

Disappearances – an analysis of the factors in legal and psychological context.

A case study

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Abstract

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the issue of disappearances in Poland, combining legal, psychological and social perspectives. In the legal aspect, in the absence of uniform law, it is based on police orders introducing a two-tier system for case classification. The psychological and social aspects focus on the trauma experienced by the loved ones whose reactions have been described using Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief, with appropriate modifications. The theoretical considerations are illustrated by a detailed analysis of two unsolved cases from 1999: the disappearances of Rafał Dąbkowski and Łukasz Sienkiewicz. The author outlines the circumstances of both incidents, formulates investigative hypotheses and examines potential links between the cases, highlighting numerous demographic, geographical and temporal similarities, and suggesting a possible common criminal pattern.

Keywords: disappearances, forensic psychology, grief, trauma, profiling.

Introduction

Disappearances of persons are a significant problem, not only in criminological sense, but also in social and psychological viewpoint. In this paper, the author would like to address all these issues in order to provide a broader academic perspective. This problem is the subject of much debate and has a powerful hold on the public imagination. Although the Internet provides a number of press articles and themed podcasts covering various cases of people going missing, it is more difficult to find reliable scientific or popular science analyses.

Thousands of people of all ages – adults, teenagers and also children – are reported missing in Poland every year. They include both single people and those in family relationships. Different in terms of, amongst other things, gender, place of residence, financial status and level of education, they all have one thing in common – someone, most

often a family member or someone close to them, becomes concerned about their disappearance and reports them missing.

Police statistics available since 1997 show that the number of reported disappearances fluctuates between 13,000 and 20,000 a year. Official statistics published on the National Police Headquarters' website suggest that the highest number of such cases occurred between 2000 and 2002 and between 2014 and 2017 (around 20,000 people a year), whilst in 2024 more than 13,000 missing persons were recorded¹. Since 2018, in accordance with an Ordinance issued by the Commander-in-Chief of Police, so-called parental abductions and runaway juvenile searches have no longer been classified as missing persons cases, which has also had an impact on the statistics. However, the number of reports in the runaway

¹ Source: <https://statystyka.policja.pl/st/wybrane-statystyki/zaginieni/50885,Zaginieni.html>

juvenile search category continues to rise. The police do not publish regular data on the number of people reported missing and found, but statistics from a few years ago show that 98 per cent of missing persons were found within 30 days of being reported missing². According to data from 2020, around 4,000 people are currently classified as permanently missing, i.e. one about whom there has been no information for years³.

According to Ewa Gruza (2020), there are many different causes for disappearances or vanishings, and they vary considerably. In the case of teenagers, they most often include a desire to run away from home, family conflicts or a difficult home situation, whereas for adults, they include a mental health crisis, illness, a dire financial situation, and sometimes a desire to start life afresh, free from the 'burdens' of the past. Elderly people often suffer from memory loss or dementia, which prevents them from returning home. Some of those who go missing deliberately choose to cut off all contact with their families, and if they are found, they do not wish to reveal their whereabouts. A much smaller group consists of victims of kidnappings, murders, accidents and other criminal acts. Some people do not have any documents on them at the time of death, which means that their identity cannot be established (Gruza, 2020, pp. 74–75).

It is worth emphasising at this point that the issue of long-term disappearances of persons can be analysed not only from a psychological or social perspective, but also from a legal one (Gruza, 2020, pp. 107–108). I would like to discuss all these aspects below.

Legal aspects of disappearances

As far as the legal aspects are concerned, there is currently no generally applicable legislation in Poland that would unambiguously regulate matters relating to disappearances. The activities of the relevant agencies dealing with disappearances are currently based on ordinances issued by the Commander-in-Chief of Police. Interestingly, no precise and universally applicable definition of a missing person has been established yet (Gruza 2020, pp. 74–75). According to Ewa Gruza (ibid.), the primary legal act governing police searches for missing persons and the procedures to be followed in the event of the discovery of a person of unknown identity or the discovery of unidentified corpses or human remains was Ordinance No. 48 of the Commander-in-Chief of Police of 28 June 2018. On 29 July 2025, Ordinance No. 25 of the Commander-in-Chief of Police came into force, amending the ordinance on the conduct of police searches for missing persons and the procedures to be followed in the event of the discovery of a person of unknown identity or of unidentified corpses and human remains.

² Source: <https://tarnowskie-gory.policja.gov.pl/k26/informacje/wiadomosci/150112,Zaginiecia-osob-w-Polsce-Fakty-i-mity.html>

³ Source: <https://gazeta.policja.pl/997/archiwum-1/2021/numer-3-032021/200691,Poszukujemy-tylko-aniolow.html>

Currently applicable legal acts that govern police procedures for searching for missing persons includes:

- Decision No. 147 of the Commander-in-Chief of Police of 15 April 2013 concerning the Missing Persons Search Centre of the National Police Headquarters,
- Ordinance No. 25 of the Commander-in-Chief of Police of 25 July 2025 amending the ordinance on the conduct of police searches for missing persons and on the procedures to be followed in the event of the discovery of a person of unknown identity or of unidentified corpses and human remains.

