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Susanna F.



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MURDER IN MAINZ

A Jewish mother in Germany speaks out about her teenage daughter's brutal death at the hands of an illegal Iraqi migrant



AMONG THE many photo tributes Diana posts on her personal Facebook page. (Photos: Courtesy)

Memories of murder: A Jewish mother speaks out

In an exclusive, Diana Feldmann opens up about the brutal murder of her teenage daughter, Susanna, by an illegal Iraqi migrant and the devastating effects on her family – and adopted country, Germany

• ORIT ARFA

It took about two minutes upon meeting Diana Feldmann at a run-down strip mall in Mainz, Germany for her to break into tears. This was her first in-depth interview since her daughter's brutal murder and alleged rape by an Iraqi illegal immigrant. She has shied away from reporters, unsure of their agenda and whether the reportage might jeopardize the upcoming trial of Ali Bashar, 21, the confessed murderer. She wants the harshest punishment possible in Germany: life imprisonment without parole. The trial will begin early next year.

I met her through an activist of a local movement that speaks out against the refugee policy that is ostensibly responsible for Susanna's murder. As an Israeli Jew, I felt a sense of family between us. Hence, the openness and easy tears. My shoulder was outstretched for her constant cries.

Susanna's was the type of murder people encounter only in TV specials. In true murder-mystery style, her body was found in a makeshift ditch near the train tracks in Wiesbaden-Erbenheim across the Rhine River from Mainz, her hometown. The region was the center of medieval Jewish life in Germany and now is home to a few thousand Jews.



DIANA'S HEART-SHAPED locket is imprinted with an image of her late daughter. (Orit Arfa)

The Jewish angle

Susanna's death particularly rattled the Jewish community, but Susanna wasn't the first Jewish victim of an illegal migrant with a criminal record in Germany. Israeli tourist Dalia Elyakim was killed in the Berlin Christmas market truck-ramming attack two years ago. Susanna's murder, however, was personal.

Diana Feldmann came from Moldova with her family in 1991 with the wave of Russian-speaking Jews who took up the German government's invitation to restore the Jewish population after the Shoah. Her mother's brother lives in Ashdod. She visited family in Israel before Susanna was born; Susanna never visited and had nominal ties with the Jewish state.

"Many relatives went to Israel and some friends went to America," Diana said in perfect German over coffee at a café, with translation help by a Wiesbaden resident and activist. "My [late] father said earlier: 'We'd rather go to Europe, to Germany, because Israel is always at war, etc.'"

She never imagined she'd suffer her own brutal personal war in a peaceful Germany, but contrary to speculation, the murder did not carry antisemitic motives.

"No one knew that Susanna was half-Jewish," Feldmann said. "No one. On her Instagram profile she had a Russian and Turkish flag. She never said she was Jewish. That came up later. Now Ali B. is celebrated even more than [Turkish President Recep Tayyip] Erdogan because he killed a Jewish woman, a Jewish 'slut.'"

She pulled out a screenshot from an Instagram "fan page" of the murderer, which featured caricatures of Susanna next to the image of a burning Israeli flag. "The page is now deleted. This hater page."

Susanna was hardly in touch with her father, a Kurdish Turk (hence the Turkish flag). He and Diana separated before Susanna was born. The murder re-connected them for the search party, and funeral.

A coming-of-age story

Susanna Feldmann would have turned 15 on November 2. Friends described her as pretty, quiet and shy. She displayed the usual symptoms of teenage

angst. She struggled to fit in, seeking acceptance by wearing name-brand clothes. She was also the victim of school bullying. A teacher openly called her "Dracula." After being reported, the teacher didn't apologize, saying she meant it in jest.

"Her childhood was good, without a father," Feldmann said. "I was Susanna's mom and dad... I am 44 years old, and when she was eight years old, I met my current partner. Then we had a little one who is now five years old, Giuliana. But Giuliana misses her sister very much. They did a lot together. But she still doesn't understand what the word 'died' means."

Diana's partner is a Catholic Italian with two older children from a previous marriage. Giuliana was baptized, but Diana will let her choose her religious path upon growing up. Like many Jews growing up in Communist countries, Diana's parents were unaffiliated.

