

Will (reincarnation case)

Will (not his real name) is among those rare people who remember more than one solved past life. In his first life to be investigated by a researcher, he apparently recalled being Wilhelm Emmerich, a non-commissioned SS officer assigned to help supervise the mass gassings in the death camp of Auschwitz. In the life immediately previous to that, he apparently remembered being Wilhelm Schmidt, a young German soldier killed in action in World War I.

Background

Will was born in the American Midwest in 1980 and has lived almost all his life there. He holds a baccalaureate in history and anthropology. He lives with his wife 'Elise' (not her real name). He was raised mildly Christian, but is drawn most to the religion of ancient Egypt. Anatomically he is female but identifies as male and is very masculine in manner and habits, passing as a man in some contexts.^[1]

Will claims to remember thirty past lives, some no more than a flash. Untypically for an adult, his memories emerge in the regular waking state about 80% of the time. More rarely he obtains them by clearing his mind (15%) or in dreams (5% or less). He is particularly adept at remembering the feel of clothes he wore or items that he handled.

As a child, Will had no explanation for the images and sensations that sometimes came to mind until age eighteen, when he learned about [reincarnation](#) and gathered that they were past-life memories. The first he still recalls, at about six, was an unbearable smell he knew at the time was 'the smell of death', and which he associated with the 'skeleton people', meaning extremely emaciated people he saw in his nightmares.

Investigation

Reincarnation researcher KM Wehrstein first saw posts by Will and interacted with him on reincarnation-themed internet forums in the early 2000s. Information on several of his past lives was gathered from forum posts, emails, instant-messaging conversations and interviews with him and other witnesses, as well as in-person interviews with Will at his residence in August 2016.

Wilhelm Emmerich

Sparse historical records show that Bavarian-born Wilhelm Emmerich (1916-1945) became a non-commissioned officer with the Schutzstaffel (SS) assigned to the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp. He was transferred to the Bergen-Belsen camp in April 1945, just prior to its liberation, and died there of typhus in May, leaving a wife and one son.

Memories and Verifications

As a young man, prior to identifying the previous incarnation, Will recalled:

First was a memory of shooting a man in the back who was running away, second was standing in a room with white walls which was filled with people, hearing two shots and turning to see what had happened and feeling a searing pain in my right leg (it felt like someone had put a hot pipe across my leg—it burned) and then the lights going out. ... I also remembered my name was Wilhelm, and I was about 98% certain I had worked at Auschwitz.^[2]

More details came to him later about being shot by a female prisoner:

Transports were coming in, you had to help out no matter what part of the camp you worked in. ... All I remember was that I was standing there watching people undress like usual, and I heard a yell ... and a scuffle and a gunshot, and I turned around in time to get shot. The guards closed the door and turned the lights off – 250-300 Jews, us and Sonderkommando ... Everyone started freaking out. ... They pulled us out, opened fire and whoever was left alive was gassed.^[3]

He recalled also that one of his colleagues was shot to death in the incident, and he himself was left with a permanent limp.

More details came to him of shooting the fleeing prisoner:

It was not at Auschwitz ... There were a large number of prisoners formed and they were all noticeably agitated. ... The only thing that kept going through my head was that there needed to be order when ‘They’ showed up and I was really, really, really worried that the prisoners were going to try and riot or escape. ... At one point I pulled out my pistol and yelled ‘There will be order!’ Shortly after, one of the prisoners started moving towards the gate. I lowered my pistol and shot him in the back, and as he fell, I yelled ‘You will all remain in line! I will have order! They will see that there is order here!’

Two witnesses confirmed that Will had had both these memories prior to identification of the previous incarnation. Will thought his surname might have been Schmidt, but the list of Auschwitz staff had no Wilhelm Schmidt. There was a Wilhelm Emmerich, however. Researching him, Will found this account of an incident that had taken place in the ‘undressing room’ at Auschwitz:

Franziska Mann undressed very slowly. Suddenly she struck the wholly-surprised SS Oberscharführer Walter Quakernack in the face with the high heel of her shoe ... snatched his revolver and shot him. She narrowly missed him, but hit Schillinger, who was standing beside Quakernack, in the abdomen, wounding him severely. Schillinger died on the way to the hospital. Franziska Mann also fired at SS Unterscharführer Wilhelm Emmerich, who, subsequently, was never able to walk the same way again, left with a stiff leg. After the shots, the women rushed at the SS men barehanded. The armed men ran out of the room. Shortly thereafter, camp commandant Rudolf Hoess had two machine guns set up, and shot the defenseless prisoners ... Whoever was not hit by the shots died of the gas.^[4]

