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## **Update on the raid of the children of the Twelve Tribes**

**Susan Palmer (McGill University, Canada) and Liselotte Frisk (Dalarna University, Sweden) writing from the Twelve Tribes' farm in Klosterzimmern**

HRWF (05.02.2014) - On September 5, 2013 there was a massive police raid on the Twelve Tribes, a communal NRM in Germany. A hundred police (local and "criminal") and around 60 social workers descended at dawn on the two farming communities of Klosterzimmern and Wörnitz. The raid came as a complete surprise to the sleeping families. The police seized 40 children from 16 families and drove off in 25 vans.

This raid was prompted by allegations of physical abuse. But when doctors examined the children, they found no evidence. "But they can't admit they made an error," one father said. "They are trying to construct a case against us, inviting ex-members and *sekt* experts for information."

It has been almost five months since the *Jugendamt* (youth services) obtained a judge's temporary injunction for protective custody order, which took away the parental rights of members of the Twelve Tribes. Today, in January 2014, twenty-three children (including babies and two or three year olds) are still in the custody of the German state, and the biological parents are allowed very little contact.

As one father put it, "I have no right to determine the whereabouts of my own child."

A communal and millenarian new religion movement, the Twelve Tribes emerged out of the Jesus People movement in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in the 1970s. Its founder, Eugene Spriggs, and many of his disciples had roots in Christian fundamentalist churches, where spanking one's children was (and still is) noncontroversial. The Tribes advocate disciplining their children with a "thin rod", and quote Bible verses to support this practice.

In Germany spanking children is against the law. In 2000 a law promoting "non-violent education" was passed, and it has been strictly enforced since 2008.

The September 2013 raid was exceptional. Normally, when abuse is suspected, the *Jugendamt* (Youth Office) is required by law to send social workers to work with individual families to help them resolve problems. Only in extreme cases are children

taken by the state. In this case, there was no warning. This emergency action was justified by the concern expressed that the "sekt" would flee.

Three nursing mothers were permitted to stay with their infants and four older children in an institution. But on December 9 there was a second police raid - to the surprise of the institution's care workers. Babies were seized and the all seven children were bundled into separate cars that drove off in different directions.

After the September raid, most of the parents did not see their children for four months. In January they were permitted visits, but only every two or three weeks, for an hour or two. These visits are supervised by a pair of social workers taking notes and parents are warned not to try to "influence" their children. At the same, the older children are obviously being exposed to anticult attitudes to the "sekt". After four months, small children who live with foster parents are forgetting their mother tongue. Some fail to even recognize their own mothers and fathers. Promises made by social workers in the raid - that brothers and sisters could stay together - were later broken. The *Jugendamt* split up siblings so that children can be "free to develop their personalities".

The Tribes worry that foster parents are bribing or "defiling" their children with a pork diet, television, internet, candies and toys. Parents report that many of the exiled children are not doing well. Some are in convents, others in shelters for delinquent teens. Two boys, one diabetic boy and one who fell down a staircase, have been rushed to hospital. But a fifteen year-old lad who broke his wrist has received no medical care. Some appear traumatized by being separated from parents and family, and are constantly asking to see a beloved brother or sister.

One 14-year old declared in court that he wanted to go home, but the lawyer assigned to him said, "He has clearly stated his will, but his will has been broken growing up in the Twelve Tribes, so this is not *his* will - and he should remain in custody "for the well-being of the child."

This same boy later escaped out through a window and took the train home. Police recaptured him the next day, His parents took him to the higher court to be able to "declare his will", and he was forced to return to the foster home while awaiting the court's decision. Then he escaped a second time. Finally, the court acknowledged it was his will (or else he was hopelessly indoctrinated?). Two other teens took escaped from their institutions and returned home. You can read the 17-year-old girl's account of the raid, her escape to Switzerland with her younger sister, and their traumatic recapture by the police, (see "Diary of an Abused Child" on [www.twelvetribes.com](http://www.twelvetribes.com)).

The *Jugendamt* dates back to the World War II, when it was created to provide aid for war orphans. This expert advisory body exists only in Germany, with the status of a Guardian Council. It is independent and autonomous, and its power exceeds even that of the police.

The *Jugendamt* can enter a family residence on the basis of an anonymous allegation and, even without a court order, can take a child into custody. This often leads to pre-emptive measures and scrambling for evidence in order to obtain *post hoc* judicial approval of arbitrary raids. Complaints concerning the *Jugendamt* have been brought to the attention of the European Parliament and the European Court of Human Rights - many claiming that its employees defend their own bureaucratic interests and the cultural norms of German social policy.