These acts have introduced significant changes.

A disappearance of a person is defined as a situation in which it is impossible to determine the whereabouts of a specific natural person and which requires that person to be found or assisted in order to safeguard their life, health or liberty. The most significant change introduced under Ordinance No. 25 of 2025 is the abandonment of the hitherto three-tier categorisation in favour of a two-tier system determining the urgency and scope of search operations, depending on the identified risk to the life, health or liberty of the missing person. The said levels therefore reflect the degree of urgency and the scale of the rescue operations that need to be initiated in a particular case. Thus:

1. Tier 1 applies to cases where the disappearance poses a real, immediate threat to life, health or liberty; its implementation requires the immediate and direct initiation of search operations involving significant police assets and resources. This scope encompasses search for the following groups of people: children aged up to 10, people unable to look after themselves, requiring medications, and who are reasonably suspected of being a victim of a crime; people reasonably suspected of being a victim of a crime against life or liberty; people whose behaviour immediately prior to their disappearance suggested a possible intention to commit suicide, where the time that has elapsed since they went missing permits taking effective measures to prevent the suicide; persons who went missing in weather conditions or other situations which pose a real threat to their life, and whose life can be saved by means of immediate search operations.
2. Tier 2 encompasses cases of missing persons where, in the opinion of the police based on the data collected, the person's disappearance does not pose an immediate threat to their life, health or liberty, and where the person does not meet the requirements set out in point 1;

It is worth stressing at this point that the aforementioned rules are unique on a global scale, and very few countries apply a two-tier classification for disappearances. Other countries customarily divide missing persons into two categories: adults and children. A prerequisite for conducting a search for a missing adult is to carry out a risk assessment and determine whether they are in danger. If the risk does not exist, many countries recognise that every

person has the right to privacy and absence of any obligation to disclose their current whereabouts. State authorities are not obliged to carry out searches in such circumstances (Gruza, 2020, p. 79).

It should be added that in many countries there is no legally binding definition of a *missing person*, which hinders search operations at European and international level (Gruza 2020, p. 80), as the criteria for classifying people as missing may vary from country to country, and a person classified as missing in one country may not be classified as such in another. Still, Interpol database and the Schengen Information System, which contain details of missing persons, are of great assistance in this regard. Nevertheless, extensive research into the need to define the term *missing person* was carried out at the Centre for the Study of Missing Persons at the University of Portsmouth. According to Karen Shalev Greene, the director of the centre, uniform understanding of the term is crucial to the search itself, particularly when it involves cross-border operations (K. Shalev Greene, et al. 2019). Such a shared definition would enable the creation of comprehensive standards relating to social care and criminal liability, and would also facilitate the coordination and harmonisation of approaches to the registering, identifying, searching for and locating missing persons (Gruza 2020). The most urgent matter appears to be the introduction, within the procedures, of warnings regarding criminal liability for making false reports, providing false information and withholding the truth when reporting a person missing.

The reliability of the information provided by persons reporting a disappearance is one of the most significant challenges facing the police (ibid.). In interviews with experts, officers point out that it is common practice for the families of missing persons to conceal key facts. Fear of expressing a negative opinion about the missing person and of revealing, for instance, their history of psychiatric treatment or mental health issues leads families to withhold important information that could affect the effectiveness of the search. As a result, the image of the missing person and the environment in which they lived and functioned is sometimes idealised (Gruza 2020).

It is worth noting here that Missing Persons Search Centre was established in 2013 within the National Police Headquarters under Article 5(2) of the Act of 6 April 1990 on the Police. The Centre's tasks include⁴:

- a) monitoring and analysis of missing person cases investigated by Police units;
- b) expert and analytical support in cases involving Tier I missing persons, multi-faceted cases, highly complex cases or cases that attract particular media attention;
- c) oversight of search operations for missing minors and provision of direct involvement of the Centre's experts in the search for those persons;
- d) implementation of the information transmission

⁴ Source: <https://sip.lex.pl/akty-prawne/dzienniki-resortowe/centrum-poszukiwan-osob-zaginionych-komendy-glownej-policji-34754335>.

platform as part of the 'Child Alert' system within the Police, and the provision of technical and substantive support for it;

- e) provision of technical, personnel, information and logistical support to Police units in their search operations, in particular through the Mobile Search Support Centre;
- f) cooperation with persons designated at provincial Police headquarters and the Warsaw Police Headquarters to liaise with the Centre on an ongoing basis;
- g) cooperation with non-governmental organisations working on issues relating to missing persons and the protection of human life and health;
- h) initiation and maintenance of cooperation with police units responsible for missing person cases in other countries;
- i) preparation and delivery of training courses covering issues that relate to missing persons;
- j) development and improvement of procedures or algorithms for handling cases relating to Police searches for missing persons, as well as for dealing with cases where persons of unknown identity are identified or where unidentified corpses or human remains are found (n.d., *Co robić...*).

