**17 Killed, and a Life Is Searched for Clues**

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On page 98 of Jeffrey L. Dahmer's Ohio high-school yearbook is a photograph of 45 honor society students lined up shoulder to shoulder, their hair well combed, their smiles confident.

One senior three rows from the top has no smile, no eyes, no face at all: his image was blacked out with a marking pen, reduced to a silhouette by an annoyed student editor before the yearbook went to the printer.

That silhouette was Mr. Dahmer in the spring of 1978, a couple of months before he says he killed his first victim, with a barbell. It was 13 years before he confessed to one of the most horrific strings of slayings in modern times.

With grades that ranged from A's to D's, Mr. Dahmer fell far short of honor society standards, but he sneaked into the photo session as if he belonged. No one said a word until long after the shutter had clicked.

In all the years he cried out for attention, it was one of the few times he got caught. By then he had taught himself to live behind a mask of normalcy that hid his often contradictory emotions. It was a mask no one pulled down until one night last month, when a man in handcuffs dashed out of Mr. Dahmer's bizarrely cluttered apartment in a tough Milwaukee neighborhood, called the police and stammered that Mr. Dahmer had been trying to kill him.

The authorities say that at least 17 other men did not get away: that Mr. Dahmer drugged their drinks, strangled them and cut up their bodies with an electric buzz saw; that he discarded bones he did not want in a 57-gallon drum he had bought for just that purpose; that he lined up three skulls on a shelf in his apartment, but only after spraying them with gray paint, to fool people into thinking that they were plastic models, the kind an aspiring artist or a medical intern might study.

Once, he told the police in Milwaukee, he fried a victim's bicep in vegetable shortening and ate it.

Some criminal psychologists see traits in Mr. Dahmer that they have studied in mass killers like Theodore Bundy, who was was electrocuted in Florida in 1989 after a 15-year trail of violence that investigators believe took the lives of at least 30 young women across the nation, or John Wayne Gacy, who was convicted in 1980 of the sex killings of 33 young men in Chicago.

"We're dealing with some of the same dynamics that we can see in Gacy: the dysfunctional family, a guy who denies his homosexual feelings to erase whatever shame he might feel in committing these acts, who destroys the people who attracted him in the first place," said Ted Cahill, who wrote a book about the Gacy killings. "He's punishing himself and punishing them at the same time."

Now everyone from detectives to radio talk-show hosts is puzzling over the Dahmer case. The facts by themselves -- a home where parents went through a bitter divorce; a brother he long believed was the favorite in the family; a mother who he told the police had a nervous breakdown; his own lack of close friends -- do not explain why he did what he says he did. But the increasingly gruesome details that have emerged about Mr. Dahmer have all led back to one basic question: Who is this man?

He was an elementary-school student who stored animal skeletons in bottles of formaldehyde. A high-school drinker who swigged Scotch in early morning classes. An Army medic who convinced his buddies that he hated anything more unpleasant than taking soldiers' blood pressure. A factory worker who killed a gay man in a Milwaukee hotel, packed the body into a suitcase, took an elevator to the lobby, hailed a cab and had the driver put the suitcase in the trunk.

Like Mr. Gacy and Mr. Bundy, Mr. Dahmer went undetected for years. Some of his victims came from the fringes of society, and there were so many that he could not remember them all -- men he filed in his memory not by their names but by their tattoos. Some of them were like Mr. Dahmer himself, people of whom society did not take much notice. Disturbing Images From Childhood

And he could talk his way out of trouble when he had to. On May 27, nearly two months before his arrest, neighbors called the police about a naked, bleeding teen-ager they had seen wandering on the street outside Mr. Dahmer's apartment. The officers who investigated believed Mr. Dahmer's explanation that he and the boy were living together and were just having a quarrel.

After they left, Mr. Dahmer said later, he killed the teen-ager, Konerak Sinthasomphone. The officers have been suspended, with pay.

He had a glib side, talking his way into Vice President Walter F. Mondale's suite and the office of the humorist Art Buchwald on a school trip to Washington. But his hometown -- Bath Township, Ohio, a prosperous community that was home to Firestones and other decision makers who presided over the tire factories of nearby Akron -- was a tight-lipped place. Mr. Dahmer was tight-lipped about himself. And if anyone realized how unusual some of his behavior was, no one did anything about it.