Susanna took the family changes hard. "Then came a little sister," Feldmann related. "Now Mom has even less time for you, and maybe she saw what it's like to have a dad. Because she never saw that. She didn't have a dad and she had everything from me. Double love."

Happy for male attention, Susanna perhaps found it in the wrong places. Diana believes males from Arab countries tend to be charming "sweet talkers," in contrast to shy, quiet German boys.

"Susanna always said that she got along better with boys than girls. In groups of girls and young boys, there's always cattiness."

Susanna slowly transformed from a good "domestic girl" to an at-risk teen when she started hanging out at the refugee shelter a few months before the murder. Soon, she "fell in love" with KC, Ali Bashar's 14-year-old brother.

"It was a new world for her." Diana thinks they brainwashed her into believing she could slack off in school, a so-called privilege of "refugees."

"And then she'd skip school with her friends from class. They went to Wiesbaden because in Mainz they knew too many people. And there they met this group of foreigners at the McDonald's. She came home excit-

ed, saying: 'I made new friends.' I told her about the refugees: 'You don't know where they're from. You don't know what they've been through. You don't know how these people tick, what goes on in their minds.' But she always said: 'They're so sweet. They're so cool. You can laugh and have fun with them'... She told me they stole, dealt drugs, but that they never did anything to her... Even if they didn't do anything to her, you stand by it, go along with it, get caught in it. That's the charm of adventure."

Later, Diana faced accusations that she should have sheltered her daughter better, but she explained she always encouraged Susanna to be open with her about school, boys and the typical teenage vices.

"She entrusted me with many things other daughters would never entrust their parents with. She told me she tried smoking, but that it wasn't for her. She told me she tried a joint once, but that it wasn't for her. She cut her arm for KC, perhaps out of curiosity, perhaps trying to get his attention. Usually teenagers walk around in long sweaters to hide their cuts from their parents, but Susanna showed me. I gave her some salve and told her: 'You're such a pretty young girl. No man in the world is worth that.'"

Following the cutting incident, Susanna and Diana went to the youth welfare office. On May 23, a day after the murder, Susanna was scheduled to meet with a guidance counselor.

But on the night of the murder, Susanna told her mother a white lie, saying she'd be staying over at friend's house. In reality, she went to meet KC at the refugee home, but KC, who treated her more like a sister, turned out not to be alone. It was Ali who had his eye on Susanna. Diana believes KC lured Susanna into a trap to please his older brother and his gang, including a 35-year-old Turk who was implicated as an accomplice.

Apparently, Ali had a thing for virgins. He is reported to have allegedly raped an 11-year-old prior to this.

"The Afghan [a witness named Mansur] said Ali always told him: 'When you see [Susanna], you have to call me every time. One day I'll f*** her,'" Diana said. "The rape was planned. I don't know if what happened afterwards was planned or if it got out of hand."

Despite feeling more comfortable around boys socially, Diana knows that Susanna was sexually abstinent and very shy about sex.

"She was not interested in the topic. She was completely inexperienced in this area. She trusted many people and saw only the good in everyone."

But had she known Ali would be there, she wouldn't have gone.

"As a young girl who was in love with Ali's brother, why should she want to have her first time with Ali, the older brother, somewhere on the street, in a field? Every girl wants her first time to be special... She always said that anyone over 15 was too old for her. She never was friends with Ali. She was friends with his younger brother. They were the same age. She knew Ali by sight, but when the girls talked among themselves, they all found Ali to be so weird, so aggressive. The girls always discouraged anyone from dealing with him, including Susanna. It was better to keep away from Ali."

The crime

"On May 22, Susanna called me and told me that she was staying with a friend... and I said: 'Remember to come early the next day because I have to take the little one to kindergarten, and I have to go to my job training.' Susanna said: 'Okay, I'll come at 7 a.m.'"

Susanna sent an SOS to a friend named Sonja that night.

