

## Children Who Claim to Remember Previous Lives: Cases with Written Records Made before the Previous Personality Was Identified

H. H. JÜRGEN KEIL

*Psychology Department  
University of Tasmania, Hobart, Tasmania, Australia*

JIM B. TUCKER

*Division of Personality Studies  
University of Virginia Health System, P.O. Box 800152  
Charlottesville, VA 22908-0152  
e-mail: jbt8n@virginia.edu*

**Abstract**—Children who claim to remember previous lives have been described in the research literature for over 40 years, and in many cases their families have identified a deceased individual whose life they believe the child is remembering. These cases have been criticized on the grounds that after the families of the child and the deceased individual meet and share information, they may end up attributing more knowledge about that individual to the child than he or she actually demonstrated. A case is presented in which the investigator recorded notes of a child's statements in Turkey and then subsequently found that they corresponded in great detail to the life of a man who lived in Istanbul 850 km away and who died 50 years before the child was born. A review of similar cases in which written records were made before the deceased individual was identified indicates that they present a significant challenge to the supposition that this phenomenon is due to falsely credited information.

*Keywords:* reincarnation cases—paranormal phenomena—childhood memories

### Introduction

Cases of children who claim to remember previous lives have been reported in the research literature for over 40 years (e.g., Stevenson, 1960, 2001). In a typical case, a very young child who lives in a culture with a belief in reincarnation begins to report memories of a previous life. In many cases, the child eventually gives enough details so that the family is able to locate a deceased individual, the previous personality, whose life appears to match the statements made by the child.

A number of possible explanations have been suggested for these cases. The one using normal means that is most frequently given is the socio-psychological hypothesis (Brody, 1979). It can be summarized as follows:

In a culture having a belief in reincarnation a child who seems to speak about a previous life will be encouraged to say more. What he says then leads his parents somehow to find

another family whose members come to believe that the child has been speaking about a deceased member of their family. The two families exchange information about details, and they end by crediting the subject with having had much more knowledge about the identified deceased person than he really had had. (Stevenson & Samararatne, 1988: 237)

The most important feature of this hypothesis is the last one given: that the families end up crediting the children with more knowledge about the identified previous personality than they actually demonstrated. After the children's families learn about the previous personality, they may falsely claim that the children made statements that they did not, or they may mistakenly recall that the children had voiced details about the life that they did not. These possibilities can be conjectured because a written record of the children's statements has rarely been made before the families met. Exceptions exist, however, and these provide an important test of the socio-psychological hypothesis. We present a new case here in which an investigator made notes of the child's statements before the previous personality was identified, and three previous cases will also be reviewed for comparison.

### **The Case of KA**

The first author (JK) investigated the case of a boy (KA) in south-central Turkey who claimed to remember a life in Istanbul some 850 km away, and he was eventually able to confirm many of the boy's statements.

#### *Interview*

In April 1997, JK met KA, who was then 6 years old, for the first time. JK's interpreter was acquainted with KA's parents, who agreed to arrange this first visit. The interpreter had mentioned JK's interest in children who speak about previous lives to KA's parents, who told him that KA was doing this. KA's statements were not known outside the immediate family circle, and his family said that while he had made a few statements shortly after starting to speak, he had made most of them beginning around the age of 2½.

KA lived in Hatay in a comfortable upper middle class environment. His parents were obviously delighted to have a son (he was the only son), which in Turkey is regarded as a particularly desirable blessing. KA's parents were well-educated Alevi Muslims who had friends among various different religious and other interest groups. Although they were aware that purported memories of previous lives are regarded as one of the distinguishing features of the Alevi Muslims, they apparently did not attach a great deal of importance to KA's statements. JK noticed that they listened to him with tolerant interest and seemed at times amused by his enthusiasm.

JK and his interpreter met KA at his home. His mother was present for the entire interview, and his father joined the interview partway through it. The interpreter translated what was said after short intervals, and JK took notes and

asked questions. Audio recordings were not made since JK has found that a cassette recorder often creates a distraction. At this first meeting, JK was impressed with the clarity of KA's statements and the confidence with which he made them. He said his family's name had been Karakas and he had been an Armenian Christian. He said that during that life, he was rich and lived in a large three-story house in Istanbul. He said his house was on the water, where boats were tied up, and a church was behind it. He said people called him Fistik and his wife and children had Greek first names. He said he and his wife's wedding took place in Bodrum, a town on the coast approximately 430 km from Istanbul by air. He also said he often carried a large leather bag and he only lived in the house for part of the year. He said he had been shot and killed and his wife was involved in the murder. In addition, he mentioned that his youngest son had died as a rally car driver. A full list of his statements is given in the *Analysis of Statements* section below.

