The 49th Berlin Film Festival: Part 3--documentary films from Germany, Switzerland and Austria

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In addition to some international contributions addressing the issue of fascism, this year's Berlinale was marked by a significant number of German films dealing with this subject. Several films examined the persecution of the Jews during the Third Reich and in light of the campaign against foreign workers in many European countries today, including Germany, and the rise of extreme right-wing tendencies, these works have a particular relevance. In addition, a number of documentary films at the festival probed pressing social issues, including the situation in the states of the former GDR (Stalinist East Germany) where mass unemployment has led to a pronounced social polarization.

In the film *Gerrons Karussell* film director Ilona Ziok has tried to get under the skin of a contradictory character, who cannot be judged on the basis of simplistic criteria--Kurt Gerron, the Jewish cabaret review artist, actor and director. Gerron, eventually murdered by the Nazis, was incarcerated in the Theresienstadt concentration camp. In addition to directing the prisoners' cabaret, "Karussell," he also made a Nazi propaganda film about the Theresienstadt concentration camp. The film, *The Leader Offers a Town to the Jews*, was a documentary designed to deceive world public opinion about the true character of the German concentration camps.

A spectator asked the film director after the preview: "Was Gerron really conscious of the fact he was filming a documentary? Whilst other people put their lives at risk in Germany to inform those abroad of what was happening in the camps, Gerron was making a film which covered up the truth." Ilona Ziok replied, "Not everyone is born a hero, but neither was Gerron a coward. Survivors confirmed that no one was harmed through the making of the film. Everybody in the camp supported him willingly because they thought they could save lives this way." As long as the prisoners were needed for the film, they could not be deported.

Should Gerron have made the film or should he have refused? Was there any other alternative in his situation? Or was the most important thing for the prisoners their immediate survival? The last word in this respect is pronounced by the jazz musician Coco Schumann who was imprisoned alongside Gerron: "I did not have a clue--I didn't know what was really taking place. Gerron thought he would be released if he made the film. We didn't know then that a German giving his word was no longer worth anything."*Gerrons Karussell* is due to appear in German cinemas in April and will no doubt trigger off a heated debate.

In a second film on this theme, *Closed Country*, the Swiss film director Kasper Kasics looks at the career of Swiss police chief Heinrich Rothmund, who held office from 1929 to 1954. Rothmund was a Swiss patriot who rejected Hitler, but at the same time refused to allow Jewish refugees to enter Switzerland. He claimed that he turned down the Jews because of his feelings of national responsibility and not because of anti-Semitism. The filmmakers organize a confrontation between one of the border guards who carried out Rothmund's order with Jewish survivors whose family had fallen into the hands of the Nazis--most of whom were killed. Kasics' film is an antidote to claims that the persecution of the Jews had its origins simply in the German "spirit" or tradition or merely in anti-Semitic ideology. The reality is far more complex--national pragmatism of the sort exemplified in the phrase "the boat is full" played a powerful role in driving many Jewish refugees to certain death.

Another film which clearly documents how refugees were at the mercy of international politics is the documentary from Austria, *Refuge in Shanghai* (*Zuflucht in Shanghai*), by Joan Grossmann and Paul Rosdy. Chinese authorities, basing themselves on tactical considerations towards the US rather than humanitarian principles, permitted Jews fleeing Europe to enter Shanghai, which was occupied at that time by Japan, at the end of the 1930s. There they were largely left to fend for themselves. Many died of poverty and sickness. Following the outbreak of war between Japan and the United States in 1942, many of the Jews were herded into a ghetto that was eventually bombed by the Americans on the pretext that the Japanese had deposited ammunition and a receiver there.

Another film, *No! Witness of the resistance in Munich 1933-1945*,by Katrin Seybold, deals with the resistance against the Nazis, and demonstrates the broad nature of this opposition. The films contains many interviews with people involved in the resistance of the time, Social Democrats, Communists, Christians, monarchists, and so on. The fundamental weakness of the film is that it repeats the claim, which was propagated continually in the postwar period in both the Stalinist East and the capitalist West of Germany, that if only there had been more courageous people who had opposed Hitler then the catastrophe could have been avoided. Exactly why not enough people were prepared or in a position to offer resistance--i.e., the problem of the politics and fate of the workers parties, such as the Social Democratic Party and the Communist Party, with millions of members at the beginning of the thirties--this issue is not touched upon. That it was not just some sort of collective carelessness that opened the door to the Nazi takeover is indicated by the film *Jewboy Levi*, which will be reviewed separately.

A number of documentaries at the festival observed the changing pattern of life in the newly reunited German republic. The film *Brigitte and Marcel--Golzower Lives*, by Barbara and Winfried Junge, completes a film project consisting of several parts and constitutes the longest documentary in the history of international film, spanning a period of 37 years. The film reaches back to the post-war East German Stalinist state. As Brigitte starts school in 1961 in the village of Golzow, the Ulbricht government has just closed the borders of the GDR. The film ends in 1998, nine years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The now grown-up son Marcel looks back at the filmed scenes of his childhood.

The film portrays and identifies itself with the life of simple people

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based in the countryside who have never been at the center of public life. They come across as uncertain and are obviously not used to articulating themselves in public; they are not particularly talkative and give evasive answers. The director poses questions in a sensitive way, but now and again takes the offensive in order to bring them out of their shells and to take up contradictory aspects of their lives. What he then brings to light, however, are personalities who conduct their daily unspectacular fight, have their own thoughts about life, have existential worries and make a development. The film thereby refutes the notion that the majority of the population can be regarded as merely a gray, inert mass. Under a seemingly stable surface appearance, changes and movement are permanently taking place.

