

# Out of the Icelandic cold murder they wrote: The Guðmundur- and Geirfinnur criminal case of 1974<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

The case of Guðmundur and Geirfinnur has become one of the most notorious criminal case in the history of Iceland. Two males disappeared in the mid 1970's and their bodies were never found. A total of six persons were later convicted of murdering the two merely on basis of their confessions. The suspects were held in solitary confinement for a long period of time and subjected to lengthy interrogations even torture. As time passed, cracks started to open up in the court version of the case, slowly starting to crumble. In late September of 2018 the Supreme Court of Iceland acquitted five of the six original suspects.

**Key words:** Homicide, winter, murder mystery, national hysteria, missing persons

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## **Introduction**

During winter in Iceland days can be both dark and cold. In December and January daylight only lasts about 4-5 hours a day and the temperature can get nasty including the wind chill factor. In 1974 two young males disappeared during cold and dark winter nights in January and November. The first one, 18 year old, went missing in January after a visit to a nightclub in Hafnarfjörður on a freezing snowy night. Later in November of the same year, a 32 year old family man went missing late at night in Keflavík close to a local café by the docks. The two did not know each other and were not related in any other way.

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About two years later six young individuals from Reykjavík were arrested on suspicion of killing these two young males. They were held in solitary confinement for up to two years the longest and suffered various other punitive measures while in custody before being charged and convicted for killing the two males by the Supreme Court in 1980. They received long prison sentences from 3 years up to 17 years and served their prison terms accordingly. Nothing was shown in court that they had known the two missing males in question neither was there any other convincing motive found for the two killings demonstrated in court – and the bodies were never found. The court decision was only based on their confessions yet later during custody had been retracted by them.

This case has become one of the most notorious criminal cases in Icelandic history and by now is believed by most to be a total fabrication and a serious miscarriage of justice. In late September of 2018 five of the young persons in question were finally acquitted of the two killings by the Supreme Court of Iceland.

In this paper presentation it is contended that this case could never have happened if not for the cold and dark winter hours in Iceland. Under some circumstances extreme weather conditions can in a small tightly knit society at social cross roads create a deep national hysteria resulting in a case nothing short of a modern time witch hunting – reflecting fiction more than reality.

## **Homicide in Iceland**

Murders in Iceland were extremely rare in the 1970's, and even still today not an annual matter (Gunnlaugsson, 2018). There have recently been years in Iceland with zero murders, such as 2008 and 2006. In the new millennium Iceland has experienced on the average of two homicides per year. This rate locates Iceland on the lower end of the spectrum when it comes to murders per capita per year, with 0.6 murders per 100 thousand citizens. There are many nations with a *per capita* murder rate between 0.9 to 1.5, and United States stands out among Western nations with 4.9. In the 1960's and 1970's serious crimes were practically unheard of, apart from a taxi driver being killed in Reykjavík in 1968, a case still being unsolved.

By far most murders in Iceland occur among those who know each other personally. Usually intoxicated, and killing in the heat of the

moment, using knives or bare fists. Rarely planned homicides, and seldom any mysteries. Often those concerned also have a history of prior violence. Does this description of typical homicides in Iceland show any resemblance to the case of the two missing males in question?

## Disappearance of Guðmundur Einarsson

In late January of 1974 a young man, 18 years old, by the name of Guðmundur Einarsson, disappeared after he had left a nightclub in Hafnarfjörður, a port town, ten kilometers away from Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland (Adeane, 2018). A few road passengers spotted him after midnight attempting to catch a ride to Reykjavik, apparently very drunk. It was dark, cold, snowy and icy everywhere. Guðmundur has not been found ever since. No credible evidence has been brought forward to what happened to him, despite a thorough search by a great number of people and rescue teams, in the days and weeks following his disappearance.

**Photo 1:** *Morgunblaðið* newspaper report on the massive search of Guðmundur Einarsson, a couple of days after his disappearance in January of 1974.



Some ten months later, or in November of 1974, another male of 32 years old, a family man and a construction worker in Keflavik disappeared, Geirfinnur Einarsson. His case bore more the hallmarks of a criminal case than the teenager’s case, which in comparison looks more like a tragic accident, less than a year earlier (Adeane, 2018). The two, Guðmundur and

Geirfinnur, did not know each other. They lived in two different towns with significant age difference between the two.