Following the September raid, some parents were required by the court to undergo psychological testing. Although they scored high in the "personality" section, because of their biblically-based views on spanking they were deemed "unfit parents".

"What they don't seem to *get*," one mother said, "is that they're *our* children. They belong to *us*, their parents - and the German Government has no right to steal them!"

A closer study of this situation reveals a strong "anti-cult" bias at the heart of the conflict.

Since 2010, a network composed of ex-members, social workers, journalists, *sekt* experts, and worried relatives has been forming, exchanging information about the fanatical, fundamentalist, patriarchal "*sekt*" where children are beaten. There was a strong Catholic and Lutheran "counter-cult" presence at the court hearings. *Sekt* expert, Klaudia Hartmann from the Augsburg Catholic Diocese testified at the September 13 court hearing for the parents from Wörnitz. A Mr. Behnck and other Protestant *sekt* experts were consulted. Before the raid, on August 21, there were two experts from *Sekten-Info Nordrhein-Westfalen* to support the *Jugendamt's* application for the judge's temporary custody order. Ex-members were also present at that hearing. Since 2010, ex-members, notably the Reip family, have aired their atrocity stories in the media.

In June 2013, Wolfram Kuhnigt, a journalist from RTL, infiltrated the Klosterzimmern community posing as a troubled soul undergoing a painful divorce. He planted hidden cameras around the property and beneath the central meeting hall to capture on film the Tribes' disciplinary practices.

Kuhnigt stars in his own drama as the deeply concerned investigative reporter embarking on a dangerous mission.

Scenes of mothers swatting their toddlers three or four times with flimsy balloon sticks are crafted into horror movie scenes through suspenseful music, lurid angles and a biased narrator. Edited out, we were told, are the "hugs of reconciliation" that normally complete the discipline.

We see close-up shots of Kuhnigt's face wincing in horror as he watches his own footage, and there is a long narcissistic scene of Kuhnigt shaving off his beard to return in "disguise" to the Tribes' autumn festival (although they recognized him immediately). We follow the whistle-blowers' progress as he shows his film to the *Jugendamt's* director, and to a *sekt* expert - actions which set plans for the raid in motion.

This journalist not only prompted the raid, he stars in the climactic scene - the raid itself. This film was aired on television shortly after the raid.

Considering Germany's recent attempt to pass a law against male circumcision, a similar stigmatizing film might have been made about the Orthodox Jews or the Hassidim - but the Jews are still a sensitive topic in Germany.

Time is of essence for the parents of the Twelve Tribes, especially those with infants and toddlers. For even if they eventually regain custody of their children in the higher court, the court might decide it is in the best interest of the child to let them remain in foster homes - for the child's "well-being" and "stability".

"They are trying to *deprogram* our children." one father claimed. "They don't want the children to go back to the *sekt*. They are not just worried about spanking. They accuse us of 'breaking the child's will' - of interfering with a child's right to 'freely develop the personality'. An ex-member told them our spanking stops with the Bar Mitzvah - but then 'psychological pressure' begins. So, when we teach our children about Our Creator, to be true to their own conscience, the *Jugendamt* says we are *brainwashing* them."

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## **German homeschoolers reunited with children that were seized by government**

The Christian Post (20.09.2013) - Dirk and Petra Wunderlich were reunited with their children Thursday after they were taken by their German government because the Wunderlichs homeschooled. The Wunderlichs had to agree to send their kids to public school before their kids were returned to them.

On Aug. 29, armed police officers raided the Wunderlich's home and forcibly took their four children, ages 7 to 14. There were no accusations of abuse nor neglect. The Wunderlich's were homeschooling their kids, in violation of German law.

The case has gained attention in the United States through the efforts of the Home School Legal Defense Association, which has been assisting the Wunderlichs. HSLDA encouraged its supporters to contact German officials and relay their support for the Wunderlichs. An article on the HSLDA website claims that thousands of Americans contacted the German embassy to complain about how the Wunderlichs were treated. HSLDA hopes that their efforts will "change Germany's attitude ... by embarrassing the authorities."

At the time of the raid, the parents pleaded with the police. They agreed to send their kids to public school if the police would not take them away. The police told them at the time that it was too late to make such an agreement. Michael Farris, chairman of HSLDA, believes that the international pressure led to the court agreeing to return the Wunderlich children to their parents.

"It's a small victory, but it's still a victory," Farris said. "... What we've seen today is a reversal in the German courts caused by the mounting international pressure from human rights advocates. This is a promising start to what will hopefully be a reversal on Germany's stance on homeschooling altogether."

Farris believes that Germany's mistreatment of homeschoolers is part of a larger problem in Germany in which its citizens are not allowed to live according to the dictates of their conscience.

