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LÜLSFELD

## MP+ Psychological pressure and sexualized violence in a former monastery?



Benjamin Stahl

**Dropouts raise serious allegations against a community called "Go & Change". She sees herself as a victim of defamation. What is going on in Lültsfeld (district of Schweinfurt)?**

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ICH HABE DEN HINWEIS GELESEN UND VERSTANDEN

Peacefully it lies there, the former monastery "Maria Schnee" on the outskirts of Lültsfeld. Just as peaceful as the rest of the 826-soul community in the district of Schweinfurt. Cultivated Franconian country idyll. Time seems to stand still here like the clock above the main portal of the late classicist monastery building: shortly after twelve. A handful of cars are parked in the car park, they no longer carry license plates. The gates to the monastery entrance are open. Isolation looks different. And yet the question still arises as to what has been happening behind the convent walls since the Sisters of the Redeemer sold the complex a good three years ago, the last nuns left after 129 years and a community called "Go&Change" moved in. A community without a church background, which the world view commissioner of the diocese of Würzburg classifies as a "psychological group with a high potential for conflict", but which says of itself that it has "dedicated its life to the orientation towards love".

In the past months several men and women have contacted the editorial staff: former members of "Go&Change". In the community there is "psycho terror" and "brainwashing", they report independently. They tell of all-controlling leaders and sexualised violence as "therapy". Visits from relatives are usually not welcome. Almost all dropouts want to remain anonymous. Especially the drop-outs are very afraid.

"Go&Change" sees itself as a victim

Humiliated and frustrated, the women and men turned their backs on "Go&Change" at different times. Only now - sometimes more than a year later - they can talk about it, they say. Since they have got their lives back under control to some extent. They want what they say happened in the community to be known - so that others do not have to make their experiences. As a warning. "Go&Change", on the other hand, says that they have been victims of various "defamation attempts" many times before. One sees oneself as a "surface for attack and projection of the feeling of injustice" of individual persons who have been thrown out, it says in an e-mail to the editors. With other former members one "still had good contact". According to Lültsfeld's mayor,

Thomas Heinrichs, 20 adults and some children still live in the monastery, out of the 40 people who once lived there.

"They have integrated themselves very well and help wherever they can."

Lülsfeld's former mayor Wolfgang Anger

Looking back: In 2017, the new residents of "Maria Schnee" make a picture-book start in Lülsfeld. In February, the then mayor Wolfgang Anger announces that the monastery has been sold. Previously, it had been offered on a real estate platform on the Internet for 399,000 euros. How the community financed the purchase is not disclosed by "Go&Change" on request. In March, representatives of the community, whose origin is a residential community in Halle an der Saale, will present their plans to the local council. In April, they present themselves to the villagers in the official gazette. They want to establish a "research and meeting centre" in the monastery, where they can practice "new ways of loving togetherness". They want to become "part of the village" and support its inhabitants "wherever we can".

Several buildings and gardens belong to the former monastery complex on the edge of Lülsfeld. Several buildings and gardens belong to the former monastery complex on the edge of Lülsfeld.

Photo: Anand Anders

Today, former mayor Anger praises "Go&Change" almost verbatim: "They have integrated themselves very well and help wherever they can. New Mayor Heinrichs, whose municipal election list included two "Go&Change" members, confirms: "I can't say anything negative, they've done nothing wrong." The monastery, writes "Go&Change" in an "exposé" to "dear friends", should become a kind of pilgrimage place for all creative and inspired spirits. A meeting place where art, science, healing work, meditation, innovation, spirituality and more flow together.

A supposed "Guru" at the top

The drop-outs paint a less positive picture of their life within the monastery walls. After an idealistic beginning an intimidating atmosphere of fear developed. A community member - K.K. (name known to the editors) - is particularly prominent in the descriptions. He has increasingly transformed himself into a "guru" and has taken the lead.