**Photo 2:** Geirfinnur Einarsson, who disappeared in Keflavík November 19, 1974.



Geirfinnur was at his home at night during mid-week with a male friend watching TV (Adeane, 2018). Soon after his wife returned home from the library, Geirfinnur asked his friend for a lift in his car because he had to meet someone –and had to come alone to the meeting. Better be armed he told his friend who took it as a joke. Geirfinnur did not meet anyone there and returned home at 10:15pm.

Then he got a phone call from someone to which his son answered, and Geirfinnur responded, I already came. Then he paused and said he will come. Grabbed his jacket and pipe and headed for the door. The boy asked his father where he was going without any response and then asked if he could come along but his father refused. Geirfinnur then drove his red Ford Cortina to the café and parked nearby.

Like Guðmundur before, Geirfinnur then just vanished, and has not been found or seen ever since. His car was found close to the café the following morning, unlocked, with the keys in the ignition. The café was located close to the Keflavík docks by the cold Atlantic Ocean.

**Photo 3:** Location of where Geirfinnur's car was found the day after his disappearance.



The circumstances were strange for Geirfinnur's disappearance and many details known and certainly suspicious. Who was the person who called Geirfinnur? Who was he supposed to meet at the café? The police investigated the case intensely in the weeks and months following his disappearance and scrutinized his personal life. It was almost impossible to find anyone who held any grudge against him, described as being somewhat of a loner, and a private person. Not in any financial difficulty but not with enough means to cause any resentment from anyone. A typical Icelandic family man by all accounts.

Therefore, it is no surprise that the disappearance of Geirfinnur created a huge moral fervor in Iceland, and a massive police investigation, given the suspicious circumstances. Not much came out of the initial investigation by police and no arrests were made in the beginning.

### **Prosecutions and convictions**

After nearly two years after the disappearance of the two males and dozens of possible suspects, six young people around 20 years old were eventually arrested in late 1975 and 1976 and kept in isolation for months (Milne, 2016, Finnsson, 2017 and Cox, 2018). One of them was even kept in solitary confinement for more than 600 days. Some of them had been involved in petty crime and therefore known to the police. Early on some of them confessed to the murders even though they had no clear memory of committing the crimes. One suspect, a young woman, later stated she had confessed to the crime to be able to get back to her then few months child. She also implicated four other persons to the case who consequently

had to sit innocent in solitary confinement for more than 100 days in solitary confinement before being released.

Much later it was revealed that in addition to the psychological stress of the interrogation and isolation, the young suspects had been subjected to sleep deprivation and water torture, particularly the alleged ring leader, who had a fear of water. They all later said that they had signed the confessions to put an end to their solitary confinement.

There was a huge pressure on Icelandic officials to solve the case. A case in point is that Icelandic authorities even hired a retired W-German expert cop to lead the investigation. When he had helped solving the case the Justice Minister of Iceland stated in a newspaper interview in February of 1977 that a nightmare had been lifted off the nation.

The Icelandic Supreme court finally in 1980 sentenced all six suspects to prison for the murder of Guðmundur and Geirfínnur. The only tangible evidence supporting the decision was their confessions. The young convicts served their sentence accordingly and were later released in the 1980's. This notorious criminal case marked all included in the aftermath, understandably making life in a small society difficult for them. Despite efforts of re-opening the case, mostly through the efforts of the alleged ring leader, Sævar Ciesielski, the case was not re-opened until 2018. Two of the suspects had by then passed away, including the ring leader. In September of 2018 all convicts were acquitted expect the woman apparently due to her perjury implicating four innocent men.

**Photo 4:** Geirfínnur's case has been solved: Three males confess to the murder of Geirfínnur. *Morgunblaðið*, February 3, 1977.



## Concluding remarks

The disappearance of the two men in 1974 understandably was suspicious and mysterious. No surprise Icelanders were puzzled and curious what had happened to them. Rumors were spreading in society and many tips appeared from the public. Soon after the disappearance of Geirfinnur in November of 1974 the police was under tremendous pressure of solving the case. They seem to have followed a lead based on nothing but rumors that the young people in question were linked to both cases.

And once the ball started rolling and the young people had been held in solitary confinement for months, with confessions early on, it probably became very difficult for the police to rewind and start the case anew. Most likely police investigators were confident that they had apprehended the guilty ones of the two killings. Even though no bodies were found, no connections between the accused, and the two missing men in question, no credible motives, they were still convicted and sentenced to long prison sentences. Just some young people previously linked to petty crime and two missing persons.