Will also found this eyewitness account of the fleeing prisoner being shot:

This was on the day the English [British] liberated the camp. When the amplifying unit first came to the camp to announce the arrival of the English [British], many of the prisoners rushed forward rejoicing. They were told they must not do so. One of them, a Dutchman, who persisted, was shot from behind by Rapportführer Emmerich. I saw the man was dead, and he was carried away.^[5]

These two verifications convinced Will that he had been Emmerich, but he continued researching to verify more memories. His recall of being ordered to carry corpses with bare hands is confirmed in both photographs and film of the SS men doing so at gunpoint. Other memories he verified or at least proved plausible through textual or photographic evidence include:

- Emmerich was interrogated by a French man.
- He and his wife did not get along.
- One of his colleagues liked to kill prisoners by striking their heads with a giant wooden spoon.
- Elaborately-carved German clocks like one he remembered did exist.
- SS men would hang prisoners on evergreen trees around Christmas as a 'joke'.
- Emmerich repeatedly requested to be transferred to a combat unit but was denied each time (verification of plausibility)
- He was punched and kicked by prisoners once the liberation of the camp freed them to do so (verification of plausibility).
- Another colleague brought his young son into the camp (verification of plausibility).

Behaviours

The full picture of Will's [behavioral indicators of reincarnation](#) is blurred by the multiplicity of his past lives. For example, his transgenderism as a result of [sex change](#) between lives and his fascination with all things military can both be attributed to multiple lives, as he recalls being a man in every life and a soldier in the vast majority of them.

However, his memory of the 'smell of death' and his 'skeleton people' [phobia](#) seem clearly related to Emmerich. Auschwitz while in operation is known to have been permeated by a deathly stench, and the extremely emaciated people from whom he feared revenge correspond with starved prisoners.

From childhood also he recalls nightmares of a demonic being with long horns and a gruesome face coming to put him in shackles and take him to Hell, similar to delirious visions he recalls Emmerich having while dying of typhus. Will learned later that in southern Germany children are customarily warned of the Christmas demon 'Krampus', who looks and punishes bad children just as Will remembered from childhood and the past life. There is no such mythical creature in American culture.

Will's teenage interest in Nazi insignia and memorabilia was strong enough to get him in trouble with his parents. During a WWII re-enaction event some years before 2012 when he posted about it, Will played a German soldier who had been captured by Americans and was made to lie down while a mock American soldier pretended to consider shooting him. To his surprise he became uncontrollably nervous, though he had experienced no such feelings while re-enacting earlier. He realized later that the scenario corresponded with an Emmerich memory of being forced to lie down and suffer similar intimidation, except genuine, by British soldiers in Bergen-Belsen.



Fig 1: Photo from liberation of the Bergen-Belsen camp. Original caption: 'German SS guards, exhausted from their forced labor clearing the bodies of the dead, are allowed a brief rest by British soldiers but are forced to take it by lying face down in one of the empty mass graves, 20 April 1945'. Photo by H. Oakes, © IWM (BU 4094).

Will continues to collect Nazi memorabilia and also enjoys German music, food, beer, restaurants and entertainment. He is not antisemitic or prejudiced against other types of people massacred by Nazi Germany, however when reminiscing he re-enters the Nazi mindset of utter dehumanization of the victims and can say some very disturbing things. He also says, though, that guilt for what he did in that life is a constant presence in this one.

Physical Signs

Will's mother confirmed that he had congenital problems with his right leg as a child, especially the knee, doctors were unable to identify a cause. Wehrstein observed that he had a chronic slight limp which became more marked whenever he talked about Emmerich.

Mother's Pregnancy

When she became pregnant with Will, 'Jean' (not her real name) suddenly acquired an aversion to the smell of a charcoal grill, which became permanent. The Auschwitz crematoria were fuelled with coke, producing a similar smell. Jean had long had a recurring dream of seeing a number tattooed on her arm, though she produced no other evidence of a past life. Wehrstein notes that the aversion could be rooted in past-life imprisonment in Auschwitz, but its timing suggests a connection with Will.