Among other things, the men and women describe group meetings in the great hall of the monastery, which usually took place in the evening and without prior notice. Arbitrarily K.K. had chosen one person. Personality and character traits of this person would then be "mirrored" by the others for hours on end. The focus is on the "shadows", i.e. the characteristics that are still in the dark, that have been repressed and must be looked at. This looking at by the group is described by all dropouts as "strongly manipulative". One woman experienced it as a "violent breaking up of the personality". A great deal of pressure had been built up. "Our personality became more and more unstable, our ego dissolved more and more", another person affected formulated it.

Sex practices as therapy

On the outside, K.K., 38, made himself scarce. In the community he acts "from above" and does not stick to what applies to all others: vegan food, ecologically oriented life, a well-structured day. He praises, criticizes, manipulates. He determines who else has to work on his personality. Who is degraded - or rises in the hierarchy like Felix Krolle. The 33-year-old is the face to the outside. Krolle is the managing director of the non-profit entrepreneurial company as which the community is now registered. It thus enjoys tax advantages.

Little by little another aspect comes to light in all the talks with the drop-outs: "Sadomaso sex" is also part of a "therapy" by K.K., who, according to drop-outs, calls himself a "healer". The aim is to cure the personality from its "shadows". This kind of "treatment" takes place in a "sex room" on the upper floor of "Maria Schnee". The women say that some of them have suffered injuries, one woman even very severe physical wounds. When asked by the editors what the sex therapies described are, "Go&Change" does not answer. This is "our private matter", says Krolle. The accusation is not denied.

Why were no charges filed?

The men say that nobody was forced to have sex. A woman who had dropped out of the game replied that no woman knew exactly what to expect there. If someone did not want to go, "a huge pressure" was immediately built up again. It had been assumed that this was to be understood as a refusal to advance his development. Why then did the women put up with "this therapy" after all? "We all longed to be happy and free of shadows inside," explains one of those affected. And why didn't they press charges? A shrug of the shoulders and a frightened expression on her face. "We want to continue our lives," they say, "without stress." And because it "seems hopeless to us. We're afraid that we'll lose what we've rebuilt now - that we'll be persecuted."

Such behaviour doesn't seem uncommon. "Experience has shown that it is very difficult for dropouts to open up and seek help after what they have experienced," says Stefan Nickels from Munich police headquarters. He is the only police officer in Bavaria who deals with such communities. "Often the worry and fear of being persecuted by the group plays an important role here."

Ex-mayor Anger said he had never heard of violence in the convent. "I can't imagine it either." There is a hierarchy in the monastery, "but if you want to bring 40 people under one roof, you need rules to lead such a group", he says. And: Everyone in the monastery "has chosen this way of life voluntarily". His successor Heinrichs says: None of the people who left "came to us and complained about 'Go&Change'".

What a concerned couple says about "Go&Change"

Ralf B. is the only witness who steps out of complete anonymity - "because I am not afraid". The retired prison officer and his wife, a graphic designer, were initially enthusiastic about "Go&Change" after a so-called get-to-know-each-other weekend for interested parties (current participation fee 350 euros). That was in the winter of 2018, when they joined the community and moved their center of life from the Rhineland to Lower Franconia, just a few kilometers from Lültsfeld. However, they did not move to the monastery at first. They were external members. He was rather looking for a geriatric WG, says the 62-year-old. But he fully supported the community. Also financially.

Ralf B. and his wife were members of the community 'Go&Change' in Lültsfeld (district of Schweinfurt). Ralf B. and his wife were members of the community 'Go&Change' in Lültsfeld (Lkr. Schweinfurt)

Even Ralf B. is no longer enthusiastic about "Go&Change" today. "I am angry!" He talks because he wants "people who go there just as naïve to be spared what happened to us". For him, "Go&Change" is a "cult". Not a community, but a dangerous "commune".

Woman is in therapeutic treatment

The change of heart began after his wife moved into the convent in April 2019. 45 year old today, when she developed psychological problems due to blows of fate in her family, she sought "peace and quiet and security" within the community. K.K. and others had promised him that "we will take care of your wife". She paid around 600 euros a month for board and lodging - the usual rate according to other dropouts.

