



# **KASPAR HAUSER**

The Tell-tale Heart

200 years on and still beating

David Bryer

# BLEAK HAUSER

**A dark Dickensian tale, the hero of which is also ‘celebrating’ his bicentenary**

**by**

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As most people will know, this year of 2012 has been rightly dominated by celebrations and commemorations of the birth 200 years ago last February of Charles Dickens. Very few people, however, are likely to know that there is another bicentenary taking place this year, for in the September of the same year as Dickens’ birth in 1812 another child was born in Southern Germany whose life, apart from its wretchedly tragic ending and German setting (important differences, it is true), could otherwise have sprung straight from the pages of a Dickens novel. The hero of this story suffered a fate comparable to but far worse than *Oliver Twist*’s, was subjected to a schoolmaster not far removed from Mr Squeers, and treated with that mixture of kindness and cruelty many of Dickens’s heroes underwent and which interrogators use when they want to break their victim’s spirit. His murder in 1833, just five years after his appearance, remains to this day an unsolved crime. The story of Kaspar Hauser is well-known only in Germany and still debated there with unremitting passion, despite the fact that in his lifetime he was given the title ‘The Child of *Europe*’. Here in the UK, if he is known at all, it is probably through the film by Werner Herzog, but since this was a particular take on what for Germans was a familiar tale, it therefore dealt with the facts in a somewhat cavalier fashion. For this reason alone, apart from the bicentenary and Dickensian parallels, it would seem timely to set the record straight by giving as accurate an account of the story as space makes possible, showing at the same time why, like Poe’s tell-tale heart, this particular tale seems to refuse to stop beating.



On Whit Monday May 26<sup>th</sup> 1828 a boy of around 15 stumbled into a near deserted square in Nuremberg, holding a letter. He walked like a toddler and his speech made no sense, being set phrases he had been taught but the meaning of which he did not understand. Taken to the police, it was found he had also been taught to write, but only a name, Kaspar Hauser, by which he was from then on known. Recoiling in horror when offered meat and alcohol, he was unable to tolerate anything but bread and water. Judged a vagrant - and possibly a hoaxer - he was imprisoned in a high tower where his jailer, however, after prolonged observation, concluded him to be a total innocent with a mental age of a three year-old. As a consequence, he was brought him into the jailer's own family home.

Word spread fast about this mysterious boy and soon he became little more than a freak exhibit, visited first by curious citizens, then by people from further afield, finally becoming a tourist attraction for people all over Europe, this possibly giving rise to the title he now acquired: 'The Child of Europe', though some see a greater significance in this name.

The story he was later able to tell of his years before coming to Nuremberg was that, as far as he could remember back (and it is reckoned this incarceration began when he was about three), he had been kept chained to a wall in a low-ceilinged chamber, where he could not stand but where bread and water were within his reach when he awoke. Apart from a toy wooden horse and toy dog, he had come to believe himself to be totally alone in this twilight world, until, when the boy was fifteen, his jailer finally appeared, at which point he was given a crash course in walking, taught to write this

name and to parrot a few sentences, after which he was half dragged, half carried to this quiet square in Nuremberg where he was left wobbling unsteadily with his letter.

While in the tower prison he attracted both compassion and cruelty, this dual reaction to him continuing right up to his death. The cruelty involved, for example, forcing him to eat and drink things that threw him into fits, and exposing him to loud explosions. His complete ignorance of fire and of mirrors provided the occasion for much callous hilarity. The boy's senses were abnormally acute: he could distinguish between colours in relative darkness; he had strong and differing reactions to minerals even when these were covered; his sense of smell as well as a sensitivity to movements made behind his back and from a distance were also highly developed; furthermore, like some *tabula rasa*, he had a phenomenal memory. However, what struck discerning people most was the boy's sweet and loving nature and his total lack of any desire to see those punished who had so maltreated him. For these people, Kaspar was living evidence of the truth of Rousseau's Noble Savage.



An early portrait of Kaspar

However, the way in which his extreme sensitivity was exploited for general amusement led to a serious deterioration in his health, which would have resulted in his death, if a leading judge and criminologist of the day, Anselm von Feuerbach (father of the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach), had not intervened and arranged for his transfer to the home of a schoolteacher then on sick leave but who had been teaching Kaspar while in the tower.



