

The Telegraph

Who is the boy from the forest?

He said his name was Ray. He spoke about his parents, in English and stilted German. But Berlin authorities are still asking who the mysterious teenager can be.



Just who is the boy from the forest?

By Patrick Sawyer and Fiona Govan in Berlin

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Nothing about him struck her as extraordinary. At first glance he seemed indistinguishable from any of the other teenage tourists congregating on the street outside.

Blonde hair cut in a moptop style, blue eyes, about 5ft 11in tall, the English-speaking boy looked healthy and well cared for. He said his name was Ray, he wore a clean white sweatshirt, and he carried a rucksack and a sleeping bag.

It was only when the lad spoke that the middle-aged civil servant realised this was no ordinary 17-year-old who had walked into the grand lobby of Berlin's Rathaus, the imposing red brick city hall built in 1861.

"I'm all alone in the world," he told her when he turned up at the front desk around 4pm on Monday, September 5. "I don't know who I am. Please help me."

The teenager told the civil servant, who spoke English, that for "as long as he could remember" he had been travelling with his father, who he called Ryan. He had been walking north since his death, following his compass.

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['Forest boy' adapts to Berlin life](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/8777302/Berlin-forest-boy-adapts-quickly-to-city-life.html)

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[Forest boy 'is telling the](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/8772016/German-forest-boy-is-telling-the-truth-say-police.html)

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Those hesitant, but clearly spoken words were to signal the start of a mystery whose answer has so far eluded the combined powers of the [German](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/) (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/germany/>) police, Interpol and Berlin's social services: just who is the boy from the forest?

It is a question which has touched on something deep in our collective psyche, harking back to modern man's origins as a hunter gatherer, roaming the plains and forests of the European continent.

Ray's story also exposes Europeans' ambivalent attitude towards forests, feeding the myths that have surrounded them since people chose to settle in villages and towns.

It was Germany, after all, that gave us the dark Mittel-European fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, with their nightmarish forest settings, along with the story of 16-year-old Kaspar Hauser, the archetype of the boy from nowhere, who, in May 1828, appeared out of the blue on the streets of Nuremberg, barely able to speak.

Perhaps it is this aspect of the story that explains the fascination with the 17-year-old boy. Could he be an enfant sauvage, emerging from unspoilt nature to hold up a mirror to our pampered, but often brutish, civilisation?

The boy told the Berlin civil servant, who asked for her name to be withheld, that his first name was Ray and that he was born in 1994.

"He didn't look at all like a vagrant," she said. "He didn't smell, he was clean, his clothes were clean, but he simply didn't know anything about who he was. Although he seemed to be a native English speaker I detected some sort of accent."

At one stage Ray told her: "I'm looking forward to sleeping in a bed."

His story clearly raised more questions than it answered. The woman contacted child welfare services, who told her to send him to a crisis centre across the city.

"I printed off a map for him, wrote some instructions and told him how to buy a ticket for the U-bahn [underground]."

Surprisingly, the boy pulled some coins out of his pocket and asked if they were enough to get him to his destination. He also asked if he could buy his ticket from "a machine", suggesting he was at the very least aware of the basics of contemporary travel.

Even more puzzling, he successfully found his way to the Jugendnotdienst emergency youth shelter in the Charlottenburg district, five miles across a bewildering new city, on his own.

The 30-minute journey involved crossing the Rathaus gardens, in the shadow of Berlin's iconic 368 metre Fernsehturm television tower and boarding a train at Alexanderplatz station, before changing at the equally busy Charlottenburg station for another train.

On arriving at Mierendorffplatz station he faced a five-minute walk before reaching the shelter.

Police later revealed the boy had told them he had been living in a forest for "at least five years" following the death of his mother, Doreen, in a car crash. Ray went on to tell officers that his father had recently died in a fall and that he had buried him in a shallow grave, before piling rocks on top of him. His father had told him to head north to Berlin should anything happen, and he had followed his instructions.

The teenager seemed to adapt quickly to life in the Jugendnotdienst, according to Beate Kohn, the shelter's manager. He exhibited no disorientation, slept normally in a bed and seemed happy taking regular showers. Furthermore he seemed to be a fan of a TV music channel, enjoyed 10-pin bowling sessions with the other youngsters and had no trouble using a knife and fork.

Mrs Ko[umlatt]hn said that while at the centre, where the youngsters' bedrooms have balconies overlooking a tree-lined park, "he mixed with the others like a regular teenager".

