

Independent.co.uk

Did a boy live in the woods for five years?

Tony Paterson explores the German forest where 'Ray' emerged with his remarkable survival story

Thursday, 22 September 2011

The German woodland where an English-speaking "forest boy" claims to have spent the past five years living rough is a landscape of tree-covered hills rising to 3,000 feet with valleys dotted with fields and cut by rushing streams. They were once regarded as impenetrable, but that was 800 years ago, before the region was plundered for its iron.

Click [HERE](#) to view graphic (108k jpg)

It is from this forest that a 17-year-old boy, known only as "Ray" (he says he cannot remember his last name) is believed to have emerged. He says he had been roaming there until his father died after a fall. The boy told authorities that he buried his father in a shallow grave and covered his body with stones. Then heeding the dead man's advice, the boy took out his compass and headed north, eventually arriving in the centre of Berlin some 200 miles and two weeks later. Police remain baffled. Many others remain sceptical about the boy's story of life as a forest forager.

Yesterday, those dense woods – above the town of Schlettau in German's Ore mountains that run the length of the country's south-eastern border with the Czech Republic – felt eerily remote and dark even at midday because of the acre upon acre of towering fir trees that shut out the light. At first, the silence of the forest was broken only by the sound the wind swishing through the tree tops and the sound of woodpeckers hammering on tree trunks.

But the sensation of being alone was cut short every 20 minutes or so by the crunch of hikers' boots on forest paths and the clack of their aluminium walking sticks. Jens Nixdorf, an Ore mountain forester for more than 30 years who knows the region like the back of his hand, doubted that anyone could live rough and undetected for long periods of time in the forests.

"If there are not hikers in the woods there are hunters. They would notice anyone camping out in the wild very quickly and I, or one of my colleagues, would be informed about it," he told *The Independent* yesterday.

But to disprove, or prove, the story, the authorities first have to understand it. And the authorities are no closer to discovering the true identity of "Ray" than they were when he first showed up. Berlin police nevertheless suspect that he must have spent time roaming the forests. Calculating the time that he spent walking, they believe he must have come from the forests along Germany's borders with the Czech Republic.

Linguistic experts have interviewed him extensively and say they cannot establish whether he is native English speaker or simply learnt the language at some stage. All they can say, is that he speaks broken German.

As "Ray" claims to be 17 years old, he remains classified as a minor under German law and nobody but police and language experts have been allowed to question him. The mystery "forest boy" is being kept away from press and the public and is in the care of the social services.

His case is being compared to that of the legendary Kaspar Hauser, the 16-year-old German who suddenly turned up on the streets of Nuremberg in 1828 hardly able to speak. His identity could never be established and he was murdered under mysterious circumstances five years after his appearance. His case is a part of German folklore.

"Ray" suddenly appeared at Berlin City Hall on the afternoon of September 5. He was wearing a brown T-shirt, carried a rucksack packed with a tent and sleeping bag on his back, looked well-fed and had a pageboy-style haircut. His first words to the baffled officials from whom he sought assistance were reported to be: "I am all alone in the world."

"Ray", as he subsequently named himself, was interviewed by police not long after his appearance in Berlin and his

remarkable, if not incredible, story began to emerge. "Ray" told police and city hall staff that he and his father took to the woods after his mother, whom he named as "Doreen", was killed in a car crash more than five years ago. It is not clear whether "Ray" and his father were in the car when it crashed, but Berlin City Hall staff said that "Ray" did talk about having scarred legs as a result of the accident.

However, according to his statements to police, he and his father spent the next five years wandering the woods, "sleeping in tents and holes in the ground".

Berlin police, who have alerted Interpol in an attempt to identify the boy and find his father's body, said they had no reason to doubt his account and said they were taking his story seriously. However, yesterday, deep inside what is alleged to have been "Ray's" and his father's stomping ground for five years, there was considerable scepticism about the boy's claims.

Mr Nixdorf said there had been only one reported case of an alleged hermit living rough in the Ore mountain woods over the past three decades. "His story was shown on television and the journalists promised not to reveal where he was living. He hung out in a home-made bungalow and appeared to be quite comfortable," Mr Nixdorf told The Independent.

But he added: "The Ore mountains are so full of tourists. The area is simply too densely populated to make living in a tent or a hole in the ground possible for any length of time. You would be noticed if you did that."

His opinion was supported by Ronny Schmidt, a former German army paratrooper, who runs Team Survival, a school specialising in survival training courses in the woods close to Germany's border with the Czech Republic. On his week-long survival courses, he teaches pupils to dine on maggots and start fires Stone-Age style, with a friction bow and pieces of wood.

Mr Schmidt dismissed the idea of living rough for a protracted period anywhere in Germany. "This would be possible in remote regions of, say, Canada, where one could survive on the wildlife if one had the right rifle, but in Germany there is not really enough wildlife to go round," he told The Independent. "Even if you spent five years camping out, in a civilised country like Germany at some stage you would end up having to go to a supermarket. I just don't believe it."

Mr Nixdorf said that there was a slim possibility of being able to live rough and undetected on the Czech side of the Ore mountains which lost most of its original German-speaking population after the Second World War and has since been only sparsely repopulated with Czechs. "The Czech side is just as forested but there are less people living there. There is just a remote possibility of being able to camp out there without being seen, but it is really remote," he said.

Missing persons...

Shoichi Yokoi

The Japanese sergeant became a national hero when he was discovered by two hunters in a remote jungle in Guam in 1972. He was still carrying his Imperial Army issue rifle, 27 years after the end of World War Two. Showing traditional Japanese warrior spirit, Mr Yokoi said he had chosen to live in the jungle to avoid surrendering, despite knowing for more than 20 years that the war was over. He returned to Japan a month after he was found, and his first words on arrival were: "I am ashamed that I have returned alive."

Rochom P'ngieng

Nicknamed "jungle woman", the 30-year-old spent 18 years living in the wilds of north-eastern Cambodia before she was found dirty, naked and "looking like a monkey" on January 13, 2007. She had reportedly attempted to steal food from the lunch box of a local villager, who proceeded to stake her out. After leaving the jungle, she went to live with her father, who said she had disappeared in 1989 while herding water buffalo the province of Ratanakiri. She spent three years trying to learn the Khmer language and adjust to life in Cambodian society but ran away, apparently back to the jungle, in May 2010. By early June she was found living in a toilet near the family home.

Kaspar Hauser

According to German legend, a 16-year-old boy called Kaspar Hauser appeared in Nuremberg in 1828 with an anonymous note from a guardian – who allegedly held him in a cell for years – which asked authorities to either let him follow in his father's footsteps, and become a cavalryman, or be hanged. He was murdered in mysterious circumstances five years later.

©independent.co.uk [Terms & Policies](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Email newsletter](#) | [RSS](#) | [Contact us](#) | [Syndication](#) | [Advertising Guide](#) | [Subscriptions](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Evening Standard](#) | [Homes & Property](#) | [London Careers](#) | [Novaya Gazeta \(English\)](#)