"The way the parents were forced into complying with the government's wishes is only part of how Germany mistreats its citizens," he said. "The German government loves compromises as long as they ultimately get their way. They were fine with a Muslim teenager wearing a swimsuit with a head covering as long as she took part in co-ed pool activities despite her objections. And now they're fine that the Wunderlich family gets their children back as long as they attend a state school. The attitude of 'Our way or else...' is still very much alive in a supposedly tolerant society."

HSLDA has been helping another German homeschooling family, the Romeikes, that fled to the United States to avoid having their children seized from them. The Obama

administration has been trying to deport the Romeikes back to Germany. In a last effort, HSLDA is petitioning the U.S. Supreme Court to hear that case.

Farris criticized the Obama administration for not speaking out about the Wunderlich case.

"The State Department says it seeks to promote a greater respect for human rights on its website," he said. "It lists specific examples including freedom of expression and the protection of minorities, but what it doesn't mention is religious freedom. It is clear that the administration doesn't mind that religious homeschoolers in Germany are having their rights trampled upon by the way the Justice Department is going after the Romeike family."

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## **Muslim girl must go to swimming lessons - German court**

BBC News (11.09.2013) - A court in Germany has ruled that a Muslim schoolgirl should take part in mixed-sex swimming lessons.

Her parents had insisted that the girl, 13, not take part in swimming lessons at her school in Frankfurt.

Some Muslim parents say that such lessons run contrary to Islamic principles of modesty.

However, the judge in the case said the girl could wear an all-over swimming garment sometimes dubbed a "burkini" in order to accommodate her beliefs.

Some Muslim girls already wear the garment to take part in lessons.

However, others reject that solution, saying that the garment is clumsy but also that it is unacceptable for Muslim girls to be in close proximity to boys clad only in swimming trunks, the BBC's Stephen Evans reports from Berlin.

The judges in Germany's Federal Administrative Court ruled that "the basic right to religious freedom does not... provide for any demand not to be confronted at school with the behavioural habits of third parties - including those pertaining to clothing".

The judges went on to point out that such "habits" were widespread in Germany in the summer months.

The lawyer for the girl's family had said that there was already segregation of gym lessons in some Catholic areas.

There are also some secular gyms in Germany which have special segregated areas reserved for women to exercise.

The family who brought the case in question are from Morocco, the German magazine Der Spiegel reports, which adds that the girl had done well academically since joining the school.

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## **Police have raided two religious communities in Bavaria**

HRWF (09.09.2013) - On 5 September at 6 am, more than 100 armed officers were involved in one of the biggest police operations of the recent German history to remove children from their parents living in a religious community (the German branch of the Twelve Tribes) and place them temporarily with foster families. They were taken from two locations run by the group - 28 from a monastery and farm of Klosterzimmern near Deiningen town and 12 from a communal house in the village of Wornitz. At this stage, the reason for such an impressive crackdown seems to be the suspicion that the parents discipline their children by spanking them or using a "small reed-like rod" if disobedient.

The judicial procedure will clarify the charges and confirm if they are founded or not.

See below the links to several websites presenting the issue from various angles: BBC - Analysis of Dr Massimo Introvigne (Cesnur) – Viewpoint of the accused party – Info about the Twelve Tribes

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-23977577>

<http://www.lanuovabq.it/it/articoli-germania-sculacci-tuo-figlio-te-lo-portano-via-7228.htm>

<http://www.christianpost.com/news/police-raid-home-seize-children-of-homeschooling-family-in-germany-103435/>

<http://hslida.org/hs/international/Germany/201308300.asp>

<http://twelvetribes.com/frequently-asked-questions>

### ***The Twelve Tribes in France***

In 2011, Susan Palmer, a researcher, sociologist and writer in the area of New Religious Movements in Canada, published a book entitled "The New Heretics in France" (Oxford University Press) in which she devotes a whole chapter to the French branch of the Twelve Tribes. Here is an excerpt of it:

"The Tribes first came to Europe from the United States in the early 1980s. Twenty-four German youth, friends since high school, set up a small community. After being evicted from their home and encountering strict regulations concerning home schooling, they left Germany and traveled around France, Spain and Portugal in 1982. In 1983, they were invited by a woman named Teresa to come and live in the stately eighteenth-century chateau she had inherited in foothills of the Pyrenees. They dubbed it "Tabitha's Place" after the first French woman joined their company. They renovated the chateau, preserving its eighteenth century style, and reside there today. (...)

