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NEWS

South suburban abortion doctor who hid thousands of fetuses carried his secrets to his grave

'You can speculate till hell freezes over,' says a lawyer for the widow of Dr. Ulrich Klopfer, who died leaving behind 2,411 preserved fetal remains — and nothing to explain why.

By Stefano Esposito | Oct 25, 2019, 5:30am CDT

Dr. Ulrich Klopfer, seen here at his South Bend, Indiana, clinic is believed to have performed tens of thousands of abortions. But, in the final years of his life, he developed a close friendship with one of the anti-abortion activists who stood outside his clinics. | WNDU-TV via AP

It looked more like an old barn than a garage — its boards weathered and warped, with dark corners where things might remain lost for years.

It did not look like a place that held secrets.

Its owner, a retired doctor with a foreign accent too faded to place, often left his garage doors open. He had a fondness for clutter — so much so that there was no room for automobiles in the three-car garage. But that was just something his Crete Township neighbors had come to expect of Dr. Ulrich Georg Klopfer, the sometimes-cranky, slightly nosy man who threw nothing away.

It wasn't until he died on Sept. 3, at 79, that the garage began to give up its secrets. The abortion doctor's family, clawing through the clutter, found what would turn out to be 71 cardboard boxes containing 2,246 fetuses — each one chemically preserved and individually sealed in a clear-plastic pouch.

"The 31 years I've been doing this job, I've never seen anything like this — ever," said Will County Sheriff Mike Kelley, whose deputies sifted through "hundreds and hundreds" of boxes in Klopfer's home to be sure they hadn't missed any other remains. "It's one of those once-in-a-lifetime things."



"I've never seen anything like this — ever," said Will County Sheriff Mike Kelley (left), seen at a Sept. 19 news conference with State's Attorney James Glasgow. | AP

The discovery floored everyone, no matter their views on abortion.

It also left perhaps thousands of women wondering: Is one of those fetuses mine?

"I was horrified and heartbroken — I was just filled with so many feelings. I didn't know what to do with myself," said Rachel Kelly, 43, who'd had two abortions at Klopfer's Fort Wayne, Indiana, clinic in 1998.

Nowhere in the garage, Klopfer's clinics, his house crammed floor-to-ceiling with possessions — or a garage at a business property in Dolton, where 165 more sets of fetal remains turned up in early October — have investigators found anything to answer the question: Why?

"You can speculate till hell freezes over," said Kevin Bolger, a Chicago lawyer representing Klopfer's widow. "You're not going to know the answer. He took it with him."

Maybe that's only fitting for a man who, in life, was so baffling to so many people.

To those who called him a heartless baby-killer, he argued that, in many cases, he was saving a baby from a life of misery.

He also often told people that, when he died, he expected to meet the likes of Hitler, Stalin and Mussolini.

And though he cursed the anti-abortion activists who protested outside his clinics, he also shared a deep friendship with one of them in the last years of his life.



Police in Fort Wayne, Indiana, searching a building that once housed one of Dr. Ulrich Klopfer's clinics. Even after he lost his license, the abortion doctor came back once a week for years — to have coffee with an anti-abortion activist he befriended. | The Herald-News

Nearly everyone who met Ulrich Klopfer had heard the story, even if they knew nothing else about him. He was born in Germany during World War II and survived the Allied forces' bombing of Dresden that killed tens of thousands and left the city in ruins. He once told an anti-abortion documentary filmmaker that the bombings forever colored his perception of "human beings ... what they do to each other."

His family lived in Radebeul, on Dresden's outskirts, according to a relative who agreed to be interviewed only on the condition that her name not be published. Klopfer's father was a doctor and a rocket-fuel scientist.

The relative said that, if Klopfer was a hoarder, well, maybe that was something he inherited.

"They laughed that the mother had a box of string in her basement with pieces too short to use," she said.

When Klopfer was a boy, his family came to America and settled in Michigan, where some relatives still live. After high school, he studied organic chemistry at Wayne State University and elsewhere and graduated from the Chicago College of Osteopathic Medicine in 1971 with a doctor of osteopathy degree. One sibling went on to work as a NASA scientist, and another became an airline pilot, according to the relative, who said all of the children were brilliant.

Klopfer spent his early career in downtown Chicago, working at Chicago Loop Mediclinic, 316 N. Michigan Ave. — a facility that figured prominently in the Chicago Sun-Times/Better Government Association 1978 investigation "The Abortion Profiteers." The series documented how women were moved through clinics with conveyor-belt-like speed, not all of them surviving and others left maimed. At Mediclinic, where doctors were paid per procedure, Klopfer tried to one-up another abortionist, Dr. Ming Kow Hah.



THE ABORTION PROFITEERS

'The abortion was exceptionally painful. It hurt so bad and I was screaming so loud they stuck a tampon in my mouth.'

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with another clinic doctor, Ulrich Klopfer, are a continual source of conversation.

