The wild child

The unsolved mystery of KASPAR HAUSER

A valuable introduction to a timeless and fascinating mystery involving child buse and murder." — Kirkus Reviews

effrey Moussaieff Masson

AUTHOR OF THE BESTSELLING WHEN ELEPHANTS WEEP

PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED AS LOST PRINCE





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For

LEILA

my found Princess

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(series ed., Hans Magnus Enzensberger): Georg Friedrich Daumer, Anselm von Feuerbach: Kaspar Hauser, mit einem Bericht von Johannes Mayer und einem Essay von Jeffrey M. Masson (Frankfurt am Main: Eichborn Verlag, 1995).

Susan Arellano of The Free Press has been a fine editor, and I am thankful for her light touch and patience. Susan Llewellyn saved me from a number of errors and added a great deal to the accuracy and readability of the entire book. I am very grateful to her.

Kaspar Hauser said that he was lost in wonder when he saw the night sky for the first time in his life in 1828. I dedicate this book to Princess Leila, for I am lost in wonder at the love that radiates from her, as the foundling was at the stars he saw in Nuremberg.

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Maspar Hauser, Europe's most famous wild child, was a sixteen-year-old boy who turned up in the streets of Nuremberg, Germany, in 1828. He immediately drew local interest because he seemed to be unable to speak and barely able to walk, and was apparently not able to understand what was said to him. Rumors, at first dismissed as nonsensical, began to circulate that he was the heir to the throne of Baden, the son of Napoleon's adopted daughter, Stéphanie de Beauharnais, Grand Duchess of the House of Baden. He drew international interest when it became apparent that somebody wanted him dead: A year after he first appeared, an unknown person tried to murder him. Soon all the newspapers of Europe and even the United States (the latter, no doubt, the source of Herman Melville's abiding interest in Kaspar Hauser) were discussing him, his life, and the rumors. Was he a prince? Was he a wild man? Did his "goodness" represent the original nature of man? How easily did he learn language, and what did he talk about in that language? In 1833, less than five years after he first appeared in Nuremberg, Kaspar Hauser was lured to a deserted park on the pretext that his true origins would be revealed to him. He was stabbed in the heart, and died of his wounds three days later. The murderer was never found, despite a large reward offered by the king of Bavaria. The mystery of who he was, where he came from, and why he was killed has not been solved to this day.

Called the "child of Europe," this "foundling" is known in the United States as the name of a psychiatric syndrome¹ and through a lovely song by Suzanne Vega called "Wood Horse (Caspar Hauser's Song)."²

For the last 165 years there has been unceasing interest in this mysterious story. Every year in Germany at least one new book comes out, most of them on the side of Kaspar Hauser, but a few aiming to prove he was a fraud. The literature is immense: More than three thousand books have been written about Kaspar Hauser, and at least fourteen thousand articles.³ The 1899 edition of the German *Brockhaus*, in its long article about Kaspar Hauser, avers that he was probably a fraud. The 1954 edition of the same encyclopedia says the opposite. The major historical and scholarly work, however, is clearly on the side of the pro-Hauser forces.

There are many reasons for this interest: Writers and poets found something haunting and compelling in this melancholy and solitary boy who had been kept for all or most of his childhood in a lonely dungeon. Educators and intellectuals were fascinated by the light his imprisonment shed on the socalled "natural man." The general public was convinced, not without reason, that Kaspar Hauser was really the legitimate heir to the throne of Baden, a prince who had been robbed of his birthright. For me the story resonates with my interest in child abuse.

The Brief Life of Kaspar Hauser

Kaspar Hauser was a young boy who was first seen wandering the streets of Nuremberg in May 1828 (the very year in which the Wild Boy of Aveyron died). The police put him in a tower, where he immediately became the focus of attention: The citizens of Nuremberg thought he was a *Tiermensch* (a feral child) since he could barely walk, evidently could speak but a few bizarre sentences, and could hear but not understand what was said to him. The English poet Spenser relates of his wild man that "... other language had he none, nor speech, / But a soft murmur and confused sound / Of senseless words, which nature did him teach."⁴

He showed an aversion to every kind of food—especially meat—except bread, and he would drink nothing but water. He carried a letter for the captain of the garrison of the light cavalry. He appeared to be between fifteen and eighteen years old, though in most respects he seemed more like a boy of eleven. The one sentence he repeated continually, and used as an all-purpose means of communication, was: "Ich möcht' ein solcher Reiter werden wie mein Vater einer war." That is the High German version of what he actually said, which was: "Reutä wähn, wie mei Vottä wähn is," or "Ä sechtene möcht ih wähn, wie mei Vottä wähn is," something like: "I would like to be a rider the way my father was."

Mayor Binder's Proclamation

Kaspar Hauser remained solitary and withdrawn. The mayor of the city, Jakob Friedrich Binder (1787–1856), was fortyone years old when he first met him. The day after Kaspar arrived in the city, Binder invited the city doctor, Preu, to examine him in his presence, since he had not been able to extract anything from him. Over the next few days Binder continued to meet with Kaspar, had friends speak with him, and finally issued a public proclamation, which he wrote on July 7, 1828, and published on July 14.⁵

It was the first published document in the history of the Kaspar Hauser case and quickly achieved almost canonical status as the *Keimzelle* (germ cell) of all future versions. Since the actual text has never been translated into English, and because it contains no doubt the earliest comments of Kaspar Hauser himself (although not in direct quotations), I reproduce the entire document (see appendix 1), which is written in stilted nineteenth-century official German (most sentences in the original are a page long), but I omit its appendices since they are almost identical to information that will be supplied from elsewhere.⁶

In spite of the many problems raised by the text (for example, could Kaspar Hauser really have provided all this information within less than two weeks of his arrival?), it is a document that must be read and reread. I urge the reader at this point to turn to it in the appendices and read it through before continuing with this introduction.

Newspapers all over Europe and as far away as New York, Boston, and Philadelphia immediately reported on the strange boy.⁷ A day after the proclamation was issued, however, a sharply critical letter was sent to the local authorities complaining that the publication may well have compromised the investigation - which should, in any event, be under the jurisdiction of the superior court, and demanding that all the documents assembled be sent immediately to it. A government official replied immediately, agreeing with the criticisms and letting the author know that the proclamation had already been published in two newspapers (though only in small numbers), but that all remaining copies had been seized and would no longer be published. The letter was signed by the legal counsel to the court of appeals in Ansbach, a small town not far from Nuremberg. It was also signed by the president of this court, the great German jurist Paul Johann Anselm Ritter von Feuerbach (1775-1833), the man responsible for the abolition of torture in Bavaria.⁸ As presiding chief judge in the court of appeals for Ansbach, he headed the court that had jurisdiction over the Kaspar Hauser case. Feuerbach was not happy with this proclamation:

This official story, if one wants to call it that, contains some unbelievable and contradictory things. There were also many details that were given with such completeness and assurance that it is hard to ascertain what came from the questioner and what from Kaspar Hauser; how much really flows from his dim memories and how much he was unwittingly talked into, or how much was adapted from the many questions; what was added to or created through suppositions; what was grounded in simply misunderstood comments he made, since he was an animal-like man barely capable of speech, still unacquainted with the most commonplace