In addition, the two killings were very different to the characteristics of typical homicides in Iceland. Killings in the heat of the moment usually intoxicated among those who know each other well. Nothing of this type was demonstrated in court for this case.

Personally, I remember it vividly when the profile photos of the young people accused of the two killings were published in the local media in the mid-70's (photo 4). I was just a teenager at the time, and I was confident they were guilty. The police snapshots seemed to prove their guilt. The leader also had a foreign name, which only seemed to add more proof to that they were guilty.

In a way, to my young mind, this was like we had our own local Baader Meinhof terrorist group in Iceland, or even some sort of a US Manson family. We were facing a criminal gang with intentions of doing harm to society. When the case dragged on, and the young suspects retracted their confessions during their confinement, it only seemed to prove how hard-headed and ruthless these youngsters really were.

Gradually over the years cracks started to build up that the police version of the story was not correct. The police narrative of what had happened simply could not have happened like they had described, was in fact impossible (Danielsson, 2016). The cars being used in the killing of

Geirfinnur did not match, weather conditions made police scenarios impossible, time table of events was not realistic, links to distil alcohol sale, and a night club were dubious to say the least, to name only a few of the apparent inconsistencies in court records.

Yet, the system showed no signs of giving up, and the Supreme Court denied the case to be reopened in 1998 due to lack of new evidence. Since 1998 pressure on the court system to re-open the case from different groups in society only became more intense. Articles, books and TV programs increasingly revealed more holes or gaps in the official version of the criminal case urging justice authorities to reopen the case.

Today, Icelanders appear to direct the blame for this whole affair not on the young people anymore as was done in the 1970's. Now, the police investigative forces and the court system personnel end up as being the guilty ones having made this whole case up out of next to nothing in the 1970's. It is perfectly understandable to focus on the criminal justice system and its responsibility of what eventually came out of the case. They are the ones formally responsible for the genesis of this huge miscarriage of justice. Still, we need to keep in mind they did not have any experience dealing with complex and difficult cases back in the 1970's, and they did not have the skills and training they have today. And the case of Geirfinnur certainly on the surface appeared to be a serious crime needed to be solved by police.

Even though the criminal case in question originated in the criminal justice system, I still think it is premature only accusing the system for this whole unfortunate affair. The entire society was overwhelmed and gripped by the case in the 1970's fueled by sensational news media reporting. A moral panic and national hysteria can be shown to have dominated the national psyche, with the local mass media regularly feeding us on all the rumors spreading around. Some of the rumors appear to have implicated the young people in question early on. These youths, or some of them, had been linked to petty crime by the police, being labelled and stigmatized by society, as being a group of misfits, linked with both drugs and violence. At a time in history when radical social change was taking place in Iceland. Rapid urbanization, and the outside world increasingly entering Iceland with influx of drugs, among other things (Gunnlaugsson and Galliher, 2000). This criminal case seems to have symbolized new times for Iceland, a tangible evidence the nation was leaving its innocence behind.



On the surface the young suspects seemed to perfectly match the profile of being the guilty ones of the two killings. In turn keeping them in custody for so long created a huge pressure on the police and the court system to solve the case, tragically ending up in a serious mistrial of justice. After years of custody and solitary confinement it must have felt impossible for the system to let the young just walk out innocent, due to lack of evidence. And the confessions made early on by the suspects, later revealed under tremendous pressure, did not help the suspects when the court proceedings took place.

In late September of 2018, five of the six convicts were finally acquitted by the Supreme Court. This was an historic move by the Supreme Court overturning an earlier ruling. However, one of the convicts had been left out by the special prosecutor assigned to re-evaluate the case. The only woman in the case was not acquitted, because of her alleged perjury against innocent men implicated to the case by her, during her custody confinement in the 1970's. This part of the whole case and mistrial of justice has therefore not yet come to an end.

In 2018, we are in fact in the same position as when the two young males disappeared in the mid-1970's. We do not know anything more now what happened to them than in the beginning. No credible or convincing evidence shows any links to the young people sentenced to long prison terms for the two killings – nor to anyone else for that matter.

In my mind, Geirfinnu most likely just walked out into the cold ocean to end his life. Reportedly his marriage was nearing an end (Antonsson, 1991). Walking out like this might have been his response out. As for the teenager, Guðmundur, he most likely died in an accident, probably close to the harbor with his body vanishing into the ocean. Yet the case of the missing two persons remains a complete mystery in Iceland today. Probably we will never know what really happened back in 1974.

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