"Whatever had gone on in Jeff's life, he couldn't talk about." said Martha Schmidt, a classmate at Revere High School who is now an assistant professor of sociology at Capital University in Columbus, Ohio. But she added, "It seemed so clear all along that it was someone saying, 'Pay attention to me.' "

He had been saying it for years. School records of his teachers' comments suggest that his feelings of alienation were apparent as early as first grade. His mother became ill in 1966 before and after the birth of his brother, David. "Jeff felt neglected," said a school official in Doylestown, Ohio, where Mr. Dahmer, then 6 years old, had been enrolled in Hazel Harvey Elementary School that fall.

The family moved to nearby Barberton before the school year was over, and a little more than a year later, when Mr. Dahmer was 8, they moved again, to Bath. From what his father, Lionel Dahmer, told a Milwaukee probation officer last year, that would have been about the time that Jeffrey Dahmer was sexually assaulted by a neighborhood boy. Jeffrey Dahmer, in his conversations with the police, has denied he was ever assaulted in that way.

Eric Tyson, who grew up across the street, said Jeffrey Dahmer kept chipmunk and squirrel skeletons in a backyard shed and had an animal burial ground at the side of the house, with graves and little crosses. "A number of neighbors have recalled seeing animals, like frogs and cats impaled, or staked to trees," he said.

Mr. Dahmer's high school record had the look of normalcy: he was in the band and played intramural tennis. But he drank. "I used to see him drinking gin," said Chip Crofoot, another classmate.

One day he went to a class with a Scotch, and Ms. Schmidt asked why he was drinking. "It's my medicine" was his reply, she said.

He sometimes tried to get attention by yelling odd exclamations in public places or by pretending to faint while crossing a street.

Sneaking into the honor society photograph became something of an annual prank: he did it when he was a junior as well as when he was a senior. "It was a very Jeff thing to do," Ms. Schmidt said. "It was part of his trying to be unconventional and to mock everything around him. I think he very consciously chose the honor society because I think in some ways he was laughing at himself and us." Trouble at Home, And Then a Killing

There was turbulence at home: the Dahmers' marriage was unraveling. One person who knew the Dahmers said that as things deterioriated Lionel Dahmer moved to a different part of the house to be away from his wife. He even jury-rigged an alarm, a string pulled across the room with keys hanging from it that would jangle if she intruded while he slept. Later Mr. Dahmer moved to a motel.

It was in the final weeks of the divorce settlement, just after Jeffrey Dahmer's high school graduation, that he says he committed his first homicide, a killing that went unreported until he told the police about it last month.

Mr. Dahmer told the police he picked up a hitchhiker named Steven Hicks and took him home for a beer. Mr. Dahmer said they had sex.

When Mr. Hicks wanted to leave, Mr. Dahmer smashed the back of his head with a barbell and then strangled him. He dragged the body into a crawlspace under the house, cut it into pieces and stored it in garbage bags. Later, he buried the bones, only to dig them up, crush them and scatter them in a ravine behind his parents' house.

That set a pattern that the authorities say Mr. Dahmer followed in Milwaukee, where he turned his grandmother's house and later his own apartment into killing factories: He would offer people a beer or money to pose in the nude while he took photographs. When they wanted to leave, he became violent. Showing a Different Side While On Military Duty

The next stop for Mr. Dahmer was Ohio State University, where he spent one semester. Then he enlisted in the Army and reported for duty at Fort McClellan, Ala., in the spring of 1980. He began training to be a military police officer, but soon transferred to Fort Sam Houston, in San Antonio, for a six-week course as a medical specialist, the military equivalent of a nurse's aide, a job that involved screening patients. He was assigned to the 2d Battalion, 68th Armored Regiment, 8th Infantry Division, and was sent to Baumholder in West Germany.

Mr. Dahmer decorated his room in Baumholder with a poster of the heavy-metal rock band Iron Maiden. He also spent hours poring over a children's picture book about the troll and the billy goats Gruff and telling boozy W. C. Fields jokes. Once he gave his bunkmate, Billy J. Capshaw, a birthday card with a beer mug on it and a Fields punchline. "To a fellow guzzler on his 19th birthday," he wrote on the card.

"He talked about his dad a lot," Mr. Capshaw said. "He wanted to please his dad." Mr. Capshaw believed that Mr. Dahmer was an only child. "He never said anything about a brother," Mr. Capshaw said last week.

Mr. Dahmer was clean-cut and easy-going, though he chided Mr. Capshaw for using foul language. But when he drank he became stony-faced and, to Mr. Capshaw, menacing.