"And this Sonja was the first and only one who knew Susanna was in trouble, because [Susanna] wrote to her in the evening: 'Help me. I'm afraid. I'm here with Ali and his friends in a refugee home. I want to go and they won't let me. They're keeping me here.' This Sonja just left her to her fate. She didn't tell me and didn't call the police. I think out of jealousy."

Eventually Sonja wrote to Susanna to call her mother, but Susanna said she didn't want to tell her mother because she had lied about where she was going.

"At 7 a.m., she didn't come home, and at 8:30 a.m., I wrote on WhatsApp: 'Where are you? Why didn't you come home?' Then strange, short answers came, like: 'I'll come at 4 p.m. My battery is empty.'"

Little did she know that at 11:33 a.m., she was chatting with the murderer on WhatsApp. She pulled out a screenshot of the conversation.

"Goodbye Wiesbaden, now to Paris with my heart Armando," wrote Ali with emoticons, posing as Susanna.

"Whaaat?" Diana responded.

"With my baby Armando," he answered, adding a picture of Susanna's dead hand holding a joint. Diana later realized it was planted in an attempt to frame an altercation about a joint. "I'll smack you," Diana responded (figuratively).

She pressed to know where she was: "Everyone is looking for you and no one knows where you are. Where are you Susanna. Please..."

Susanna never showed up for her appointment with the guidance counselor.

"I was also very surprised that she missed the appointment, because she always took things like that seriously."

At 9 p.m., Susanna was officially reported missing.

It is believed that Ali and his accomplices carried her body to the railway tracks in pairs after letting it rot for a day.

A massive search began, involving police and volun-

teers. Diana even drove around with Ali's other brother, Honer, and the younger brother of Mansur, the Afghan. At one point, Diana visited the Bashar home.

"And this whole damn family told me they only heard about it from the news. We were talking to them in their house and the mother said, 'Allah, Allah. We didn't see him.' They lied to me, to my face. They knew exactly what happened. How can a mother – a mother who has eight children herself – lie to another mother's face and say: 'I don't know what happened to your daughter?'"

On May 29, a friend called Diana, saying she received an anonymous call revealing that Susanna was buried in Wiesbaden-Erbenheim, near the train tracks. A few days later, Diana received a tip from someone on Instagram that the Bashar family had driven to Dortmund to escape. At Düsseldorf airport, they paid around €850 in cash for a flight to Istanbul (with fake identities). Diana is now lobbying to ensure the family cannot re-enter Germany.

On June 6, Susanna's corpse was finally found – covered with earth, leaves and brushwood, her body so badly battered by blows, falls, penetration and decay that rape couldn't even be proven. Her throat was mangled by her own sweatshirt tied in knots. Mysteriously, a rodent bone was found in her underwear. Susanna's face was so disfigured Diana was advised not to view her daughter's corpse.

To top it off, they stole her shoes. "They were AirMax 97s. They took her shoes, the mobile phone – everything that was worth money was gone. Horrible."

Ali has denied the rape, even though witnesses claim he bragged about raping her all night long. Diana surmises that the rape would bring him dishonor in the Muslim community. The forensic investigation found traces of Ali and another foreign person, but no alcohol or drugs in Susanna's system. The prosecution has pressed charges for both murder and rape. The trial will determine the severity of the crime, and hence, the severity of the punishment.



(FROM LEFT) The Instagram 'fan page' for the murderer, Ali. In the center is a picture of an Israeli flag burning.

A WHATSAPP communication the day after the murder, in which Ali used Susanna's phone to pose as Susanna and communicate with her mother. (The exchange is translated in the text.) (Screenshots: Orit Arfa)

When Diana received the dreaded knock on the door, teary-eyed police gave her a sedative, but Diana already expected the worst.

"I had a bad feeling right from the start because I knew my girl wouldn't run away from home. She always called me. I could always reach her by phone. I had a bad feeling but I didn't want to entertain the thought."

A few days later, Ali was arrested by Kurdish authorities in the Kurdistan region of Iraq and brought back to Germany. (Germany's public prosecutor is now investigating Dieter Romann, head of the federal police, for possibly illegally returning Ali to Germany, since no formal extradition treaty exists between Iraq and Germany.)