### *Investigation*

KA's parents and relatives had no information which suggested a connection between them and the previous personality described by KA. They had no friends or relatives in Istanbul, and KA and his mother had never been there. Approximately two or three years before the interview, KA's father, an accountant, had been in Istanbul twice in connection with his work, but on both occasions, he left Istanbul the same day and did not try to obtain any information about the statements that his son had made. KA's parents did not know any Armenians. Thus, when JK started the investigation, there was no indication that a person as described by KA had ever existed.

Although KA gave more details than most subjects do, identifying the previous personality probably would have been impossible if KA had not mentioned that he was the neighbor of a relatively well-known woman in Istanbul. This woman, named Aysegul, was a dealer in artworks who got into some difficulties with the authorities. When a court case was opened against her or was about to be opened, she left Turkey, and her whereabouts after that are unknown. Her situation produced some publicity, and JK's interpreter, who has relatives in Istanbul, was aware of the matter. Most educated Turks (including KA's parents) who take some interest in the news would also have heard her name. KA's parents said that when their son first mentioned Aysegul, he was so young that he could not have learned it from outside sources, but this possibility cannot be ruled out. JK was not able to discover when the stories about Aysegul first appeared in newspapers, but this likely happened before KA was able to speak.

In April 1997, JK was able to locate Aysegul's house in the Cengelkoy area of Istanbul. Next to it, he found a now empty three-story house that matched the details that KA had given. It was difficult, however, to find any evidence that a person as described by KA had ever lived there. Initially, JK could not find

anyone who had heard about an Armenian in the area where Aysegül's house was located, and no Armenians live in that area now.

During a second visit to the Cengelkoy area in October 1997, JK was told by an Armenian Church official in Istanbul that there were no Armenians in the Cengelkoy area. The church had no records, he said, that suggested that an Armenian had lived in the house that JK had identified as the one described by KA. An elderly man who had lived in the Cengelkoy area for many years, however, told him that an Armenian had definitely lived in that house and the church officials JK had met were not old enough to remember him.

During a further visit in October 1998, JK was able to interview a local historian, Mr. Toran Togar, who was born in 1924. Mr. Togar was an excellent informant. For example, he remembered the names of five newspapers that were published in the 1940s (and JK was able to confirm this). Only one of these papers is still in circulation. Mr. Togar remembered various events in connection with the previous personality without hesitation, but particularly in order to establish the correct sequence of events, he carefully checked his recollections against events about which he was quite confident.

When JK interviewed Mr. Togar, he was careful not to prompt any answers or to make any suggestions. They met near the previous personality's house, and JK asked Mr. Togar what he remembered about the people who had lived in this house. JK told him he wanted to find out some details for a family that might have had a connection with the house, but he did not say that a child had provided information about it. Mr. Togar then gave a number of details that matched KA's statements, including the family name of Karakas. He said an Armenian Christian had lived in the house that JK had identified, that he was rich, that he was the only Armenian in the Cengelkoy area, that his family name was Karakas, that his wife came from a Greek Orthodox family and that her family did not approve of the marriage. He said the wife's family name was Yordan, the couple had three children, and there was some talk that his wife had something to do with his death. Mr. Togar also said the Karakas clan lived in another area of Istanbul, they dealt in leather goods, Mr. Karakas often carried a substantial leather bag, and he lived in the Cengelkoy house only each summer period. Mr. Togar said Karakas died in 1940 or 1941.

JK then asked him specifically if Karakas or his wife had any connection with Bodrum, since KA had said he got married there in the previous life. Mr. Togar said he did not know of any such connection. He added that he remembered the procession when Karakas got married in Istanbul and there was some public interest in the unusual marriage of an Armenian man and a Greek Orthodox woman. While it is possible that a second ceremony took place in Bodrum, no available information suggests a connection with Bodrum. In addition, KA had said his youngest son had died as a rally car driver, but if all the details that Mr. Togar provided are accurate, the son must have been a child when Karakas died since Mr. Togar was born in 1924, remembered the Karakas wedding, and he said Karakas died in 1940 or 1941.