Through a precise observation of life the filmmakers succeed in showing the gulf existing between the GDR leadership and the ordinary population. The language of the officials and that of their subordinates alone are worlds apart. The brief glimpse of an educational class of the FDJ (youth organization of the Communist Party of the GDR) speaks volumes. In the class the youth listen with obvious reluctance to the pithy and stirring words of the somewhat elderly FDJ youth official. They look away from the speaker or, with a dissembling gaze, look down at the floor in embarrassment.

Standing in stark contrast to the quiet characters of *Golzower Lives* are the main figures in Pavel Schnabels film *Cross-Borders*. The wave of social protest which erupted in 1968 swept layers of youth and students from both East and West Germany into political life. What has become of them today? At the same time as Thomas Schoppe, lead singer of a legendary GDR rock band, moved to the West in order "to find freedom," Peter Porsch, born in Vienna and now, as a student in the West, threatened with state sanctions because of his Marxist sympathies, switched to the East. Porsch joined the East German ruling party, the SED, in 1982 and unlike the singer Schoppe has no problems in his new homeland. He is able to teach, to publish articles and says he finds the official party paper, the heavily censured and thoroughly dry *Neues Deutschland*, to be "an exciting newspaper."

Today it is difficult to understand how the drab and domesticated figure of Schoppe was a symbol of resistance against Stalinist repression for young people in the East right up until the collapse of the GDR. Today, sitting in his sound studio, he declares he has "left that all behind him" and is seeking "to move into new fields," i.e., the beginning of a solo career. For his part, Peter Porsch sits in the parliament for the southeastern state of Saxony as leader of the PDS fraction. He discusses with an environmentalist in the street his previous activities as a state minister. In that position he found it necessary to impose policies against the interests of the people who, he laments, do not see the necessity of making and accepting cuts in their living standards.

For a section of society the economic changes over the decades have brought success and creature comforts. *Ladies Choice--Scenes from the West* by Viola Stephan casts a look at well-situated middle class women--attorneys, fashion photographers, teachers, etc.--from a number of Western countries. They are emancipated and independent and have huge, fabulous apartments filled with treasures that they share with their children, parrots, pedigree cats and dogs. They buy only the best fruit and the freshest meat; they like to haggle over prices in antique and second-hand markets. The walls of their homes are covered with expensive works of art; they also have a penchant for a good bargain. Their hobbies include ceramics and they like giving costume parties. In distinction to their parents, they have a somewhat ironical relation to their own wealth, but they enjoy it anyway. In line with the motto of many radicals from the 1960s--"The way is everything, the aim is nothing"--they are continually on the move, without ever getting anywhere. " I don't know if I ever made a decision in my life. My career just sort of happened," declares the fashion photographer. A friend interjects: "I have never given any thought to how my life should proceed. I just knew what I didn't want--to have to get up early and work the whole time."

At the end of the showing of the film in Berlin there was both applause and booing. Of all of the films I saw at the festival this was the one that most polarized the audience. A section of the spectators left without waiting for the discussion. The director of the film admitted that she had anticipated such a reaction. "If I wanted to please everybody then it would necessary to make another film. This one is somewhat ironic with regard to the women's movement."

A comment from the audience indicated that this was not quite the whole truth. A member of the audience declared that the film had vividly portrayed the so-called " *neue Mitte*" [new middle]--the backbone of political support for the Red-Green coalition government in Germany. What did the director think about this? She provoked laughter from a section of the audience when she declared that she had made the film about a number of her own personal friends and she did not understand what the questioner was getting at.

For the characters in *Ladies Choice* the past years have been a period of continuous social elevation. For others, however, the trip has been in the other direction. *We go on ... The SchÃ¼tzes--A Life in Germany* by Wolfgang Ettlich describes the fate of an ordinary family in eastern Germany who attempted to make the leap into the *Mittlestand* (middle class) and came up short. Over a period of 10 years--from the time of the collapse of the Berlin Wall (1989) until today--the camera team follows the fortunes of JÃ¼rgen SchÃ¼tze, who worked as a sales manager in the former GDR.

SchÃ¼tze embraced the new market economy following reunification with enthusiasm and sought to make his way as an independent businessman. In his view, if you are prepared to get your hands dirty then success is assured. In the West a different and superior form of work-moral dominates. He translates it bluntly for those working under him: "If you are not up to the job then you have to go." Then for SchÃ¼tze comes a period of uninterrupted social decline. Heavily indebted, he is forced to close down his chain of shops, and now works as a long distance lorry driver eating up kilometers across Germany. His life is one of continuous stress--dates which have to be met, contracts to be carried out. He has no time on the weekends, no time for his family, or any type of private life. SchÃ¼tze becomes increasingly desperate and declares: "I don't want to be rich, I just want to be able to live and enjoy a holiday with my family." The film makes patently clear that the growing problem of mass unemployment in both eastern and western Germany cannot be overcome through the panacea of new small or middle-sized companies.

At the end of the film SchÃ¼tze draws a balance of the last 10 years. Locked in his own tiny world--which has no place for considerations of social developments such as mass unemployment or the economic crisis that has rocked Asia and many other countries--he concludes that he is responsible for the miserable situation in which he finds himself. Perhaps he is just too old for the market economy. In the general elections in 1998 he voted SPD for the first time in his life. Of one thing he is sure, "Chancellor Kohl has to go!" and then perhaps things will get better! In the meantime his wife has found work selling dog food at commercial exhibitions.

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