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Torture Scandal Rocks German Police Refugee Abuse

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A 39-year-old Hanover cop allegedly abused two migrants, forcing one of them to eat rotten pork, and threatened a colleague with a gun. As the investigation grows, it is revealing deeper problems among German police. *By SPIEGEL Staff*

In his spare time, Torsten S. engaged in typically rural activities in his village near Hanover: fishing, raising chickens, chopping wood, speeding through the mud in his jeep. But if the accusations against him turn out to be true, the police sergeant had another, uglier side that came out at work. For several days now, the 39-year-old has been the centerpiece of an affair that could shake Germans' confidence in their police force.

"I smashed him."

"He squealed like a pig."

"Then the bastard ate the rest of the rotten pork out of the refrigerator. Off of the floor."

These and other, similar sentences were allegedly sent by Torsten S. to colleagues via the Whatsapp messaging service, as he boasted about the way he treated two men, an Afghan and a Moroccan, in the police station. The Norddeutscher Rundfunk, a German public broadcaster, was

the first to publish the messages, along with a photo of one of the two supposed victims lying on the ground, hands tied, his face obviously contorted in pain.

Amnesty International described what happened in the police station, which is located at Hanover's main train station, as torture. It sounds like something that would happen in Abu Ghraib -- not in the northern German state of Lower Saxony, not in an official German police department in 2015.

The incident was first revealed by two colleagues of Thorsten S. at the Federal Police Inspectorate in Hanover. Through a lawyer, they filed a complaint at the public prosecutor's office on May 7. Six days later, the local court approved a search warrant for the sergeant's home. The reasons included the suspicion that he had committed bodily harm while on duty.

Another Incident

The warrant, though, mentions other incidents beyond the supposed abuse of the migrants at the police station in March and September 2014. In August 2013, Torsten S. supposedly placed his penis on the shoulder of a police colleague and told him to put it in his mouth while holding his service weapon to the colleague's head. The investigating magistrate has described this as a possible attempted rape. Torsten S. told SPIEGEL that the accusations against him have been "exaggerated," but on the advice of his lawyer, he declined to say more.

It remains unclear why it took so long for the accusations to come to light and why his colleagues stayed quiet for many months.

Members of the police union have reflexively tried to smother discussion about those questions: The accusations are serious and need to be investigated, they say, but insist that this case is unique. Unfortunately, they say, there are black sheep everywhere.

But this case won't be resolved quite so easily. Sources in police circles say it has long been known that the Hanover police unit to which Thorsten S. belongs has had serious problems. Police officers reported problems to the supervisor at the police station, who then turned to the Federal Police Headquarters Hanover, the police sources say. The police station supervisor asked that an investigative team be assembled to look into the events at the train station police station. His own men, he said according to the police sources, didn't feel up to the task. For over half a year, there had been reports that "things are happening that are not ok" at the station.

But nothing happened, sources say.

On Tuesday morning, Interior Minister Thomas de Maizière, a member of Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democrats, summoned the president of the Federal Police Force, Dieter Romann, to the Interior Ministry. Afterwards, Romann went directly to Hanover, where he visited the police station in which attacks are alleged to have taken place. Romann told officers there that he expects the issue to be completely resolved. He said the investigation would also identify those who had seen something but said nothing. Those who look away, he said, also make themselves culpable.

On Wednesday, Romann then addressed the accusations before the German parliament's Internal Affairs Committee. In addition to acknowledging the enormity of the accusations, he also voiced his displeasure with the two police officers who only came forward many months after the abuse allegedly took place. And that the accusations landed in the media almost in parallel.

Doubts About Testimony?

German Federal Police leaders, he said, were not certain that only noble intentions are in play. The two officers at the center of the affair were supposedly once friends before allegedly bickering over performance evaluations. Should their accusations against Thorsten S. turn out to be false, the two complainants may face legal consequences. Even if everything they allege is true, they may find themselves in trouble for remaining silent about them or not intervening.

In interrogations carried out by the Hanover public prosecutor, the two officers have stayed true to their original story. But investigators remain skeptical that they'll be able to completely clear up the accusations -- that hinges largely on being able to find the alleged victims or further witnesses. An investigative team made up of eight officers has been formed to pursue the investigation.

"The federal police's image has already been damaged enormously," says Frank Tempel, a Left Party member of German parliament. Before going into politics, Tempel worked as a police officer and his party is pushing for the creation of an independent police representative to whom officers can turn without immediately being labelled as a traitor. Green Party member Irene Mihalic, another trained police officer, agrees, saying, "only an independent position outside of the police hierarchy will result in real monitoring."

Projecting Tough Image

According to Hamburg criminologist Rafael Behr, who has been delving into the culture of police units for about 20 years, the climate in many police departments favors secrecy. Units have created the sense that their fates are tied together, that they are constantly under threat from criminals, drunks and a hostile outside world. He claims that the rule, even if one officer crosses the line, is for officers to stick together. This, he says, is also one of the reasons why only a fraction of the about 2,000 investigative procedures against police for violence every year end up in court. "You don't tattle on a colleague, that is the iron rule," Behr says.

Strength, manliness, solidarity -- these are the values that count in this world. Thorsten S. portrayed himself as a tough cop: He lifted weights and showed off his muscles on social media. Internally, he had been considered a problem case for some time. His excessive drinking raised hackles several years ago and more recently he became the subject of a disciplinary procedure after a supposed sexual affair with a colleague in the cell block of the train station police station.

But he wasn't suspended until now. He is no longer allowed to wear his uniform and his weapon was confiscated. When the police searched his home, they found another, apparently illegal, weapon: a pump shotgun.

