

An interview with the directors of the Austrian documentary *Spiegelgrund*

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The World Socialist Web Site interviewed Austrian directors Angelika Schuster and Tristan Sindelgruber at the 51st Berlinale. See the accompanying review of their film Spiegelgrund, shown at the recent festival.

WSWS: What was the impulse to make your film?

Angelika Schuster-Tristan Sindelgruber: We met Antje Kosemund [sister of one of the victims] and Wilhelm Roggenthien [a survivor of Spiegelgrund] long before we decided to make a film with them on the subject of euthanasia. We had known about [Dr. Heinrich]Gross, the main figure in the film, for a long time. When the decision was made to make a film, we were clear from the very beginning that it should not just deal with a past that is finished and done with, but also deal with what happened afterwards. It should, above all, show that the past stretches into the present. One is examining the (social) brain, the so-called memory area, the attitude of the state towards the relatives of victims, the victims themselves: it is never-ending.

WSWS: Was it a surprise for you that the film was so successful? It is usually difficult for documentaries in cinemas. Your film ran for weeks, with big interest being shown in it by youth.

AS-TS: Yes, that was a big surprise to us. On the one hand, the film's reception was bound up with the fact that the trial against Gross was due to take place at the same time. The trial did not take place, because Gross was pronounced unfit to stand trial, in itself a decision which was a scandal. But the whole thing came just at the right moment for the film. At a certain point, we consciously worked toward showing the film as the Gross affair became public. Then it was discussed a great deal and that certainly played an important part in the film's success.

We are pleased it is being shown and that the film is winning publicity in other countries—this will certainly have repercussions for Austria. In our country, there is a tradition of forgetting things very quickly. That is why it is so important that there is an impulse from outside to get things moving again. As was the case in the past, the subject of the film is still taboo.

WSWS: Your film raises broad questions about democratic traditions in Austria, the traditions of the main political parties and the issue of the basis for the rise of Jörg Haider.

AS-TS: The question relating to the main political parties is far more interesting to analyse than Haider as a person.

WSWS: You said yesterday after the showing of your film that there had been a discussion in the SPÖ [Austrian Socialist Party] about Gross which then, however, after the change in the party's leadership, came to nothing.

AS-TS: We do not think that that had to do with the new leadership; it would have been the same result with the old one.

However, the film does raise the question of the roots of democratic traditions. That's true. And they do not go deep in Austria. In the film Dr. Neugebauer mentions the fact that Austria's concern with the role it played in the war only lasted for a short period till around 1949 with a few trials taking place. Afterwards Austria lived, so to speak, between

brackets. One of these brackets was the myth that the country was a collective victim of Nazism. According to the politicians, Austria as a whole was a victim because Hitler invaded here first. The other bracket was anticommunism and in this regard all Austrian parties played along.

But fascism was not just something exported from Germany. It already had a long tradition in the country before Hitler, something which is kept quiet about in Austrian historiography and public debates. We had home-made fascism from 1934 to 1938—Austro-fascism. The Social Democratic Party was banned at the time, along with the trade unions; the workers movement was virtually unable to articulate itself in a political sense.

WSWS: What has been the political reaction to your film?

AS-TS: There were no reactions on the part of politicians to the film. There was a broad public discussion, but no contributions from politicians. The Green party supported and help spread the film. The current leader of the SPÖ of several years standing organised a meeting, a sort of round table, with supposedly all the survivors of the Spiegelgrund. I sent him an e-mail and advised it may be a good idea to show the film within the party. I never received a reply.

WSWS: So there was no desire for a serious debate on the part of politicians?

AS-TS: No. However, the film was substantially financed by public money and there was no attempt to influence us and no form of censorship. The only problem was the shots in the so-called commemorative room [*Gedenkraum*]. There we were confronted with the entire hierarchy of the apparatus and [we were] sent from the medical director to the director of governing board, to the director of the pathological department, to the press spokesman of the town council's health service, to the town councillor for health matters, etc., etc. At a certain point, we just decided to do it the way the international media do it. We simply said we had contacts in Hamburg and we found it odd that it took so long to obtain permission to shoot. After that we were given permission relatively quickly. Otherwise, there were no problems.

The public response to the film and the way it was discussed was relatively unusual. A documentary film rarely gives rise to public political debate. The discussion remains as a rule within the circles of film buffs. Our film broke through this boundary. The press reported on it and television did as well—to some extent. What was decisive, however, was that the trial, after opening in March 2000 for an just hour, was then adjourned. The judge declared he wanted to form his own opinion over the next six months concerning Dr. Gross's inability to stand trial. Up until today nothing more has happened. Letters were sent to the minister of justice, to the district court's spokesman, to the town councillor for health matters, asking what was going to happen now. We have received no reply. I think the answer will come only after pressure is exercised by other countries. Then the next step will be taken.