"They compete to see who can get the most patients done," said a former Loop clinic nurse. "They'll ask each other, 'How many have you done?', or they'll ask the staff how many the other guy has done. . . . Klopfer would be having a cup of coffee and be on his last sip when he'd jump up and say, 'I'd better get going or Hah will have the whole recovery room full.' "

Dr. Ulrich Klopfer was featured in this Nov. 15, 1978, story in the Sun-Times / BGA series "The Abortion Profiteers."

"They compete to see who can get the most patients done," a former clinic nurse was quoted as saying. "They'll ask each other, 'How many have you done?' or they'll ask the staff how many the other guy has done. . . . Klopfer would be having a cup of coffee and be on his last sip when he'd jump up and say, 'I'd better get going or Hah will have the whole recovery room full.'"

Hah eventually lost his license. There's no record of Klopfer ever facing disciplinary action by Illinois state medical authorities.

It's not clear why Klopfer moved the majority of his work to Indiana. He got a license to practice in Indiana in the late 1970s, records show, and also had licenses to practice medicine in Florida and South Dakota.

In a 1978 reference letter to Indiana's Department of Registration and Education, a doctor who knew Klopfer from Chicago wrote, "Dr. Klopfer is a confident individual and very capable in his field."

Klopfer set up shop in Indiana at clinics in Gary, Fort Wayne and South Bend. The state's anti-abortion attorney general Curtis Hill would later call him one of the most "notorious abortionists in the history of Indiana."



Dr. Ulrich Klopfer performed abortions at this now-shuttered clinic in Gary, Indiana, where most of the sign is gone. | Stefano Esposito / Sun-Times

The Gary clinic, a bunker-like brick building with slits for windows, sits across from a now-shuttered child-care facility called Children Are the Future.

In South Bend, abortion opponents hoping to keep women from having the procedure built a chapel next door to Klopfer's clinic. The 7,000-square-foot chapel building also includes a counseling center and an apartment for homeless would-be mothers.

When Klopfer drove there from his home in Crete, the activists would be waiting. The doctor — 5-foot-8, with wire-rimmed glasses and unruly white hair — scowled at them.

"He called us a lot of names," said Shawn Sullivan, a lawyer who also oversees the chapel. "On Mother's Day on one occasion, he came out to the whole crowd ... and said, 'All mothers are whores!'"



Shawn Sullivan (right) who oversees a chapel next door to what used to be Dr. Ulrich Klopfer's South Bend, Indiana, clinic, said he and his staff would pray for the abortion doctor. | ChurchMilitant.com

It was much the same in Fort Wayne.

"I don't think you want me to tell you what he said because it was very sexual and very demeaning," said an anti-abortion activist named Don, who spoke on the condition his last name not be published. Don protested outside Klopfer's Fort Wayne clinic for 10 years.

Sullivan had a window built in the chapel facing the South Bend clinic to watch the comings and goings. Surveillance cameras were directed at Klopfer's parking lot. It wasn't uncommon, Sullivan said, to see Klopfer loading boxes into the trunk of his car after dark.

He said that seemed odd, particularly since Klopfer didn't appear to have a service to remove medical waste. At the time, a member of Sullivan's staff contacted the St. Joseph County Health Department, but nothing came of the complaint, Sullivan said.

Security guards made sure protesters didn't get anywhere near the front door of Klopfer's clinics.

Rachel Kelly, 43, whose two abortions in 1998 were both performed by Klopfer in Fort Wayne, said she was given an escort inside both times.

"It was a very difficult time," Kelly said of that period in her life. "I was drinking heavily and doing drugs. ... I was very unhappy with my life."

She said she doesn't remember much about the first abortion, but her second one stands out in vivid detail. The clinic, since demolished, looked like an old, dimly lit house, she said. And she remembers sitting in a stuffy waiting area with other patients.

"When I opened that door to let some air move through, you could hear the sounds of other abortions taking place, and there was a woman screaming," Kelly said.

When a nurse came to get her, the hallway to the procedure room "smelled like death," Kelly said. To steady her nerves, she said she sneaked in a bottle of vodka. Kelly remembers Klopfer saying almost nothing to her until she was in the recovery room.

"It was a very bizarre thing. He walked right up to me, and he wanted me to stand up," Kelly said. "He wanted to shake my hand. ... He looked me in the eyes and smiled, like I had somehow impressed him or given him something he wanted."

Others were in the room, too, but Klopfer didn't shake hands with any of them, said Kelly, who's still puzzled by the doctor's behavior that day.



It was only after Dr. Ulrich Klopfer died Sept. 3 that his family discovered boxes and boxes containing preserved human fetuses in this garage in unincorporated Crete Township. | AP

In Crete Township — where backyards are wide, rolling and often unfenced — Klopfer was the friendly, nosy neighbor who liked to tinker with cars.

"One of my roommates had to go to the hospital, and he was over here immediately, trying to find out what was going on," said Chuck Rolwing, recalling a conversation about a year ago that didn't involve Klopfer introducing himself as a doctor ready to help.

Klopfer was married. But several neighbors said they rarely saw his wife.

Klopfer's widow and his previous wife declined to be interviewed for this story.

"It always looked like he was a hoarder. His garage was full of stuff," said Aaron Harris, 21, whose family has lived in the neighborhood since 2005.