As showed by the brief overview above, although there is no uniform legislation in Poland specifically concerning disappearances of persons, these matters are regulated in Poland, and applicable legal acts have been updated and amended. Oversight of all types of searches is exercised by the relevant Police unit.

Psychological aspects of disappearances

The psychological aspects of disappearances can be considered in two ways: on the one hand, there are the psychological profile of the missing persons, their personalities and lifestyles, and on the other, the focus is on the psychological impact of such an event on the family and loved ones of the missing persons. It is a life of constant uncertainty, tension and anticipation. In addition, it is not uncommon to experience feelings of guilt or what is known as 'hindsight bias', which involves drawing conclusions about the past based on present knowledge which one did not have at the time the event in question. Furthermore, people may start blaming one another, e.g. between the parents of a missing child. Psychologists also point to other effects, including a tunnel focus on the missing person while ignoring present family members, a deterioration in quality of life, a state of frustration, and a range of other behaviours and emotions that may negatively affect the day-to-day functioning of the families and loved ones of missing persons (cf. Sidor – Borek 2022).

Firstly, the families and loved ones of missing persons face above-average levels of stress and anxiety. The general pattern is that, when a person fails to turn up at the agreed time and place, their family and loved ones first look for reasons and a rational explanation for this situation. They then try to make contact with that person in any way they can, which,

in the present age of mobile phones, is much easier than it used to be. They then check places where the person might be, ring their friends and also contact hospitals. Once these options have been exhausted, the thought that the person may have gone missing begins to dawn on their loved ones and family. They usually find it very hard to believe such a scenario and are left with the feeling that this situation could not possibly have happened to them. In social psychology, this mechanism is known as the 'belief in a just world' and is based on the fact that people tend to believe that bad things happen to bad people, and good things to good people (cf. Wróbel, 2024; Zimbardo, 1997; Aronson, 2009).

A study by Isuru et al. out in southern Sri Lanka analyses the phenomenology of grief amongst 24 family members of people who went missing during armed conflicts (1987–2009) and the tsunami (2004). The respondents included mainly the parents (mothers and fathers) and wives of the missing persons, 21 of whom were unsure of their loved one's fate. A qualitative analysis of the in-depth interviews revealed six predominant themes: a lack of closure, hope, guilt, helplessness, ongoing suffering and emotional emptiness. This experience is referred to as 'ambiguous loss' – the person is physically absent, but psychologically still present in the minds of their loved ones. The lack of confirmation of death prevents the natural grieving process from beginning. Families experience chronic psychological distress, financial difficulties and social marginalisation. The authors emphasise that families are 'trapped in grief', unable to move on due to constant fluctuations between hope and despair, which requires intervention by health and social care services (Isuru et al. 2021).

According to some scientific sources (cf. Testoni 2020, Wayland et al. 2015), the overall psychological response to the prolonged disappearance of a loved one can be understood within the framework of the stages of grief identified by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (1969), albeit with some modifications. The Kübler-Ross theory identifies five stages and applies to people who have experienced the classic grieving process. The first stage is denial, which is an initial defensive reaction to news of inevitable death or loss. At this stage, the individual refuses to acknowledge the reality of the situation, which acts as a defence mechanism against overwhelming emotional suffering. Denial allows the mind to gradually adapt to the traumatic information, acting as a buffer that cushions the initial shock. Kübler-Ross emphasised that denial rarely lasts for long, giving way to a more direct confrontation with the reality of the loss (Kübler-Ross, 1969). The second stage, anger, appears when denial can no longer continue. The individual experiences intense emotions linked to a sense of injustice, frustration and helplessness in the face of the inevitability of loss. Anger can be directed in various ways: at medical staff, family members, forces beyond one's control, or even at the dying or deceased person. This phase is characterised by such questions as 'Why me?' and a search for those

to blame for the situation. Kübler-Ross argued that anger is a natural and healthy reaction to loss, one that needs to be accepted and expressed in a constructive way (Kübler-Ross, 1969). The third stage is bargaining, where the individual attempts to regain control of the situation by entering into a deal, most often with forces beyond their control or with God. At this stage, thoughts such as 'If only...' begin to surface, along with attempts to postpone the inevitable by promising to change one's behaviour, make sacrifices or improve. Negotiation is often associated with feelings of guilt and attempts to turn back the clock in order to avoid the mistakes that may have contributed to the loss. This phase represents a desperate attempt to recover what has been or may be lost, and often takes the form of an internal dialogue full of conditions and promises. The fourth stage, depression, manifests itself when the individual fully realises the inevitability and finality of the loss. It is characterised by deep sadness, social withdrawal, apathy and a sense of emptiness. Kübler-Ross distinguished between two types of depression in the context of grief: reactive depression, linked to the practical consequences of the loss (such as financial costs, responsibilities), and anticipatory depression, which constitutes an emotional preparation for the final parting. This phase is often the most emotionally intense and may require professional psychological or psychiatric support. The fifth and final stage is acceptance, in which the individual comes to terms with the reality of the loss. Acceptance does not mean happiness or consent to what has happened, but rather an emotional readiness to accept a new reality and carry on with life despite the loss. At this stage, the individual is able to find peace and meaning in the experience of loss, integrating it into their life story. Kübler-Ross emphasised that acceptance is a gradual process and that not all patients or people who are grieving reach this stage.