This was no feral "wolf boy", but in fact appeared to have been raised according to conventional, civilised norms.

After 10 days Ray was transferred to a more specialised youth shelter in another part of the city, whose location is being kept secret by the authorities.

Here he has been visited by police officers, language experts and psychologists desperate for a way of unravelling the enigma.

Behind the scenes the authorities are working on a number of theories. The first is that Ray's story is true, in which case they hope to tease out more details about his life, in the hope of being able to trace members of his wider family.

Another is that Ray is a runaway who has invented a bizarre cover story.

"This could all be a fantasy," admitted a police spokesman last week. "But he is a child and we have to investigate his story until we establish the facts."

To this end Interpol are trawling their databases to see if anyone matching his description has been reported missing.

But there is also the possibility that Ray in fact suffered some trauma that led him to adopt the identity of a "forest boy".

Psychologists call this a "dissociative fugue", which can be brought on by a sudden crisis, leading the victim to experience a near total amnesia and disappear from their old life by trying to piece together a new identity. Such episodes – similar to that suffered by the "Piano Man" who appeared in Kent in 2005 unable to speak a word – normally last a few hours or days, but in rare cases go on for weeks.

"Fugue Syndrome is a very rare condition," says Prof. Dr. Jaap Denissen, a psychologist at Berlin's Humboldt University. "There is some kind of shock, not necessarily violent, maybe one has the feeling that life is slipping away; people then just grab their suitcase, forget who they are and start travelling.

"It could something like that, a kind of amnesia. Then all of a sudden he's in a forest, and he may make up stories involving his father because his father played some role in the event that led up to the memory loss."

Ray's story quickly captured the imagination of the media.

It is understood that a reporter from the bestselling German tabloid *Bild* was allowed to look at a police photograph of Ray. Not allowed to take a copy, the newspaper produced a composite image of his face from the reporter's description.

The image was transmitted around the world, but more than a week on there is still little of substance to fill in the gaps of his tantalisingly intriguing tale. It is this lack of detail that has now begun to raise doubts about its veracity.

Nobody has yet claimed to know a Ryan who, following the death of his wife, suddenly disappeared off the map with his son.

Stranger still, no passing hikers or forest rangers have come forward to report having seen a man and his son living in a forest. Neither have any villagers reported unexplained instances of animals, fruit or vegetables being stolen from their plots.

Germany still has tracts of sizeable woodland, particularly on the border of the Czech Republic. Here lie the Ore mountains, which, being some 200 miles south of Berlin, are thought to have been one possible starting point for Ray's trek.

The landscape is harsh and isolated, with the highest peaks rising to over 4,000 feet above sea level. Temperatures in winter can fall to well below freezing and the annual average is only 3 to 5C, with some parts enjoying only 140 frost free days a year. Such is the winter snowfall that the area has been nicknamed the Saxon Siberia.

What is not clear is exactly how long Ray said he spent in the forest with his father. He initially told the woman at Berlin city hall that he had been travelling for a long period, but it may be that he and his father spent just part of this time in the woods.

Ronny Schmidt, a former German paratrooper who runs courses in the wild, said it would be possible to survive for a limited period in these isolated forests.

"The most important thing would be for them to stay warm, dry and protected from the wind," says Mr Schmidt. "Shelter and clean water would be vital. Building basic shelter is not a problem and clean water can be easily obtained with a little knowledge."

For a limited period foraging would provide many of the nutrients needed so survive.

"You can make tea or a salad from nettles. Dandelion also tastes very good, as do boiled roots," Mr Schmidt continues. "In our forests are also nuts like sweet chestnut, hazel and beech. Water reed roots provide starch and in spring you can also drink birch and pine sap, which are a good source of vitamin C.

"With a few self-made traps, you could also catch animals for protein, particularly if you can find their watering holes."

Yet, as Mr Schmidt points out, any fire started by the pair for cooking or warmth would surely have attracted the attention of hikers or forest rangers. Furthermore any protracted stay in the forest would require specialised equipment for hunting.

It is also curious that nobody has come forward to say they spotted Ray on his trek out of the forest to Berlin. Is it conceivable that a 17-year-old could walk such a distance without attracting the attention of another human being?

Perhaps the simplest explanation is that nobody noticed this boy wandering the country's roads and byway and, if they did, nobody thought to ask where he was going or offer him help.

After all, as the first person to hear his story noted, there was nothing out of the ordinary about him. Nothing, and yet everything.

Additional reporting by Stuart Braun

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