Harris, like pretty much everyone else, assumed the "stuff" was just junk.

Authorities estimated Ulrich performed tens of thousands of abortions. But he seldom was sued.

"I've never lost a patient," Klopfer told the South Bend Tribune in February 2015. "No patient of mine in all the years I've been doing abortions has ever had a major complication."

The year before, an Indiana State Department of Health spokesman told the same newspaper Klopfer's clinic had never been hit with a civil penalty.

That's because no one was watching him closely, anti-abortion groups in Fort Wayne and South Bend say.

In 2011, Allen County Right to Life opened an office a "stone's throw" from Klopfer's Fort Wayne clinic.

"I could look out my window and see the women coming to abortionist Klopfer on procedure day," said Cathie Humbarger, the group's executive director.

Humbarger and her staff pored over thousands of documents from Klopfer's clinics, including state "terminated pregnancy" reports, taking note of every omission or mistake.

In South Bend, Sullivan, who runs the chapel, had staff pose as women seeking an abortion to see if they could catch clinic staff breaking state rules governing abortions.

In November 2016, the Medical Licensing Board of Indiana suspended Klopfer's license, saying the staff in one of Klopfer's recovery rooms lacked proper training and that, in some cases, he failed to file paperwork showing patients were given "state-mandate information or counseling" in a timely manner.

The board also said that Klopfer had performed an abortion earlier in his career on a 10-year-old girl who told the doctor she'd been raped. The board said Klopfer failed to report the rape to police.

Klopfer saw the move to revoke his license as an orchestrated effort by anti-abortion workers in state government to put him out of business, he told the South Bend Tribune in 2015.

"If I had an agenda, and I went to inspect a hospital and spent two or three days there, do you think I couldn't find errors or mistakes?" Klopfer told the newspaper.



Dr. Ulrich Klopfer, who survived the Dresden bombings of World War II, said abortions sometimes kept babies from a life of misery. He also said he expected to meet Hitler and Stalin after he died. | South Bend Tribune via AP

Despite losing his license, Klopfer didn't stop going to work. Once a week, every week, he drove to his Indiana clinics. He didn't see patients, though. For years, he spent every Wednesday night at the Fort Wayne clinic before driving to South Bend and Gary. In Fort Wayne, he met Don, the activist who'd stood outside his clinic, the one Klopfer had directed his most vile curses toward.

Somehow, a friendship developed — after Don, sitting in church, took the words in his pastor's sermon to heart: "Think of the person you dislike the most and ask for forgiveness."

The abortionist and anti-abortionist drank coffee together every Thursday morning for five years in Don's Dodge Durango. They talked about everything from their dislike of President Donald Trump to food to what Klopfer's life in Germany had been like.

"We never missed a Thursday," Don said. "The only time we missed a day would be on Thanksgiving or Christmas or if, perhaps, I would go on vacation."

Don said he'd sometimes ask Klopfer why he continued to drive to the clinics but that all he would say was: "Force of habit."

If Klopfer couldn't make it for coffee, he'd call.

But there was no call in the days leading to Sept. 5. When Don dialed his friend's cellphone, Klopfer's wife answered.

"Oh, Don, I know you! He talked about you all the time," she said. Then, in tears, she told him her husband had died.

A fellow crusader in the "right to life" movement told Don about the garage and the thousands of fetal remains.

"I just can't imagine why he did it," Don said.

Klopfer left no letter, no note, nothing that might tell investigators why he kept dead fetuses.

"He was a very complex person," said the relative who didn't want her name used, but he wasn't "unstable," she said.

He could be very private — out of necessity, he once told an Indiana TV station.

"I've been stalked, I've been shot at," he said. "I've had three busloads of people in front of my house. No, I'm not going to advertise. I'm sorry, I'm not running for political office."

Now, investigators in the Indiana attorney general's office want to know whether Klopfer had help moving the fetuses.

They have described his family as "very cooperative."



Chicago attorney Kevin Bolger, who represents Dr. Ulrich Klopfer's widow: "This was a total shock to her. You think you know someone, but then you don't always know." | Provided photo

Asked whether Ulrich's wife had any inkling about the fetuses, family attorney Bolger said: "Every room in the house, except hers, was floor-to-ceiling junk. ... You couldn't see out the windows."

The relative said of the widow: "She's having a really hard time. It's hard to lose your husband — and then to have to face this firestorm."

The relative described Klopfer as a kind man who "truly cared about his family and his practice."

Kelly, who twice had abortions at Klopfer's clinic in the late 1990s, now knows that the recovered fetuses are from women who had abortions between 2000 and 2002 — that's what investigators have said, noting that each pouch is labeled.

A spokeswoman for the Indiana attorney general said there was no "specific" law for the disposal of fetal remains during that time. That changed on Sept. 3 — the day Klopfer died — when an Indiana abortion law that had been contested all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court took effect, requiring the cremation or burial of fetal remains following an abortion.

Kelly can't get rid of the nagging fear that something once belonging to her might yet turn up.

"I'm definitely left wondering: Are they going to find more somewhere else?" she said.

Contributing: *Jon Seidel, AP*

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