Based on her research, Testoni et al. identified several stages of grief experienced by the loved ones of missing persons. The first stage is incredulity instead of denial – all participants in the study experienced shock, panic and a sense of absurdity of the (Testoni et al. 2020). In addition, there were difficulties in coping with everyday life and an inability to carry out their usual duties. The sense of incredulity and absurdity was gradually reduced by the exhaustive search for the missing person. The families of the missing people did not believe that it was possible to 'vanish into thin air' and simply disappear. They could not come to terms with the fact that the person in question could not be found, and they continued to search for them. They emphasised that that was also a way of reducing unpleasant emotions and focusing one's attention.

The second stage was anger – or, more precisely, a centrifuge of anger mixed with shame and resentment towards the community and loved ones – which stemmed from the absurdity of the situation and the lack of social support. The community withdrew after initial involvement, isolating the families and making them feel that they had been left alone (Testoni et al.

2020). At the second stage, anger also emerged as a reaction to the helplessness of relatives, friends, services – in short, everyone involved in the search. Generalised anger was also correlated with a sense of injustice and loneliness.

At the third phase, which the researchers termed 'bargaining to resolve self-blame', the participants developed strategies to solve the problem on their own because the community did not offer any valid support. This caused their thoughts to be transformed into continuous ruminations that focused on the desire to return to the past, so as not to make the mistakes which, in their view, might have led to the person going missing or being found immediately after going missing – in other words, they blamed themselves for failing to take various actions. Some people also turned to a higher power for guidance regarding the fate of missing persons (Testoni et al. 2020).

At the next phase, termed 'depression' by Kübler-Ross and 'mourning without corpse' by the researchers, the participants found themselves in a state of suspension, experiencing mourning without the possibility of a funeral ceremony. The final stage, the impossibility of closure, unfolded in such a way that the participants tried to accept the reality of uncertainty and the likelihood that they might never know the fate of the missing person. The impossibility of closure is one of the most distressing psychological aspects of this experience (Testoni et al. 2020).

It is therefore clear from the above that the reactions of the families of people who have been missing for a long time can be linked to the DABDA model, albeit with certain modifications. It also seems important to carry out research on a larger scale, so that conclusions can be based on a greater volume of both quantitative and qualitative data.

Psychologist Sylwia Ściegienko also emphasises that the psychological situation of people who have been waiting for information about their loved ones for a long time is extremely difficult (Ruszczyk, 2020). For such people, the process of experiencing loss and mourning is halted due to a build-up of ambivalent emotions – on the one hand, they harbour a deep hope that their loved one will be found unexpectedly, that they will return, or that crucial information regarding their disappearance will come to light, while on the other, they must cope with the necessity of carrying on with daily life. In practice, this means taking part in routine activities, carrying out professional duties and socialising.

The greatest emotional strain for such families is often felt during the festive season and on the anniversaries of the disappearance, which intensify their suffering and sense of isolation. The environment plays a key role here – above all, the kindness shown by employers, friends and neighbours. Not everyone is able to talk about such sensitive topics, but small gestures that show support and care are also important. Some families value the opportunity to remember their missing loved ones together, not as people who have died, but as people who live on in their memories. From

the perspective of public institutions and organisations that support such families, it is important to regularly reassure them that the matter remains a priority and that the case files have not been put into archives yet (ibid.).

Finally, it is worth mentioning the psychological effect that excessive ruminations can have, i.e. when loved ones dwell on the past, searching for signs and clues in past events. Sometimes there is also a sense of suspicion towards other loved ones and acquaintances, who may be hiding something and are not entirely honest. The impossibility of closure and a sense of uncertainty therefore appear to be the factors that most strongly determine how missing persons' families experience their loss.

The case of disappearance of Rafał Dąbkowski

In order to characterise the two case studies – the disappearances of Rafał Dąbkowski and Łukasz Sienkiewicz – the author drew on publicly available sources (listed in the literature section), as the Police did not provide the author with any information regarding the disappearances.