The way of life at Tabitha's Place is based on a millenarian theology, for the members are preparing for the return of Jesus – whom they call by his Hebrew name, "Yahshua". To this end, they engage in Bible study and communal living and cultivate the gift of prophecy. Each person must confess all sins and strive to "increase in unselfishness" so as to build a loving community modeled on the primitive Church in the Book of Acts. The so-called "pure and spotless bride", mentioned in Revelation, is understood to be *their* church. Through missionary outreach, procreation, and "swarming", the Twelve Tribes have established communities globally. Their aim is "to raise up people" so that their "bridegroom," whom they call Yahshua, will return to claim His bride, the restored church made up of obedient disciples.

Founded in the early 1970s in Chattanooga, Tennessee, by Eugene Elbert Spriggs and his wife, Marsha, the group shares all things in common as described in the book of Acts. Over the years, the movement has adopted various names: the Vine, the Apostolic Order, the Northeast Kingdom Community Church, the Messianic Communities – and

most recently the Twelve Tribes. Each local tribe has its own Hebrew name, and in France it is called the Tribe of Reuben.

By 1995 the community at Sus had attracted around 200 members from all over Europe. Their daily meetings, called *minhas*, combined testimonials, singing, dancing, and impromptu sermons, and were conducted with assistance from simultaneous translators in French, Spanish, German and English. At this time they were a thriving community, supported by hard work in cottage industries. The men fashioned furniture and leather shoes and sandals. The women sewed cotton and linen clothing, and used the ancient oven in the chateau to bake whole grain bread and croissants. These goods were sold at local market places, at fairs, and in boutiques in Paris. The brothers and sisters would encounter prospective converts, strike up conversations and invite them to attend their weddings or Saturday evening *shabbaths*. Cordial relations with their neighbours and local authorities were cultivated.

The first troubles started once ADFI became aware of the presence of a new *secte* in France."

**The book "The New Heretics in France" by Susan Palmer can be purchased on Amazon.com: <http://www.amazon.com/The-New-Heretics-France-Government-Sponsored/dp/0199735212>**

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## **Police raid home, seize children, of homeschooling family in Germany**

Christian Post (30.08.2013) - Police officers in Germany raided the home Thursday of Dirk and Petra Wunderlich and forcibly took their four children, ages 7 to 14, because they homeschool.

"I looked through a window and saw many people, police, and special agents, all armed. They told me they wanted to come in to speak with me. I tried to ask questions, but within seconds, three police officers brought a battering ram and were about to break the door in, so I opened it," Dirk Wunderlich [told the Home School Legal Defense Association](#), which has been working to help the Wunderlichs.

"The police shoved me into a chair and wouldn't let me even make a phone call at first," he said. "It was chaotic as they told me they had an order to take the children. At my slightest movement the agents would grab me, as if I were a terrorist. You would never expect anything like this to happen in our calm, peaceful village. It was like a scene out of a science fiction movie. Our neighbors and children have been traumatized by this invasion."

The Wunderlichs live in a small town about 25 miles south of Frankfurt.

In the court order authorizing the use of force to take the Wunderlich's children away from them, there are no allegations of abuse nor neglect, only that the Wunderlichs homeschool, which is against the law in Germany.

Dirk Wunderlich claimed that he and his wife were not given the opportunity to speak to their children before they were taken away, and they were not told where their children are being kept.

"When I went outside, our neighbor was crying as she watched," he recalled. "I turned around to see my daughter being escorted as if she were a criminal by two big policemen. They weren't being nice at all. When my wife tried to give my daughter a kiss and a hug goodbye, one of the special agents roughly elbowed her out of the way and said – 'It's too late for that.' What kind of government acts like this?"

After their children were taken from them, officials told the Wunderlichs that they would not be able to see them "anytime soon."

The Wunderlichs had moved out of Germany and tried living in other European countries to protect their right to homeschool, but had to return to Germany last year to find work.

Germany is a signatory to a number of human rights treaties that were violated by the seizure of the Wunderlich kids, HSLDA Chairman Michael Farris argued.

"The United States Constitution is not alone in upholding the right of parents to decide how to educate their children. Germany is a party to numerous human rights treaties that recognize the right of parents to provide an education distinct from the public schools that so that children may be educated according to the parents' religious convictions. Germany has simply not met its obligations under these treaties or as a liberal democracy," he said.

The U.S. Justice Department is currently trying to deport back to Germany the Romeikes, a homeschooling family that came to the United States to prevent the seizure of their children. HSLDA has appealed that case to the U.S. Supreme Court.

What happened to the Wunderlichs demonstrates the importance of the Romeike case, Farris argued.

"HSLDA and I will do whatever we can to help this family regain custody of their children and ensure that they are safe from this persecution. ... Families in Germany need a safe place where they can educate their children in peace," he said.

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