Georg Friedrich Daumer

This teacher, Georg Friedrich Daumer, took upon himself not just the boy's education but the overseeing of his health and general welfare, writing over his lifetime altogether three books about his charge. The boy flourished under his care and, astoundingly, was soon able to write, paint, play the piano and even ride a horse. In October 1829, however, the boy was attacked while alone in the house by a would-be assassin. He suffered a cut to his head but survived, although he was ill for a long time. Speculation, as a result, intensified a hundredfold as to Kaspar's origins. He was removed to a more central part of town and thence to the home of Gottlieb von Tucher, a friend of Daumer's. Tucher sought to protect him from the damaging effects of public curiosity and Kaspar thrived there until the arrival in May 1831 of an English lord, Philip Henry, the fourth Earl Stanhope.



Philip Henry 4<sup>th</sup> Earl Stanhope

Stanhope was the somewhat eccentric son of the even more eccentric 3<sup>rd</sup> Earl Stanhope, known as Citizen Stanhope owing to his open and enthusiastic support of the French Revolution. This support, however, went far beyond the merely verbal, so that his son had to take him to court to prevent his entire inheritance from being

slowly dismantled in the name of ‘égalité’. Like father, unlike son, the 4<sup>th</sup> Earl was Tory through and through, with a strong aversion to French republicanism. On his succession to the earldom, he found the family cupboard bare but, with the Stanhope family links to the Pitts, he was able to embark on a very lucrative career first as an agent for the British government and then to any party needing his services. He was, for instance, on friendly terms with Friedrich Gentz, right-hand man to Metternich, whose chief mission it was, post-1815, to ensure that all things with the faintest Napoleonic whiff were rapidly nipped in the bud. In 1831 Stanhope appears to have been in the employ of the Royal House of Baden and he succeeded in so impressing the citizens of Nuremberg with his apparent compassion, magnanimity and wealth that he was permitted to adopt Kaspar. Removing him from his friends in Nuremberg, he placed him instead in the house, in nearby Ansbach, of a dull, authoritarian schoolmaster. This Herr Meyer resented the affection Kaspar inspired and even before his arrival had thought him an impostor. Stanhope then left, promising to collect him later and take him back to his home in Kent, Chevening House, now the country seat of the British Foreign Secretary. This promise never materialised: Stanhope never saw his adopted son again. When he did reappear in Ansbach, it was with quite a different agenda.



Anselm von Feuerbach

Kaspar’s champion and chief friend in Ansbach was Anselm von Feuerbach, already referred to above. He had written the first book about Kaspar, now regarded as a German classic, ‘Beispiel eines Verbrechens am Seelenleben des Menschen’, the title of which indicates what most horrified people about this story: a crime against the human soul. But Feuerbach died suddenly in May 1833, believing himself to have been poisoned. At the end of this same year, on the afternoon of the 14<sup>th</sup> December,

Kaspar was lured into Ansbach's town park with the promise of revelations as to the identity of his mother. There he was presented with a silk purse inside of which was an intricately folded piece of paper and on it a message in mirror writing. While trying to open and read this, he was stabbed in the chest. The boy managed to struggle home but then returned, dragged back by the schoolteacher, Meyer, who didn't believe his story and wanted proof. The purse and note were found but the boy collapsed on his way home. Meyer continued to encourage the belief that he had stabbed himself in order to revive interest in himself, an opinion that has twice been presented recently as the truth in the British press. Since the first attempt on his life the boy had had a horror of all weapons, especially knives. All those who knew him in both Nuremberg and Ansbach were adamant that he could never have taken a knife to himself. But the story was convenient for some and has persisted. Tormented to the very end by those interested parties trying to make him confess to suicide, he died three days later on the night of December 17<sup>th</sup> 1833.

When Stanhope did finally turn up again in Ansbach, it was to begin an eighteen-month campaign to persuade the world that his beloved son, Kaspar, had been an imposter.



Kaspar Hauser

### **The Prince Theory**

After extensive research before his sudden death, Feuerbach had come to believe that Kaspar was in fact the eldest son of Karl, Grand Duke of Baden, and his wife, Stéphanie, a relation by marriage of Napoleon's wife, Josephine de Beauharnais. Napoleon had had to adopt Stéphanie as his daughter before the Zähringer dynasty in Baden were willing to accept this match, all part of Napoleon's policy to create a buffer region in Southern Germany between France and her arch enemy, Austria.

On 29<sup>th</sup> September 1812 a healthy boy had been born to Stéphanie. At that moment Napoleon was holed up in Moscow, uncharacteristically dithering as to how to proceed with his fatal invasion of Russia. However, in Karlsruhe two weeks later the baby (his grandson, in effect) was declared to be sick and dying, with both the mother and wet-nurse prevented from seeing the child, ostensibly to protect them from a sight that might upset them. Meanwhile back in Moscow and at the same time Napoleon finally decided on what was to prove his gravest military mistake: to make the long retreat through the fast-encroaching Russian winter back to France, so reducing an army of approximately 500,000 to just 10,000. As expected, the child in Karlsruhe died. And, as expected, Napoleon's own downfall, though protracted, was sealed.