Rafał Dąbkowski was born on 3 November 1980 and lived with his family at Dębowa Street in Katowice all his life. He attended the Automotive Technical College in Chorzów, where he gained a reputation as a conscientious and level-headed student. He did not cause any disciplinary problems and was regarded as exceptionally mature for his age. He was in a relationship with a girlfriend and he had a warm, open relationship with his parents – it seemed as though he had no secrets from them. At that, he did not lose sight of his ambitions – he was known for his diligence and expressed clearly defined plans for the future. His parents constantly reminded him that success required perseverance. For his eighteenth birthday, they gave him a Daewoo Matiz, on the condition that he would have to take care of the maintenance himself. He earned enough to support his needs by working in the family business, a car wash, which suited him down to the ground, as after work he could devote himself to looking after his own car.

During the summer holidays, Rafał used to walk to the 'Fala' lido in Chorzów Park. On Sunday, 4 July 1999, he had planned to spend the afternoon there. He was at work that morning and told his parents what he intended to do. His mother, Jolanta, and her husband decided to make the most of the fine weather and spend the Sunday in Ustroń. They wanted Rafał to come with them, so they visited him at work, trying to persuade him to join them, but he refused. He explained that he had arranged to meet his friend Grzegorz, who lived five hundred metres from their house, at two o'clock, and that they were planning to go to the swimming pool together.

That was the last time the parents saw their son. That same evening, after returning from Ustroń, they found that Rafał was not at home. This did not cause them any immediate concern – it was the summer

holidays, and their son was already of age. However, that night, when the boy's phone was silent and everything suggested that it was turned off, they found it hard to get to sleep. As is often the case in similar circumstances, particularly during the holidays, it was assumed that Rafał had stayed out a bit longer than planned and would return home the following evening.

At the early stage of his disappearance, Rafał's parents therefore did not think of the worst – on the contrary, they tried to play down the significance of his absence and find an explanation that was both rational and full of hope. We are dealing here with psychological mechanisms of a defensive and self-regulatory nature. It is also likely that the fact that their son had not returned home was suppressed. It is also important to note that, at the time of his disappearance, Rafał had already reached the age of majority, which may have been a source of comfort to his parents. The first phase was therefore also a phase of incredulity that something could have happened, which is why the aforementioned psychological mechanisms came into play.

That Rafał had left home before 2.00 pm was confirmed by an account from a befriended neighbour who had known the boy since he was a child. According to his account, Rafał, when leaving home, was wearing a grey T-shirt and shorts, and was carrying a rucksack and a towel. He did not take any documents or money with him. He did not make it to meet his friend with whom he had arranged to meet, nor did he make it to the swimming pool. He simply vanished into thin air in broad daylight at 21 Dębowa Street in Katowice – a spot teeming with pedestrians and vehicles. Based on the information gathered, it can be concluded that he went missing on 4 July 1999 within a very short period of time – most likely between 1.00 pm and 2.00 pm. Some hypotheses suggest an even narrower period, spanning between 1.30 pm (or even 1.45 pm) and 2.00 pm, with the entire event taking place along a stretch of just around 500 metres separating Rafał's house from the flat of his friend Grzegorz, with whom he was due to meet.

On 5 July, when Rafał did not return home, his parents reported him missing, and the Police immediately launched an intensive search. At the time of the report, Rafał met the legal criteria for being categorised as a missing person, i.e. a person whose whereabouts are unknown as a result of a specific event. Additionally, it was assumed that his health or life might be at risk.

It is reasonable to assume that the missing boy's parents were experiencing strong, negative emotions in connection with their son's disappearance. Despite this, they managed to file an official missing person report with the Police so that the latter could begin search activities. Unfortunately, the available sources do not indicate which tier the disappearance was classified under; one can only assume that it was, at least, Tier II. Rafał Dąbkowski is currently categorised as permanently missing.

The missing boy's mother, Jolanta Dąbkowska, has repeatedly emphasised in various statements to

the media that, to her best knowledge and judgement, the Police were deeply involved in every stage of the search. One might therefore surmise that, following the initial phase of shock and incredulity, the family moved relatively smoothly into a task-oriented mode and cooperated with the Police at every stage of the investigation and search. According to the available information, Rafał's friends were interviewed, posters were put up, and every lead was followed up on, even those that seemed absurd. Unfortunately, the actions taken did not yield any significant information regarding the case.

The first hypothesis considered by the investigators was escape, but this was quickly ruled out – Rafał had not displayed any behaviour that would lend credence to such a scenario. He had a strong bond with his family and did not face any difficulties that would have led him to disappear. The hypothesis was based solely on the fact that he was a male teenager and there was no other relevant evidence that might explain his disappearance. Furthermore, Rafał was not facing any financial or personal problems that might suggest he had left home voluntarily. However, as pointed out in the first section of this paper, withholding information or a lack of knowledge regarding the mental state of a missing person constitute a significant obstacle to the efficient conduct of a search.