Today Ralf B. regrets the trust he has placed in "Go&Change". His wife had not recovered there. On the contrary. "She went through hell," says Ralf B.; he was there to see it. He met his wife regularly during her stay. Until today she has not processed the experiences within the monastery walls. At the moment the 45-year-old is undergoing therapeutic treatment.

Are drugs used in the monastery?

Ralf B. tells of sleep deprivation through "trial nights" with group sessions and massive verbal insults to his wife. She had told her husband about a tally sheet in which alleged transgressions of a person had been counted. About her isolation in a special group for "narcissistic women" - as a punitive measure. And of financial control of the members.

Drugs were also reported to have been involved: LSD and Ecstasy. "Because through them you give away more of yourself," says Ralf B. The other dropouts confirm this. Ralf B. had also observed during a visit that drugs had been deliberately used and deliberately given to individuals.

Ralf B. describes that his wife felt that the group sessions were torture. "Afterwards you're done," he says. Sometimes the group sessions lasted all night. Without sleep, everyone had to get back to work where they were assigned: in the kitchen or garden, to do the dishes, to cook, to clean. Others were able to contribute their manual skills.

The former monastery 'Maria Schnee' dominates the village. Only a few members of the 'Go&Change' community are supposed to live in the building complex, dropouts say. The former monastery "Maria Schnee" dominates the village. Only a few members of the 'Go&Change' community are supposed to live in the building complex, dropouts say. Photo: Archive picture

K.K. doesn't want to talk to the editor

Can all this really be true? In the middle of the Franconian idyll and hidden only by the monastery walls from the eyes of the Lülselfelder? "Go&Change" itself does not specifically address the accusations with which the editorial staff confronts the community in e-mails. When asked about the group meetings, suspected drug use and the status of women in the convent, among other things, managing director Krolle replies ambiguously: "Yes, we would never do such things; no, we do much worse; we have not broken any laws and demand that our former members report us if they see things differently.

Attempts by the editors to get into conversation with the alleged guru "K.K." are futile. K.K., writes Krolle, is like everyone in the monastery "ready to testify in police or court hearings" - if it comes to that.

How the diocese's world view commissioner assesses the community

Jürgen Lohmayer, the world view commissioner of the diocese of Würzburg, places "Go&Change" among the many "social-utopian communities" that have been founded in recent years. When asked, Matthias Pöhlmann, Lohmayer's colleague in the Protestant Church and there cult commissioner for the whole of Bavaria, warns urgently of the group. Both of them were in Lülselfeld in March 2019 together with six other Bavarian worldview commissioners, and got a picture of the

group. "Everyone was friendly and polite," was Lohmayer's impression. Who the visitors did not get to see, however, was K.K., even though Lohmayer and Pöhlmann had asked about him several times.

Jürgen Lohmayer, the world view commissioner of the diocese of Würzburg. The world view commissioner of the diocese of Würzburg, Jürgen Lohmayer.

According to Lohmayer, methodological instruments from the field of psychology such as "Integral Structural Constellations with Deep Analysis" are used in the community, but are applied here without recognised psychotherapeutic qualification. For him, "Go&Change" is a "psychogroup with high conflict potential". He says that "group dynamic processes, leadership and power structures, social control, total commitment, separation from the previous social environment" are recurrent themes in the counselling sessions he has held with drop-outs and relatives. "You have to imagine the group dynamic context like this", explains Lohmayer: "The more I know about a person - especially in terms of sexuality and partnership - the more power I gain over them, the more controllable they become and the more vulnerable they ultimately become".

Not everyone and not everyone is supposed to have endured this way of life according to the descriptions of the drop-outs. Some would have developed massive psychological strain.

"People are broken, brought into conformity, traumatized."

Sebastian Stark, former companion of Felix Krolle

Sebastian Stark has been active for years in the so-called "Integral Movement", a scene to which "Go&Change" also belongs. He also knows K.K. and Krolle for a long time and has been to Lültsfeld several times. In conversation with the editors, he confirms the descriptions of the dropouts: sex as "treatment", drug abuse and a psychological and financial dependence of the community members. He speaks of "permanent totalitarian psychotherapy-like work" in the monastery. Stark's assessment: "People are being broken, assimilated and traumatised."