"When he'd drink, he'd get real violent with me," said Mr. Capshaw, who is now serving a one-year sentence in the Garland County Jail in Hot Springs, Ark., for negligent homicide, a misdemeanor, involving a 14-year-old who borrowed his car and hit and killed someone. "You could tell in his face that he wasn't joking. It was for real. That's why it bothered me. It was a whole different side. His face was blank. It was kind of like he was cross-eyed-like. An expression like he just wasn't there. I've never seen it on anyone else's face." Killing Becomes Almost a Routine

Mr. Dahmer was honorably discharged in March 1981, a year before his three-year enlistment was over. The scuttlebutt around the barracks was that he was discharged for drinking. Army officials in Washington would not discuss the reasons, but Mr. Dahmer said he was discharged under Chapter 9 of the Code of Military Justice, a section that covers drug or alcohol use by Army personnel.

From what Mr. Dahmer told the police last month, fantasies of killing people that he had when he was 17 or 18 recurred after he left the Army and moved to Milwaukee, where his grandmother lived and where he eventually got a job at the Ambrosia Chocolate Company. But he told the police he did not kill again until late 1984 or early 1985, when he "discovered the gay bars."

Police reports written after his arrest last month said Mr. Dahmer met his first victim in Milwaukee at the 219 Club, a bar frequented by homosexuals. They went to the Ambassador Hotel, where a room for two costs $43.88 a night, plus a refundable $10 key deposit. In the police report he did not say he had killed the man; he just talked about how the two of them got drunk and passed out. "When he woke up, the guy was dead and had blood coming from his mouth," the report said, giving Mr. Dahmer's explanation of what happened next.

He told the police he left the body in the room while he went to a mall, bought a suitcase, returned to the hotel, put the body inside, called a taxi and took it to his grandmother's house, where he was living. There he dismembered the body and disposed of it. The police report did not say where his grandmother was at the time.

The police report said he did not kill his next victim until roughly a year later, this time at his grandmother's house. He told the police he met the man at the 219 Club and gave him sleeping pills after they had sex. Then he strangled the man after he dozed off. He said he also drugged his third victim at his grandmother's house. Talking of Everything Except the Darkest Side

Mr. Dahmer was arrested in 1986 for taking photographs of a 14-year-old boy and was convicted and sentenced to a year in jail. The killings resumed, he told the police, when he was released after serving a partial sentence. He was seeing a parole officer at the same time.

He said that in 1989 he had sex with a man, drugged him and stabbed him with a hunting knife. Then he dismembered the body in the bathtub and used hydrochloric acid to destroy the bones.

Mr. Dahmer said his next killing, two months later, followed the same routine: sex, drugs in a drink, death and dismemberment. "Subject states he began getting quicker at cutting up the bodies," the police report noted.

What unfolded in his sessions with the parole-probation officer, Donna Chester, was a partial look at his life. She was unavailable for an interview last week. But her impressions of Mr. Dahmer recorded in an 81-page document that was released by the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, give no indication that Mr. Dahmer set off alarm bells during their chats.

The reason was that he seemed to talk about everything except the killings.

He sometimes expressed interest in talking about his sexual orientation, but often could not bring himself to say what was on his mind. "Client states he knows he prefers male partners but client feels guilty about it." Ms. Chester wrote.

He also talked about family tensions. "He is uncomfortable with his family," she wrote after a session, "because (1) his father is controlling, (2) he has nothing in common with his brother who attends college and (3) he is embarrassed by his offense." He said he had talked with his mother and that she had told him she knew he was gay but that it did not matter.

Money was also on his mind. Ms. Chester wrote that Mr. Dahmer "gets angry at people who make a lot of money, saying "why are they so lucky?' And he 'hates' them for having so much."

Ms. Chester told Mr. Dahmer he had a good job, but he was frustrated that he always seemed short of cash and that the life he longed to lead was beyond his means. But for all of Mr. Dahmer's complaining about finances, his job appeared to be going well. He earned about $9 an hour at the candy factory and took home $250 to $300 a week, depending on how much overtime he put in.

Soon that security was in jeopardy. On July 8, Mr. Dahmer told Ms. Chester he was in danger of losing his job because of arriving late or not showing up.

On July 14, just days before his arrest, he told Ms. Chester he had been dismissed. He told her he had overslept after spending all day visiting his grandmother in a hospital.

The police reports indicate that the killings became more frequent as things at work deteriorated. He told the police that he killed on June 30, July 4 and July 19.

Three days after that last killing, he was arrested shortly after the man in handcuffs fled his apartment and flagged down police officers.