After some time, the family had exhausted all available means of searching – they had placed notices, hired a private detective and even consulted psychics in an attempt to obtain any clues. Some of them claimed that Rafał was dead, while others said he was alive. However, no one could say for certain what had happened to him or where he was. The family sought help from, amongst others, a well-regarded Warsaw clairvoyant, who, after looking at a photograph of Rafał, said that "lightning struck his life's orbit, but he is alive and will return by the end of 2006". She also pointed out that the parents should not sell the flat, as it would serve as a link between the family and the missing person. Rafał's loved ones travelled hundreds of kilometres in an attempt to find any trace of him. They followed up on leads relating to human traffickers, visited brothels, and also checked information about a young man who had been spotted in a Turkish restaurant in Germany, but it turned out to be false. All hospitals and homeless shelters were also searched, but to no avail.

About a month and a half after Rafał went missing, someone recognised him from a photograph taken at the Kazamaty nightclub in Ustka. At first, his parents had hoped that their son had been found – it was a place not far from Rowy, where he had often visited. His father set off straight away and, showing the waitress the photograph, asked her if she had seen him. She recognised Rafał immediately. She knew where he might be. Full of hope, the father drove to the address he had been given. The door was opened by a woman who admitted that she had been expecting that visit. She immediately noticed the striking resemblance between the boy and Rafał, and expected someone to

turn up. She led the father into a room where he saw a boy who was almost the spitting image of Rafał. They looked so much alike that even the father found it hard to believe he was not looking at his own son

A kidnapping for ransom was also considered, but no demands were made, nor did anyone notice any struggle or fight, which is usually the case when a well-built young man is kidnapped. Such a scenario seems unlikely, but it is not impossible — though someone would have to organise it very carefully. Rafał's parents wondered whether he might have met someone he knew and got into a car without attracting any attention. About two years after Rafał went missing, the Dąbkowski family were contacted by the family of Krzysztof Olewnik, whose case had been widely reported in the media. Given the physical resemblance between them, suspicions arose that someone might have confused the boys, and that the same people might have been behind their disappearance. However, the Krzysztof Olewnik case ended with the apprehension of the perpetrators, so that hypothesis should also be rejected.

Furthermore, Jolanta was puzzled by a phone call from one of Rafał's friends two days after he went missing. Amidst the chaos and stress, she took it as just a normal voicemail, not realising that the caller might not have known about the disappearance. The man recorded himself on Rafał's voicemail, asking him why he had not been in touch, as that they were supposed to be going to the seaside. Today, this phone call seems very strange and raises doubts. The voice recorded on the voice mail belonged to a young man who did not have good reputation, so one might wonder whether he was acting on his own initiative or on someone else's behalf. The Police decided to investigate him, but it was ultimately concluded that he was not involved in Rafał's disappearance. As a result, the case of Rafał Dąbkowski has remained unsolved for almost 25 years, yet his family has not lost hope.

In summary, the following hypotheses could be put forward regarding the reasons for Rafał's disappearance. Each hypothesis includes a brief reasoning and potential avenues for verification.

Hypothesis 1. Escape or voluntary disappearance following a sudden change in life plans.

- Reasoning: Rafał was mentally stable, had the support of his family, had serious plans for the future, and there was nothing to suggest he had any motive for disappearing. The decision to leave without any documents, taken on his own, might suggest that he was hiding certain problems or acted on an impulse. On the other hand, potential problems or difficulties are often unknown, as loved ones often do not know everything about the missing person's situation.
- Possibilities of verification: retrieving the most recent contact history (phone calls, contact with Grzegorz, analysis of data on logging in to the network obtained from the operator, if possible).

Hypothesis 2. Kidnapping for ransom or extortion carried out by a stranger or acquaintance.

- Reasoning: although there were no visible signs of a struggle, the possibility of a kidnapping cannot be ruled out (perhaps someone took advantage of the moment when Rafał left home alone). The absence of a ransom demand does not rule out the possibility of a kidnapping shortly after the disappearance.
- Possibilities of verification: search for any CCTV footage from the area around Dębowa Street (if any cameras had already been installed there at the time), analysis of his family's financial transactions, and examining Rafał's relationships with people in his immediate circle.

Hypothesis 3. Abduction involving acquaintances or people he was befriended with (in connection with any disputes, human trafficking or drugs).

- Reasoning: it is possible that Rafał may have somehow come into contact with a criminal group involved in this type of activity.
- Possibilities of verification: analysis of Rafał's contacts, use of information provided by informants from criminal circles, review of archives, interviews with people from Rafał's social circle.

Hypothesis 4. Disappearance as a result of a road incident or accident, followed by concealment of the body.

- Reasoning: Rafał lived at a fairly busy street. It has been known to happen in the history of forensic science that the perpetrator concealed the body of a person killed in an accident.
- Possibilities of verification: analysis and acquisition of information about any accidents in the area on the day of the disappearance, review of CCTV footage, if available.