'Now Ali B. is celebrated even more than [Turkish President] Erodgan because he killed a Jewish woman, a Jewish "slut"'

Back in Wiesbaden, Ali walked the investigators through the crime at the scene but refused to speak in his mother tongue via a translator. Instead, he spoke broken German, probably, said Diana, to avoid giving too much away.

"He grinned brazenly into the camera in that field. He showed no remorse."

The aftermath

Before the event, Diana was largely apolitical. As a refugee herself, she kept an open mind to Chancellor Angela Merkel's decision to open Germany's doors to hundreds of thousands of refugees in 2015.

"But after this incident, of course, my mind-set changed dramatically. It opened my eyes."

At the time of Diana's disappearance, some local police suggested Diana shouldn't have allowed Susanna to fraternize with such people.

"They tell the kindergarten kids: 'Make friends with foreign children.' That's what I taught my children.

Then, when you are 13-14 years old and going through puberty, it's no wonder you hang out with people like that."

After the murder, Diana wrote an open Facebook letter to Chancellor Merkel, telling her the blood of her daughter is on her hands.

"I wrote [it] to get it off my chest, in very plain language, the way a mother writes and feels. But Mrs. Merkel can't understand, because she has no children. She doesn't know what it means to lose a child. I don't know if she even read it all, even though it reached 200,000 people on Facebook."

Facebook deleted the letter because it violated "hate speech" guidelines. Overnight, Diana Feldmann became a symbol for the Merkel Muss Weg (Merkel Must Go) movement led by Germans (often labeled "far-right") who oppose Merkel's refugee policy. Diana alleged that many asylum seekers are not necessarily fleeing war or persecution, but come as economic opportunists, and, in Ali's case, sexual opportunists.

In another viral Facebook incident, Diana posted a clip of Thomas Seitz, an AfD member of parliament, holding a moment of silence for Susanna at a parlia-

mentary session. To Diana's horror, Claudia Roth, a vice president of the parliament from the Green Party, interrupted the moment, arguing that an unannounced moment of a silence went against protocol. Media commentators criticized Diana for allowing herself to be instrumentalized by the right. Advocates of the refugee policy argue that Susanna's case (as well as others) should not be exploited to smear an entire population. Diana said she doesn't feel instrumentalized. Nor does she mind being a political symbol.

"I don't want my daughter to be used for politics, but you always have to keep your eyes open. I still have another daughter growing up. You should always be careful, always watch out, always..."

Six months after the murder, regional elections were held in the state of Hesse, of which Wiesbaden is the capital. Following an electoral trend, CDU (Christian Democratic Union) voters hemorrhaged toward the right-wing Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), the only party to challenge Merkel's policy fiercely. In the wake of biting defeat, Merkel announced her imminent resignation as party chair. She will not run for chancellor again in 2021.

"My little daughter and Susanna give me strength, because I have to fight for her, to make sure Ali stays in prison forever. I still need strength."

She continues her part-time work as a cleaner at a bank to find a sense of normalcy, but the pain is omnipresent. Three times a week, she tends to Susanna's grave (recently adorned with a heart-shaped tombstone) in the Jewish cemetery, which keeps getting defaced by thugs.

"Honestly, if I didn't have my little one or my partner, then I'd be lying in the grave next to my daughter," she said, breaking down in tears again. They recently began to remodel their home to "paint over" the painful memories. Only recently did she step into her daughter's untouched room.

The Jewish community of Mainz held a memorial for Susanna at the synagogue, and a tree was planted in Susanna's honor in Jerusalem. Some local donors have assisted her with expenses that have accrued because of the murder. While she fights depression for her family's sake, Diana is hardly ever truly comforted.

"I don't accept help from anyone; only the love of God can help... My uncle always says, 'Come, come to us in Israel. Come visit us again.'"



DIANA WITH her family on New Year 2013-14 (from left to right starting from top): Diana; her partner, Liborio; her mother, Bela; her younger daughter, Giuliana; and Susanna.



SUSANNA WITH Giuliana at her little sister's fourth birthday party on September 27, 2017.



RIGHT: GIULIANA visits Susanna's heart-shaped tombstone in the Jewish cemetery of Mainz.