

Domestic killings shock Swiss

By Imogen Foulkes

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Corinne Rey-Bellet (centre) with her parents in 1997
Rey-Bellet was a star in Switzerland with a wide following

The murder last week of one of Switzerland's most famous skiers has forced the Swiss to look long and hard at a crime that is worryingly common in their society. Corinne Rey-Bellet was shot by her husband Gerold Stadler just days after the couple had agreed to separate.

Stadler also shot and killed Rey-Bellet's brother Alain, and seriously wounded her mother, before finally killing himself.

The Swiss media tend to call cases like this "family dramas", in which a man kills his wife, often his own children, and himself.

Family slaughter might be a more accurate term - there have been 14 such cases in Switzerland in the last 11 months.

"There is a profile for a man who commits a crime like this," says Philip Jaffe, professor of psychology at Geneva University. "He tends to be very ambitious, but isolated, very contained, and he can't cope with loss. So if his wife threatens to leave him, his response is violence."



Police show a picture of Gerold Stadler
Gerold Stadler was found dead with a gun lying next to him

Deceptively normal

Another characteristic is normality, or orderliness, as the Swiss often call it. All the recent cases, including that of Rey-Bellet and Stadler, involved families who presented an outward appearance of normal, calm, orderly family life.

"Every time we get a case like this, you can go and ask the neighbours, and they all say the same thing," says Martin Boess, head of Switzerland's crime prevention unit.

"It was a normal family, he was going to work, the kids were going to school, they were quiet but friendly, no one suspected a thing," Mr Boess says.

Trying to make sense of senseless killings, he hazards a guess that perhaps the very normality - or the dreadful stress of keeping up the appearance of normality - can trigger the violence. "Here in Switzerland we are brought up to expect everything to go according to plan," he explains. "Just like our trains run on time, we've come to expect our lives to run to plan, and when they don't, we go wild."

Military menace

But this does not explain why Switzerland, so often thought of as a peaceful country, should have so many family killings.

A recent study indicated that 58% of all murders in Switzerland were within the family. In the Netherlands, also a peaceful, prosperous Western European country, the figure is 29%.

Mr Boess blames the Swiss army's policy of requiring Swiss men, who all have to do military service, to keep their guns and ammunition at home in case of an emergency call-up. What that means is that nearly all Swiss men have a Sturmgewehr - an assault rifle - stored somewhere in their homes. Those who make it to officer level have an automatic pistol too, and when men leave the army, they are allowed to keep their guns. No licence is required.

"If things go wrong, he can go upstairs, get the gun, and shoot," says Mr Boess.

In most of Switzerland's "family dramas", an army gun is used. Stadler shot his famous wife with his officer's pistol.

"It's very common to hear women tell how their husbands remind them they have a gun in moments of tension," says Brigitte Schnegg, professor of gender politics at Berne University. "They'll say: 'If you don't do what I want, don't forget I've got my gun upstairs.'"

'Male honour'

For Ms Schnegg, the prevalence of guns together with the slow pace of equality in Switzerland, where women did not get the right to vote until 1971, have formed a lethal combination.

"We have a country in which, until recently, men were legally classed as the head of the household. They were the sole providers, the ones in charge and in control," she explains.

"I think these killings are the 'honour killings' of Switzerland," she says. "Family problems are seen as a defeat for the man, it all has to do with male honour."

Psychologist Philip Jaffe agrees with this interpretation, but believes it will take years for male attitudes to change. In the meantime, he has a suggestion for reducing the violence, but it means challenging the much-loved tradition of keeping the guns at home. "I think the guns should not be kept at home," he says. "It's absolutely absurd when you think about it. For them to be available, in the cupboard or whatever, it creates the opportunity to use a lethal weapon in the heat of the moment, and that's very scary for many families. "

The Swiss gun lobby is strong, and until now all attempts at gun control have been defeated.

But when Corinne Rey-Bellet and her brother were buried side-by-side in their home town, on the day that should have been Alain's wedding day, even the most enthusiastic gun owners began to waver.

For the first time, opinion polls show a majority of Swiss want the guns out of their homes, and stored in a safer place.

The days when every Swiss man had a weapon, in the garage next to the kids' bikes or the lawnmower, may be numbered.