Hypothesis 5. The use of psychoactive substances and problems with memory or mental health which may have influenced Rafał's behaviour.

- Reasoning: one of the locations reported (Kazamata in Ustka) was a typical nightlife spot. In addition, boy went missing during the summer holidays.
- Possibilities of verification: review of CCTV footage from nightclubs and venues, interviews with Rafał's friends.

Hypothesis 6. Incorrect identification or classification of the corpse as unidentified.

- Reasoning: Rafał's suggested physical resemblance to another young man (Krzysztof Olewnik), combined with the lack of identification documents (Rafał left home without his wallet), could theoretically have led to a case of mistaken identity.
- Possibilities of verification: comparison of biometric data with records in various police databases, verification of the identities of people who have contacted the family, review of current data in databases.

Based on the available information and actions taken, it is not possible to put forward a plausible hypothesis as to what happened to Rafał Dąbkowski. Most of the hypotheses that were considered were

ruled out. Rafał's body has not been found, nor have any clues been discovered to suggest that he might have been murdered. According to available sources, however, the Police regard the event as a criminal case.

The case of disappearance of Łukasz Sienkiewicz

The disappearance of Łukasz Sienkiewicz is often reported in the media somewhat apropos of Rafał's disappearance, as the two stories share a number of common points. Some of the available sources even suggest that these two events may be linked. Compared with the case of Rafał Dąbkowski's disappearance, the material available in the case of Łukasz Sienkiewicz is, unfortunately, much more limited and not particularly detailed.

Born on 20 November 1980, Łukasz Sienkiewicz was the same age as Rafał (there were just 17 days between them). Interestingly, their homes were only 16 km apart, as Łukasz lived in at Zabrzańska Street in Ruda Śląska. He was a tall boy, considered attractive yet reserved, whose main interests included reading books. Łukasz also often met up with his friends. His parents trusted Łukasz and had very good relation with him. Like Rafał, he chose a technical college instead of a sixth-form college.

It was 29 October 1999. Dressed in black corduroys with a wide leather belt, a black sweatshirt, black hiking boots and an Adidas logo jacket, Łukasz went to a party with a colleague who had come to visit him that day. He told his parents that he would be back at around 4.00 am. He went out with a colleague whom his parents did not know. They were sure their son would be home by morning, as he always kept his word, but 4.00 am had come and gone and he was still not there. As the hours passed, his parents reacted quickly and reported their son missing to the Police. There, however, they were told not to worry as he was definitely with his girlfriend. But Łukasz did not have a girlfriend, which, according to the available sources, was not considered a significant factor by the Police. As a result, no specific actions were taken to find the boy during those first few hours. The Police did not even carry out detailed checks of the place of the alleged party to which he had gone with the colleague.

It is therefore clear that, unlike in the case of Rafał Dąbkowski's disappearance, on this occasion the Police did not show any commitment, failing to take action in the first few hours after he went missing – a period which is generally crucial in such cases. Furthermore, it can be assumed that Łukasz's disappearance was not classified as either a Tier I or Tier II case (at that time, there were three tiers of missing person cases), which would have given the Police investigation the appropriate priority. According to the account of the colleague with whom Rafał had gone to the party, he had walked Rafał to the stairwell in the block of flats, and that was the last time they had seen each other. No one else saw or heard anything. Questions immediately sprang to mind: did Łukasz's colleague know anything else about what happened back then, and did he really

walked him to the block's stairwell? There are also a great many other questions that remain unanswered.

In the absence of any leads or information, Łukasz Sienkiewicz was declared dead on 22 March 2022 at his mother's request, 22 years after his disappearance.

Below, as in the case of Rafał Dąbkowski, the author set out some hypotheses as to what might possibly have happened to Łukasz Sienkiewicz.

Hypothesis 1. After leaving the party, Łukasz was kidnapped by an unknown person.

- Reasoning: Łukasz's last contact was with his colleague who walked him to the block's stairwell, after which there is no further trace of Łukasz. This may suggest that someone from his circle was involved in the event and took advantage of his colleague's absence.
- Possibilities of verification: interviews with residents, check and verification of the colleague's alibi.

Hypothesis 2. A criminal event (a fight, bodily harm, accidental manslaughter) arising from a conflict with the criminal underworld or debts.

- Reasoning: Łukasz was surrounded by young people from school; there was a risk of conflicts or incurring debts. It is also puzzling that the alleged party was supposed to take place in the middle of the week.
- Possibilities of verification: interviews with other students, analysis of Łukasz's contacts, check of Łukasz's phone login details, if possible.

Hypothesis 3. Łukasz disappeared intentionally (either by taking his own life or by running away).

- Reasoning: young age; the possibility of him being under pressure at school or in personal life, mental health issues of which his parents were unaware.
- Possibilities of verification: interviews with Łukasz's family and friends about his mental state; checking for any previous warning signs, place of residence and immediate surroundings. Unfortunately, family members and friends do not always provide accurate information about the mental state of a missing person.