*Analysis of Statements*

KA's statements that corresponded to the life of Karakas:

- (1) He lived and died in Istanbul.
- (2) His house is next to Aysegul's house.
- (3) His house was large.
- (4) His house had three stories.
- (5) His house was at the water's edge.
- (6) Boats were tied up at the house.
- (7) A church was at the back of the house.
- (8) His family name was Karakas.
- (9) He was an Armenian.
- (10) He was a Christian
- (11) He was married.
- (12) He had children.
- (13) He was rich.
- (14) He often carried a substantial leather bag.
- (15) He lived in the house during only part of the year.

KA's statements that were partially confirmed:

- (16) His wife and children had Greek first names. Their actual names are not known, but Karakas's wife came from a Greek Orthodox family.
- (17) He was called Fistik. No direct confirmation could be obtained, but since Armenians use this term to refer to a "nice man," this would be consistent with the previous personality. This term is not known in the non-Armenian population in Turkey, and JK initially assumed that it was a name.
- (18) His wife had something to do with the previous personality's death. This assumption was also confirmed as talk in the neighborhood by Mr. Togar, the historian.

KA's unverified or doubtful statements:

- (19) KA said that he was shot with a pistol but did not immediately die. There was no confirmation of this. KA had a birthmark on his chest that was visible for several years, and he said that it corresponded to the wound caused by the bullet from the pistol. KA's parents had not noticed the mark until after KA, at the age of about 3, started to talk about it. The birthmark was no longer visible when JK met him. Birthmarks or birth defects corresponding to wounds on the previous personality have been noted in 35% of cases of children who claim to remember previous lives (Stevenson, 2001), so while the shooting is unverified, KA's birthmark was consistent with his claim and with those in other cases.
- (20) He knew Aysegul. Initially, it appeared that Karakas could not have

known her. When he died, Aysegul was probably only between 5 and 10 years old. Later, however, JK learned that Aysegul lived in the house next to Karakas as a child, and Karakas may have known her. Thus, the statement was not directly verified but is consistent with the history that is available.

- (21) He got married in Bodrum. Mr. Togar remembered a wedding procession (when Karakas got married) in Istanbul. If there was a connection with Bodrum, JK was not able to find out about it or whether there is a Greek Orthodox community there.
- (22) His youngest son died as a rally car driver. No available information on the Karakas family supports this, and based on the timeline that Mr. Togar gave, Karakas's son was presumably too young to have been a rally car driver at the time of his father's death.

The following two correct statements KA may have made at a later stage after he had heard the relevant names from JK. JK did not record them during his first meeting with KA, but it is possible that KA made them at that time:

His house was in Cengelkoy.

His wife's family name was Yordan.

### *Follow-up*

JK made some further attempts to obtain additional information. According to officials from the Greek Orthodox Church, at some stage, about 40 years ago, more than 300 Greek Orthodox families lived in the Cengelkoy area. The officials said most of these families had since returned to Greece, and they could not suggest how JK could contact members of the Yordan family there. They also recommended Mr. Togar as the person who was best acquainted with the history of the area.

JK attempted to find possible records about Karakas's marriage and funeral. Unfortunately the central records, including funeral details that were kept by the Armenian Church, had been destroyed in a fire in 1957. Some records may still exist in the offices of five cemeteries in Istanbul which are only open to the public during one day each week. JK contacted the history department at the university in Istanbul but found there was little interest in this kind of local history. He searched one of the newspapers that was published at the time of Karakas's death without finding any reference to him. News at that time (the early 1940s) was mainly limited to war events. In the Hatay region, JK visited an Armenian village and met a man who had previously lived in Istanbul named Mr. Kirant. He was not old enough to remember anything about the time when Karakas was alive. He said his mother had talked to him about the Yordan family, but he could not remember any details.

During a further visit to Karakas's house, JK met some elderly men nearby who said in the past the house was known as Yordan's house. They said after

Karakas's death, the house remained with the Yordan family for approximately 15 years but Karakas's wife and children did not continue to stay there. JK also located the Greek Orthodox church, which he had not noticed before, behind Karakas's house.