This healthy son, who had supposedly died suddenly a few weeks after his birth is, however, believed by many, and with some evidence, to have been substituted by a servant woman's dying child and then later removed to various places of hiding. He was kept alive perhaps as a pawn in a game of dynastic intrigue, until released, irremediably brain-damaged and therefore considered harmless. The first Zähringer line thus died out and the children from the second morganatic marriage of Karl Friedrich (Kaspar's great-grandfather, if true) succeeded to the throne of Baden.

There have been two DNA tests conducted in order to try and either prove or disprove this theory. The first was financed by the German magazine 'Der Spiegel' and involved the analysis of the bloodstains on the undergarments Kaspar was wearing when he was stabbed. 'Der Spiegel' proudly trumpeted the negative results of this analysis when these were compared to the blood of a living descendant of Stéphanie. The question remained, however, as to whether the bloodstains were Kaspar's or blood used to touch up the stains for the delectation of those visiting the place where they had been on display. A second more rigorous and less partisan test, therefore, took place a few years later in Münster, when several samples were first compared (two separate locks of hair along with sweat residues round the inside of his hat brim) and when these were all found to be of the same origin, then and only then were these compared to the DNA of the descendant. Though not conclusive and certainly not widely trumpeted, the result of this second test strongly supported the theory.



Two further avenues of investigation might have clinched the matter but one has been consistently blocked: the Church authorities in Ansbach have stolidly refused to allow the exhumation of the grave where Kaspar is buried. Equally stubborn has been the refusal of the Baden Grand-Ducal descendants to allow the family vault in Pforzheim to be opened and investigated so as to see if DNA tests might establish whether the dead prince is in fact the son of Stéphanie. This suddenly changed, however, at the beginning of this same bicentenary year when jurisdiction over the vault was declared to pass to the state of Baden-Württemberg. The vault was therefore finally opened. But the coffins containing the remains of the child who had ‘died’ after two weeks, along with that of a younger brother, Alexander, who had also suddenly died, had both disappeared. It was claimed that these coffins had been looted in the chaos of Germany’s collapse at the end of World War Two. But there are photographs of the vault and its contents that show the two missing coffins in place, photographs taken well after the end of the war. Who are these interested parties 200 years later who continue to wish for the Prince theory to be buried? Why is this still so important to some? Is there something more to this than meets the eye?



The Baden Royal Family vault in Pforzheim

The whole truth about this mysterious boy may well never be known. In reality it is a life that never took place, an individual who, unlike his famous novelist contemporary, was never given the chance to live out his destiny, whatever that might have been – those of a certain age drawn to the story may well themselves reflect on the might-have-beens in their lives. But from the beginning this complex tale has created a yawning divide like no other, between those ready to believe Kaspar’s own story and those who see him as an imposter, and it is in the nature of the story for it to be well-nigh impossible not to take one side or the other. In his last book, Kaspar’s first guardian, Daumer speaks of believers and unbelievers; he is not talking of

religious belief but rather of two deep-rooted and opposing mind-sets, one that is open but, taken to an extreme, tending to a naïve gullibility, and the other that seeks to protect itself by the adoption of a hard carapace of scepticism and is thus closed off to what is unknown and unfamiliar.

Then there is another divide between those who generally take things at face value, who see ‘*with* the eye’, and those who see, as Blake exhorted, ‘*through* the eye’. The former saw in Kaspar a wimpish, possibly devious 16 year-old, while the latter could see through this to an abandoned but unsullied 3 year-old. This explains why the Camphill Movement, who care for children with severe learning disabilities, have adopted Kaspar as a model for their approach, which is to see what lies *behind* the damaged exterior of a human being. The recent Paralympics have made a significant contribution to this hoped-for sea-change in attitudes.

### **Blue Flower, Sick Rose**

Finally, another angle on the story can be obtained through a study of the period in question. This can lead one to see the story of Kaspar Hauser as an intrinsically Romantic narrative. Novalis’ Blue Flower became the symbol of early German Romanticism, while Blake’s Sick Rose could be seen as a premonition of European Romanticism’s demise. And since, as we know, Romanticism did indeed lose its way after the 1830s and became subverted, on the one hand, into darker ideologies, and, on the other hand, sanitised and sentimentalised in the Victorian Age (note what ‘romantic’ has now come to mean popularly), Kaspar Hauser’s life can be readily seen as symbolic of the active suppression of a movement that could have laid the basis for a very different Europe to the one that took its citizens into the barbarous calamities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond.

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