Alternate Explanations

Fraud, Wehrstein notes, is unlikely in this case (or with any of Will's past lives) due to the number of people who would have had to be involved in the conspiracy as well its nineteen-year duration, and a lack of motive, as Will is quite the opposite of an attention-seeker, having participated in the investigation somewhat reluctantly. Unconscious self-deception Wehrstein also considers unlikely due to the lack of either fame or redeeming actions in either of the investigated lives.

Wehrstein points out that if Will had learned what he had about Emmerich's life through historical research, he would not have had the erroneous sense that his surname was Schmidt, as Emmerich's name is attached to the most distinctive incidents. As well, some of Will's verification sources he could not access without the help of another person or without accessing sources he only could if he knew the name Emmerich. With Schmidt, learning about the life normally would have required an implausible amount of detective work, and involved no errors.

Wilhelm Schmidt

Will remembered his World War I life less well than his death-camp life, had fewer related behavioural signs, and had no physical signs at all. This resulted in a more difficult search.

Memories

Will reported having experienced spontaneous, uncued memories of having fought in WWI starting in 2011 and continuing for a few years. On 29 October 2012, he wrote online:

I was in a shell hole somewhere, I think, in no man's land. I know I was really badly hurt and in shock but what was most on my mind was that I was completely terrified that I was going to be gassed.^[6]

Shortly thereafter he recalled holding and looking at three British cap-badges, including one inscribed with the name 'Royal Warwickshire Regiment'.

A later, vivid memory suggested a motivation for terror of being gassed:

We had been pulled to transport cylinders to where they were going to be buried (think big Scuba tanks) [in aid of another army unit] ... they had a ton they had to move ... think hundreds, and they had to move them fast so no one noticed. The guy in front of me tripped and fell and broke the seal on it and it hit us. Burning in your nose and mouth. Eyes too but I don't remember it as much as the mouth ... I think someone grabbed me and pulled me back.^[7]

Some tens of thousands of Gurkha soldiers from Nepal fought on the Allied side of the war, and Will vividly remembered finding the corpse of one:

He was wearing a turban and what looked like a long nightshirt and had the leather British pouches over his shoulder ... He was so dark and alien with his dark skin and short black beard ... he looked so different. I was interested in him, his exotic mystery ... I saw he was wearing a weird knife on his belt. I pulled it out and thought it was cool, so I pulled the scabbard out and took it with me.^[8]

He also reported remembering:

- Participating in the 'Christmas Truce', an informal stoppage of the fighting and mutual celebration between British and German troops during the Christmas season of 1914.
- He left home to enlist without parental permission.
- He was fifteen years old when he enlisted, lying about his age.
- He was originally from Bavaria (as a child he had been fascinated with the 'Pickelhaube', a Bavarian-style helmet of the era, and in fact recalls as a young Emmerich being fascinated with his father's Pickelhaube).
- The battlefield trenches had 'wicker sides', that is, were buttressed by thick interwoven branches (which he learned later was done uniquely by Bavarian units).
- Ammunition was carried and stored in paperboard boxes.
- German soldiers sometimes tucked their pants into their socks.
- The German army customarily marched into battle singing.

Will also calculated from Emmerich's birthdate of 7 February 1916 that Wilhelm Schmidt, as he felt he must have been named, could not have died any later than April 1915. For his WWI re-enacting persona, Will wore a uniform appropriate to the 6th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Division, with insignia further specifying a 21st Regiment and 8th Company – numbers he 'felt drawn to' – and indicating his rank was *Gefreiter*.

Fig 2: Will's WWI personal shoulderboard, indicating 21st Regiment and 8th Company. He also verified that the yellow colour of the piping was correct. Photo by Will.

Fig 3: The collar pin Will uses for his WWI persona, indicating the rank of Gefreiter. Photo by Will.

Interpretations, Corrections and Verifications



In 2011, Will declared in a post that he had been a British soldier in the Royal Warwickshire Regiment whose first name was Wilfred. He told KM Wehrstein later that the name he had actually remembered was Wilhelm, but he thought it was impossible to have the same first name two lives in a row.^[9] Then in 2013, Will had the

opportunity to try on and handle WWI-style uniforms and weapons. The British outfit felt entirely wrong, but once he donned the German one, he said, ‘the feel and fit was what I remembered’.^[10] The British cap badges, he realized, had been trophies or mementoes.