After JK had obtained the details about Karakas listed above, he visited KA once more. KA was particularly impressed with a photograph of Karakas's house that was taken from across the water. KA believed that he could identify the room in which he had lived. KA did not in any way suggest that he knew some of the new details which JK had discovered. When JK asked him whether his wife might have been Greek Orthodox, he replied that he did not remember.

KA was aware that he had started to forget some of the details when JK visited him in 1999. He was then 8 years old. At that point, there was still no indication that anybody in his environment might have been connected with the previous personality or could have had some information about him.

### **Previous Reports of Cases with Written Records**

Cases in which written records were made before the previous personality was identified are rare. Over 2500 cases of young children with past life claims are now registered in the files of the Division of Personality Studies at the University of Virginia, but only 33 of them involve cases where a previous personality was identified after written records were made of the child's statements. Some of these have been published previously (Haraldsson, 1991; Mills, Haraldsson, & Keil, 1994; Mills & Lynn, 2000; Stevenson, 1974; Stevenson & Samararatne, 1988), and they demonstrate that such cases, while rare, do occur. Any effort to reject the current case as an isolated oddity must address these previous cases as well, so it is important to review some of them.

#### *The Case of Sujith Jayaratne*

Stevenson (1977) reported the case of Sujith Jayaratne, a boy living in a suburb of Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka, who described a life in a village named Gorakana that was 12 km away. A monk recorded notes of conversations that he had with Sujith about his memories when Sujith was 2½ years old, and Stevenson was able to obtain a translated copy of them. These documents indicated that Sujith said he was from Gorakana and lived in the Gorakawatte section of it, that his father was named Jamis and did not have one eye (Sujith pointed to the right eye to indicate that it was the defective one), that he had attended the *kabal iskole* (which means "dilapidated school") and had a teacher named Francis there, and that he gave money to a woman named Kusuma, who prepared string hoppers, a type of food, for him. He implied that he gave money to the Kale Pansala, or Forest Temple, and said two monks were there, one of whom was named Amitha. He said his house was whitewashed, its lavatory was beside a fence, and he bathed in cool water.

The monk then went to Gorakana and found that all of Sujith's statements were

true for the life of a man named Sammy Fernando, who died at age 50 after being hit by a truck 6 months before Sujith was born. When Stevenson investigated the case a year later, he learned two people in Sujith's neighborhood had connections to Sammy Fernando. Sujith's family knew one of them, a former drinking buddy of Fernando's, slightly, and the other one, Fernando's younger sister, not at all. The family had no idea who Sujith was talking about until the monk went to Gorakana—in fact, neither Sujith's mother nor the monk had heard of Gorakana before the case developed—and the idea that Fernando's drinking buddy or sister surreptitiously fed the information to Sujith seems quite unlikely.

### *The Case of Kumkum Verma*

Kumkum Verma was a girl in India who described a life in the city of Darbhanga 40 km from her village (Stevenson, 1975). Her aunt made notes of her statements 6 months before anyone attempted to identify the previous personality, and Stevenson was able to obtain extracts of her notebook that contained 18 of them. They document details that all matched the life of a woman who died 5 years before Kumkum was born, including the name of Urdu Bazar, the section of Darbhanga where she lived; her son's name and the fact that he worked with a hammer; her grandson's name; the name of the town where her father lived and the fact that his home was near mango orchards and reaching it involved crossing water; the presence of a pond at her house; and the fact that she had an iron safe at her house, a sword hanging near her cot, and a snake near the safe that she fed milk to.

A man from Urdu Bazar who worked for a friend of Kumkum's father was eventually able to identify the previous personality. The previous family belonged to a relatively low artisan class while Kumkum's father was a landowner, homeopathic physician, and author, so even though he went to Urdu Bazar once to meet the previous personality's family, he never allowed Kumkum to go.