WSWS: To what extent is the strong response to the film related to the widespread public reaction against the elevation to power of Jörg Haider?

AS-TS: Whether the film came out three or four years ago or was

released in the current situation probably made little difference. One should not just look at Haider. His Freedom Party (FPÖ) is bad enough but there is a party, the People's Party (ÖVP), which went into coalition with it. That is really dreadful. And the SPÖ itself offered to negotiate with Haider, it is not as if the social democrats themselves were completely against building a coalition with the FPÖ. There are people who wanted to go in that direction. The former SPÖ home affairs secretary was quite frank about that. There is virtually no difference between the parties on this score.

The situation is absurd. Since the government took power, the country has been under considerable international pressure. One measure taken by the new government to whitewash and establish itself internationally was the negotiations for compensation for victims of Nazi slave labour, which led to an agreement recently. These negotiations would have probably taken much longer with the old SPÖ/ÖVP coalition. Now the whole thing proceeded more quickly, enabling the government to collect international bonus points. The US was delighted at how swiftly the discussions went and how constructive it had been to work with the Austrian government. The fact that the representatives of the victims were not always invited to the negotiation table is another matter.

WSWS: Could you say something about the cultural policies of the current government?

AS-TS: When the federal government strictly follows the Maastricht course, i.e., no budget deficit—the new credo which dominates throughout Europe—then that rubs off, of course, on the sphere of culture. Savings have to be made everywhere, as they put it. And that means closing things down, of course. Medium-size institutions are not affected so much, but smaller groups applying for funds for small projects year-in year-out have a hard time. They have no lobby and cannot therefore articulate their problems via the media. One simply does not get to hear of what is being affected and what has already been closed in the sphere of culture.

The main form of film sponsorship is the Austrian Film Institute. It was reduced by 30 percent last year. The cut was taken lying down. Then there is the so-called small film sponsorship under the authority of the federal chancellery, which sponsored our film and sponsors many first works, mainly documentaries, videos, avant-garde and the new media. Such sponsorship had already been halved during the last few years by a social democratic coalition government and now it has been cut again. Cuts in the cultural budget are not just a consequence of the new government, but you now have a situation where many artists are disparaged by the FPÖ more or less as being traitors to the Austrian people. Criticism is straight away reworded into some form of betrayal: why should the government pay for such and such, and so on? The more cuts are made, the more the government attempts to breed anti-cultural sentiments in broad layers of the population.

WSWS: Are there forms of censorship, any kind of attempts from the policy makers to determine the content of culture?

AS-TS: In a subtle way. When there is no money.... On a national level there is no open censorship. But one can silence an opposition by starving it. That will happen very quickly. One measure is the introduction of postal charges for the dispatch of small newspapers, meaning that the newspapers can no longer be sent. This has already taken place. The argument used then is that the post office has to become profitable.

WSWS: A year ago there were big demonstrations in Austria against Haider. At the film festival I saw the film *homemad(e)*, which gives the impression that the movement had rather fizzled out. What is your impression of this opposition as a whole today?

AS-TS: The big demonstrations which took place not only in Vienna, but also in several other Austrian towns, were very exceptional occurrences because there is no tradition of demonstrations or developed political debate in Austria. There are still these Thursday demonstrations to which several thousand people still come. That has been going on for a year and,

in itself, is really remarkable. But somehow the whole movement is deflated. At the beginning people expected such demonstrations would change something if everyone joined in. But nothing has changed.

The demonstrations are not only directed against Haider but also against the government as a whole. But one should not, however, lose sight of the context and the tradition in which the present political development is taking place. The real drama is this: it was the Socialist Party home secretary who, a few years ago, enacted the harshest laws against foreigners in all of Europe. One cannot simply ignore that and say we want the old government back. Many don't want that. At the beginning many people went onto the streets. But they were completely abandoned by the parties which are now in the opposition and by social lobbies which are also subject to government attacks. Take the trade unions, for example—they don't take to the streets, they do nothing, they don't move an inch. They are paralysed. In particular social democracy, which cannot get used to being out of power, refrains from drawing up any alternative model and avoids any open political debate.

It seems that what has increasingly evolved over the last weeks and months is that the SPÖ is already looking for its salvation by adapting to the current people in power and whispering into the ear of the People's Party: If it doesn't work out with Haider, if he creates too many problems, we will be there to build a coalition with you. The only thing the SPÖ seeks is to return to power and continue its policies again behind closed doors. In Austria there is neither a democratic culture which is carried over into the street, nor is there a so-called civilised society in which one can discuss at length the meaning of this abused term. The people were always merely administered by all the political parties, even after 1945 and the experience of fascism. Last autumn there was a one-day strike by grammar school teachers. The schools inspector for Vienna, a social democrat, called in the army to take care of the children while the teachers were on strike.



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