Hypothesis 4. Łukasz died as a result of an accident or some other misfortune, and someone is covering it up.

- Reasoning: the location of the party is unknown and there are no traces of it; it is possible that an accident occurred (a fall, illness, or confusion).
- Possibilities of verification: a field search in places where he may have been.

Hypothesis 5. Łukasz may have been the victim of abuse, including sexual abuse, which took place after the party in a teenage setting.

- Reasoning: an unknown colleague, no definite information about where the party took place.
- Possibilities of verification: checking other stairwells in the vicinity, taking statements from people from Łukasz's circle, and establishing links between the party and other persons.

Hypothesis 6. Kidnapping by the colleague motivated by personal reasons.

- Reasoning: the colleague was with Łukasz, but the question remains as to whether he definitely

accompanied him to the stairwell and whether he knows what happened afterwards.

- Possibilities of verification: an interview with the colleague, check of his relations with others, and comparison of the findings with the witnesses' accounts.

As the above analysis shows, there are numerous hypotheses regarding the disappearance of Łukasz Sienkiewicz, none of which have been conclusively verified. The lack of access to the case files makes it difficult to classify the hypotheses as more or less likely.

Conclusions and summary

Justifying the thesis regarding the link between the two disappearances – those of Rafał Dąbkowski and Łukasz Sienkiewicz – requires a careful analysis based on the similarities and differences in the circumstances of the events. Below, the author outlines her analysis of what might link these themes and which hypotheses are worth considering.

Their age, family background and life circumstances are similar. Both boys were the same age (Rafał was 18 and was a student at a technical college; Łukasz was 18 and was also a student at a technical college). It is safe to say that their lives were fairly peaceful. Against this background, the sudden loss of contact becomes particularly intriguing as an unprecedented event. It has not been established that the boys were experiencing any family or financial problems. It emerges from the characteristics of Rafał and Łukasz that they were 'well-adjusted young people' with plans for the future, a circle of friends, content with life, with no problems at school – in their own way, quite ordinary. One might therefore venture to suggest that the above description rules out such hypotheses as escape or suicide for personal reasons.

The second factor is the geographical location and the time of the event. Rafał lived in Katowice, while Łukasz in Ruda Śląska. Their homes were only 16 kilometres apart, so one could say they lived very close to one another. Some sources have suggested that the boys knew each other, but the parents of neither of them have confirmed this version. Furthermore, both went missing in the same year (1999), with only three months separating the two disappearances. Another possible link between these disappearances is the fact that one of the leads being investigated pointed to Ustka (and Rowy, which were once famous for their youth parties and where Rafał had previously spent time). Łukasz, in turn, disappeared in the area where a party was taking place. Such a short trip away from home in search of fun can also be a common factor: in rather unpredictable settings (restaurants, clubs, discos), it is easy to come into contact with strangers or find oneself in unfamiliar situations.

The nature of the scene of the incidents appears to be another point of convergence. Rafał disappeared in broad daylight between 1.00 pm and 2.00 pm on Sunday near his home in a fairly busy area, and was recognised by a neighbour as he was leaving. Łukasz,

on the other hand, went out to a party in the evening and never came back. Interestingly, both boys had arranged to meet up with their friends. According to his friend's testimony, Rafał never made it to him, whilst Łukasz was supposed to have been accompanied by his friend to the block of flats and seen there for the last time. The physical resemblance is also puzzling. Many people investigating these disappearances pointed out that Rafał and Łukasz looked similar: both were tall, dark-haired men with a slim, athletic build.

According to publicly available information that the author has to obtain, it appears that the two investigations were never merged, which, in the context of the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century, was common practice in regions with limited investigative resources. The failure to treat the cases as a matter of immediate priority made it difficult to resolve the outstanding issues there.

Without categorically ruling out the possibility that there is no connection, one could suggest a few plausible links:

- a) the same type of perpetrator or a group operating in the region exploits young people who trust them and have easy access to vehicles;
- b) the missing persons may have been victims of a wider pattern of abductions or human trafficking offences in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when young men became targets as a result of situational vulnerability (parties, encounters with strangers, coming across people offering 'help');
- c) it is possible that similar channels of disappearance were used (abduction following participation in a spontaneous event; in one case, there were no signs of a struggle, in the other, there were no obvious signs of violence).

In summary, linking the disappearances of Rafał Dąbkowski and Łukasz Sienkiewicz is justified primarily on the basis of demographic similarities, the geographical circumstances of their disappearances, and the age and life circumstances of both boys. One cannot conclude that the same individuals were behind both disappearances, but there are reasons to consider common scenarios in which similar criminal patterns or relationships with the young people's social circles may have been at play. However, this requires further, systematic analysis and a re-examination of the material covering the entire period.

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