### *The Case of Jagdish Chandra*

The case of Jagdish Chandra in India was quite old when Stevenson (1975) investigated it—in fact, the subject was then in his late 30s—but the subject's father, a prominent lawyer, had made a written record of the boy's statements and their verifications at the time that the case developed. Jagdish was born in Bareilly, a large city in northern India, and when he was 3½ years old, he began saying that he had lived in Benares, a city approximately 500 km away. His father sent a letter to a newspaper asking for help in verifying the child's statements. In the letter, he said that Jagdish stated that his father was named Babuji Pandey and had a house in Benares with a big gate, a sitting room, and an underground room with an iron safe fixed in one of the walls. (*Ji* added to the end of a name means *respected*, so Jagdish was saying his father's name had been Babu.) He said Jagdish described a courtyard where Babuji sat in the evenings and where people gathered to drink bhang, an Indian drink. He said



Babuji received massages and put powder or clay on his face after washing it. He described two cars and a horse-drawn carriage and said Babuji had two deceased sons and a deceased wife.

The day after this was published, Jagdish's father went to a magistrate to have Jagdish's statements officially recorded before they traveled to Benares. The recorded statements, in addition to those listed in the paper, included the fact that his name had been Jai Gopal and that his brother, who was bigger than he was, had been named Jai Mangal and had died of poisoning. He said the Ganges River was near the house, and the Dash Ashwamadh Ghat was there. (Ghats are piers where people go to bathe, and Babu Pandey was the supervisor of one.) He also said a prostitute named Bhagwati had sung for Babu.

Jagdish was then taken to Benares, where all of the above statements about the previous personality were verified (except that Babu Pandey had used automobiles but not actually owned them) and where he appeared to recognize people and places.

### Discussion

The current case is typical of cases of children who claim to remember previous lives in some ways and unusual in others. The very early age when the subject began talking about a previous life is the norm for these cases, and in the 1200 cases that have been coded and entered into our computer database (out of 2500 registered cases), the median age is 32 months. Similarly, his report of forgetting some of the details is very common, as the median age for the subjects to stop talking spontaneously about the previous life is 72 months. His apparent birthmark, which was consistent with his report of being shot, is also a feature that is commonly reported, as noted previously.

His case has other features that are unusual, such as the identification of a previous personality who lived such a great distance from the subject. The median distance between subject and previous personality is 14 km, and only a handful of cases involve a distance of more than 500 km. The interval of about 50 years between the death of the previous personality and the birth of the subject is unusual as well, though not unique. While the median time is only 16 months, there have been a few cases with a similar time span. In addition, in cases in which the previous personality has not been determined, the exact interval, of course, is unknown unless the child has mentioned a year, so there may be unsolved cases with similar intervals that families and researchers have not identified as such. The long distance and long interval would generally make identifying the previous personality very difficult, as they did in this case, but they also make the child's confirmed statements all the more impressive.

While KA's case is a strong one, the review of other cases with written records shows that it is not unique, and since the written records demonstrate the cases were not created by families crediting children with more knowledge about the previous personality than they actually displayed, this group of cases

poses a serious challenge to the socio-psychological hypothesis for the phenomenon.

These cases can also provide an indirect indication of the likelihood that such a process occurred in cases where written records were not made before the previous personality was identified. Schouten & Stevenson (1998) compared 21 cases from India and Sri Lanka in which written records were made of the children's statements before the families met with 82 thoroughly investigated cases without such previously written records. They found the average number of documented statements in the cases with the written records was 25½, while the average number obtained from the families retrospectively in the cases without written records was significantly lower at 18½. The percentage of correct statements was essentially the same in both groups—76.7% in the written record cases and 78.4% in the cases without records. As the authors point out, the findings indicate that families do not create more, and more correct, statements after they meet or at least not to the point that they affect the data in a measurable way.

In the case of KA, his family had no idea if a person matching his description had actually lived, and it was only with great effort that JK was able to confirm the existence of such a person. This not only rules out the possibility of falsely credited information, but the search required to confirm the statements also appears to eliminate the possibility that KA somehow learned about the previous personality by overhearing people talking about him. This makes the task of explaining the case through normal means a difficult one.

### **Conclusion**

The socio-psychological hypothesis of exaggerated credit has appeared to provide the most reasonable way to explain through normal means many of the cases of children who claim to remember previous lives. It fails completely, however, to explain ones in which written records document that in fact the subjects' families did not credit the children with more information about the previous personalities than they actually possessed. Such cases, in addition, lend credence to the validity of children's memories of previous lives in general since they demonstrate that some children do make numerous statements about deceased individuals that are later confirmed to be accurate, and they cast significant doubt on the ability of the socio-psychological hypothesis to accurately explain this phenomenon.

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