In Lültsfeld the mood is elusive

Beyond the monastery walls there is obviously nothing to be felt of it. In the village the opinion about "Go&Change" is hard to grasp. Although some speak nebulously of a "delicate topic". But the tenor is: "These are nice people." Former mayor Anger praises that the members are active in the football club, the music band and the fire brigade, have revived the choir. It is questionable, however, how great the commitment actually is: if you ask around in Lültsfeld, you will come across divided opinions. Pastor Stefan Mai, leader of the parish community "St. Franziskus am Steigerwald", to which Lültsfeld also belongs, does not want to comment on "Go&Change". When asked, he says that he is not concerned with it. "No comment!" According to his own statement, "Go&Change" still maintains very good contacts with the former residents, the Sisters of the Redeemer; Mayor Heinrich confirms this. The sisters leave an inquiry of the editorial staff unanswered.

The current convent residents "mingle with the people", says Heinrichs, head of the town hall. In fact, they were even invited several times to the "open day" in the monastery. Most recently, during the Corona crisis, they had offered to go shopping for the elderly, among other things, Heinrichs continues. No surprise for police officer Nickels. It is "not a rarity, but common practice" that such communities integrate themselves into village life through associations, neighbourhood helpers or festivals. It can "often be observed that even very critical and dangerous groups succeed in entering and being accepted in small villages".

Two deaths shake the community - and lead to an order of punishment

In June 2018 "Go&Change" will celebrate a wedding in Lültsfeld. Former mayor Anger marries the couple and sends a small report and photo to the editorial office. The couple smiles into the camera. Both are no longer at "Go&Change" today, they say. Months later, the picture of an intact world, which "Go&Change" at least presents to the outside world, gets deep scratches.

In March 2019 a one-year-old falls into a fire pond near the monastery and later dies in a hospital in Munich. As it turns out, the child was visiting "Go&Change" and was supervised by members of the community. According to the public prosecutor's office in Schweinfurt, when asked, "three people have been investigated for negligent homicide". In the meantime, fines of 120 daily rates have been imposed on the accused, "the orders of summary punishment are legally binding". Four weeks earlier, an infant from the area around "Go&Change" had died during a walk. According to the public prosecutor's office, this was "a natural cause of death" and proceedings were dropped. Youth Welfare Office does not see child welfare endangered.

Since March 2019, the responsible youth welfare office in Schweinfurt has gained an impression of the childcare at "Go&Change" during three registered and unannounced home visits. The community was "once again expressly" reminded of the supervisory duties that "are incumbent on the persons responsible for childcare", it was said upon request. No indications of a risk to the well-being of the child were found. At the last visit of the Youth Welfare Office in Lültsfeld, in November 2019, nine children were living in the monastery, one of them of school age, according to the authority. They are attending a Waldorf school.

"The care concept for our children was examined and praised by the Youth Welfare Office."  
Felix Krolle, manager of "Go&Change"

Krolle's former companion Stark got a different impression during his visits to "Go&Change". He had observed a "deficient form of child supervision" and questionable pedagogy: Mothers are said to have been told not to hug their children; children who demand attention are not allowed to be looked at by the monastery residents; children who cry at night are not looked at. This coincides with the statements of several drop-outs. Felix Krolle, on the other hand, asks why "neither the police nor the Youth Welfare Office" took action and no complaint was made "should we have acted illegally or endangered the welfare of children". Instead, the Youth Welfare Office has praised the "Go&Change" care concept.

For the community, the deaths were "heavy blows of fate", "which almost led to the break-up", Mayor Heinrichs said today. His predecessor Anger speaks of a "tensile test". Some had moved out at the time. "But the tip remained."

The wife of Ralf B. is different: Three months after she moved in, she surrendered. "I waited for weeks for her call that she wanted to leave immediately", says Ralf B. He left immediately.