANDREAS WEIHER STEFAN KUNTNER

Of the murders committed in Germany, an impressively high number is solved. In recent years, more than 90 percent of the 300 or so cases a year have been cleared up. The remainder, which are known as cold cases, are very hard nuts to crack. These are the realm of criminologists like Axel Petermann, who attempts to work out what motivated the perpetrators, what their methods were, and how their victims might have behaved. He puts tiny pieces of the puzzle together until the criminal finally has a “face.” “Investigators have to stick to hard-core facts in their search for a motive or a suspect,” says Petermann. “As a profiler, I look for the clues behind the clues.”

Since 2000, all of Germany’s state criminal investigation offices (LKAs) have employed profilers. Most of them work on teams, and avoid publicity. Not Petermann. Compared to the usual circumspect police officials, he stands out like an exotic bird. A 64-year-old native of Bremen with long white hair and a distinctive moustache, he could have walked straight out of a detective series—even without his Columbo-style trench coat. Petermann is comfortable with his lack of convention. He is never satisfied with “the facts,” or photos, or a cozy atmosphere at the office. He personally inspects the scene of every crime, regardless of how long ago it was committed. “I often stand there for hours at a time, as if the murderer might show up and talk to me,” he says. “Not everyone realizes that what I’m doing is working. Sometimes a single step, an inspiration, a new thought will suddenly shift everything into perspective.”

Petermann has always been a loner, even when he led the homicide squad in Bremen, and worked on more than 1,000 cases. He informed family members of deaths, and declined to attend conferences with his colleagues in order not to be influenced by convention or the received wisdom on clues. What he seeks to do is “read” the perpetrators. How did they interact with their victims? Did their violence stop with the murder?

Did they depersonalize their victims, or desecrate them? “My approach is often unusual, or even crazy for that matter. I try to reproduce how people kill. I slip into their minds, in order to see the crimes through their eyes.”

In Petermann’s view, no violent crime can be planned and carried out in an airtight manner. The biggest weakness in every crime is chance, he says. Even when a deed has been meticulously planned, a great many situations arise that require on-the-spot decisions. Piece by piece, they reveal a great deal about the perpetrator. “And precisely that is what gives me a way in.”

Despite all his experience, there are some cases that have eluded his grasp and remain to be solved. But Petermann would never consider giving up. “I never close a file on an unsolved murder. At some point the crucial clue has to turn up, which will lead to the person who committed it.”

Petermann turned in his badge and now works as an independent profiler. People commission him to examine their relatives’ unsolved murders or other deaths. Depending on his clients’ finances, he sometimes works for free. “Some people are tormented for decades by a lack of knowledge, especially if they’ve lost a child,” he says. “They still hope to find out what happened—they’re rarely interested in revenge anymore; they’re just looking for closure.”

Profilers can complete a training program as “police case analysts.” Petermann doesn’t think much of it. “You either have what it takes for my job or you don’t. They’re not things you can learn: experience with criminals, a strong network of contacts, hundreds of visits to crime scenes, long hours of work in forensic medicine. Above all, what you need is the courage to question longstanding conclusions by your colleagues and supervisors. That may not win you many friends, but it does help crack cases.” ←