Identifying the previous incarnation, however, was made difficult by the fact that Wilhelm Schmidt is a very common name; Wehrstein’s search on the German War Graves Database for a Wilhelm Schmidt who had been killed on the Western front in 1915 generated eighty results. Searching together on the genealogy website ancestry.com, however, Wehrstein and Will found handwritten records for a Wilhelm Schmidt who had been born in Bavaria, and Wehrstein spotted that he had served as *Gefreiter* in the 6th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Division, 21st Infantry Regiment, Company 8, for about a month and a half, fighting in several intense battles and being wounded twice. He also had volunteered for service rather than being conscripted, matching Will’s memory, and died on 30 April 1915, matching Will’s calculation.

All of Will’s semantic memories – the wicker trenches, paperboard ammunition boxes, tucking of pants into socks and pre-battle singing – he himself verified through internet research.

Fig 4: Relaxing WWI soldiers (identifiable as German by their cap cockades) demonstrate pants tucked into socks. Photo source: Infanterie-Regiment



Generalfeldmarschall von Mackensen (3 Westpreußisches) Nr. 129 11 Kompanie.

Discrepancies

However, as Wehrstein learned from records

examined carefully and other records gained with the assistance of German parapsychologist [Michael Nahm](#), Schmidt's unit had been hundreds of kilometres away from the site of the Christmas Truce as well as the site of the first use of gas as a military weapon in April 1915. As well, his birthdate did not match Will's memory of his age (though Will had expressed some doubt about that memory prior to the error being discovered).

Some of these discrepancies could be solved speculatively. In researching WWI military transport, Wehrstein learned that Germany had built a second national railway system entirely for military use, designed for quickly moving soldiers *en masse* from one front to another. A note in the regimental record indicated that Schmidt had once been taken to a hospital about 700 kilometres away from his unit for treatment of an illness. While it could not be verified that Schmidt had travelled east to help with preparing the battlefield for use of gas, it was proven possible, and the records show that at the time he was in a non-combat unit assigned to administrative or logistical tasks. It was also possible he could have been near the Christmas Truce, though less likely and again not verified.

Will attributed his error with regard to his age on enlistment to the fact that, as Schmidt, he had previously led a rather sheltered life. This was true: Schmidt had worked as an assistant/secretary to his father, a town bailiff, and there was no indication of any prior military experience or training.

A search of military records found no other individual matching Will's memories nearly as well; but because of the discrepancies, Wehrstein proffers the identity tentatively.

Discussion

Wehrstein notes that with both lives, written and time-stamped records of the memories were created prior to (tentative) identification, placing both lives among the relatively few investigated and published [cases for which such records were made](#).

Wehrstein observes that Will's memories of the two lives illustrate how a person who recalls multiple past lives might remember and be affected by one much more

than another, and speculates on why this is so for Will. The experiences that left Emmerich scarred lasted some years, while for Schmidt it was less than a year; perhaps more importantly, Emmerich's crisis was also one of conscience and terror of punishment.

KM Wehrstein

Literature

Wehrstein, K.M. (2019). An adult reincarnation case with multiple solved lives: Recalling Wilhelm Emmerich. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 83/1, 1-17.

Wehrstein, K.M. (2021). When a name does not identify: Will in search of Wilhelm Schmidt. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 85/4, 193-212.

Endnotes

Footnotes

1. ^ Wehrstein (2019), 1. All information in this article is drawn from this section except where otherwise noted.
2. ^ Cited in Wehrstein (2019), 3-4.
3. ^ Cited in Wehrstein (2019), 4.
4. ^ Cited in Wehrstein (2019), 5.
5. ^ Cited in Wehrstein (2019), 5.
6. ^ Cited in Wehrstein (2021), 195. All information in this article is drawn from this section except where otherwise noted.
7. ^ Cited in Wehrstein (2021), 195.
8. ^ Cited in Wehrstein (2021), 196.
9. ^ At this point he had not heard of the case of [James Leininger](#), whose apparent previous incarnation was James Huston, Jr.
10. ^ Cited in Wehrstein (2021), 199.