

The 73rd Berlin International Film Festival—Part 5

My Father the Guest Worker, I, Your Mother and *Oyoyo*: Three documentaries about immigrants in former East and West Germany

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This is the fifth article on the 2023 Berlin International Film Festival, held February 16 to February 26. The first was posted on February 22, the second on March 2, the third on March 6 and the fourth March 9.

The current xenophobic policies pursued by the German ruling elite are the product of a much longer process. Three older documentary films featured at this year's Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale) provide insight into the plight of immigrants in the 1970s and 1980s. The experiences immigrants had both in the Federal Republic (FRG) and East Germany (GDR), which called itself "socialist," were sobering to say the least.

Chronicling the experiences of the first generation of "guest workers" in West Germany, Yüksel Yavuz tells his father's story in the award-winning film *My Father the Guest Worker (Mein Vater, der Gastarbeiter, 1995)*.

Like many young people who headed to the cities to escape the lack of prospects in the countryside, Cemal Yavuz came to Germany in 1968. Selection committees were specifically looking for workers for Germany's expanding industrial sector.

What was planned to be one year of work in Germany turned into 16. We see Cemal working at the Sietas shipyard (founded in 1635) in Hamburg, separated from his children and his wife, who look after a small sheep farm. He can only visit his family in the summer and becomes more and more of a stranger to them. Eventually, he takes his son Yüksel with him to Germany. When he can no longer stand being apart, he returns home in 1984 with the help of a repatriation scheme initiated by the right-wing Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social

Union (CDU/CSU) government of Helmut Kohl.

Years later, Cemal wants to show his son, who has stayed in Hamburg, his old workplace. He is proud of the fact that he helped build modern ships, wants to see the new crane and praises the prudence of the new owner (the son of the former owner) who invested in technology to increase turnover. The former model worker is then shocked and bitter when he is refused entry to his former place of work.

Today, there is still much talk about the "cultural gulf" between the German population and immigrants. These are sham discussions. In concrete terms, as the film shows, families are torn apart not by deep-seated cultural differences, but rather by poverty, reactionary laws and war. The rural, regressive "cultural circle" of Kurdish farmers is shown in the film to be the result of politically produced poverty.

The farmers are bitter that the Turkish state is letting everything go to waste. The only modern things produced are the tanks seen driving north to combat Kurdish nationalists. The father returns to these desolate conditions. While he resignedly notes that the quality of his trees has deteriorated, he still has the powerful metallic clang of the Hamburg shipyard in his ears.

The film shows how Turkish workers were deliberately left isolated in Germany. His father lived in a shanty town called "Little Istanbul" near the shipyard. The shipyard owner played foreign workers off against local ones. According to Cemal, the Turkish workers' shift lasted ten hours, the German workers' eight, leading to tensions within the workforce. His father, the director said after the

Berlin screening, never wanted to return to Germany.

African students also live in isolation in the documentary *I, Your Mother* (*Man sa yay*, 1980), which the internationally renowned Senegalese director Safi Faye made for West German television.

Moussa is a student at the West Berlin Technical University. Like others studying electrical or mechanical engineering, he keeps his head above water by doing odd jobs and selling African woodcarvings. When it rains, the 'wood sellers' earn nothing.

Moussa has real problems fulfilling the wishes of his relatives, who seem to think he is wealthy because he lives in Europe: expecting fashionable clothes, televisions, etc. He feels abandoned and on his own. Many Germans restrict their contact by merely asking him where he is from and how long he expects to stay. Yet, as he explains, today's cultural and economic problems are internationally connected. He longs for his partner in Senegal, who writes him poetic letters.

Moussa adds that the 1970s were a 'social democratic decade' dominated by two Social Democratic Party (SPD) chancellors Willy Brandt and Helmut Schmidt. West Berlin had been governed by SPD mayors since 1955, Hamburg (with one exception) since 1946. The extent to which 'left' politics were dominated by nationalism is vividly demonstrated by the stance taken by the trade unions, closely tied to the SPD. The unions regarded the recruitment agreements drawn up with Turkey and other countries as a threat to German workers and demanded restrictions, while agitating against "illegal immigrants."

Immigrants in East Germany

The fact that young people from the Stalinist Eastern bloc and other countries studied in East Germany (GDR) had nothing to do with the state's officially propagated internationalism—which in practice stopped at the Berlin Wall. In competition with the West, Stalinist East Germany was seeking to extend its political influence to a number of so-called "young nation states" where nationalist movements had come to power. Those who came to the GDR expecting socialism were seriously disappointed.

Chetna Vora (1958-1987) daughter of Indian Communists, studied film in Potsdam-Babelsberg from 1976 to 1982. She made her diploma film *Oyoyo* in 1980. Her 45-minute documentary focuses on international students living in a hostel in East Berlin. One young immigrant comes from Chile, where the Pinochet dictatorship is in power. Carmen is from Guinea-Bissau, which had been independent since 1974; others come

from "fraternal countries" such as Cuba, the Mongolian People's Republic and Bulgaria. They communicate and socialize in German.

In the interviews with Chetna, they talk about everyday life and personal relationships. The focus of the film is less on the content of the conversations than on their attitudes, informal, frank and emotional: for example, in the case of the student who fell in love with a fellow Cuban. That may seem a little banal. But in the Stalinist GDR, immigrants always had something of an official status about them. The fact that they were under state control also put them at a certain distance from the population at large.

In the hostel, however, they are no longer living figureheads of state solidarity but normal human beings. When Carmen says at some point that she likes it in the GDR and lapses into the official tone of gratitude, she is interrupted by Chetna. At some point they all sing "Oyoyo," a song that is apparently about not saying "Yes Sir" to everything.

With her first feature film, *Women in Berlin* (1982), Chetna crossed a red line for the East German authorities. Here she leaves the immigrant milieu and enters everyday life in East Berlin. East German women speak openly about everyday life, family and relationships. They confide in a foreign student and, according to the Film Museum in Potsdam, also reveal their skepticism about the "future of the workers' and farmers' state." The film was immediately withdrawn from circulation by the Stalinist authorities.

In 1983, a year before the Kurdish worker Cemal Yavuz disappointedly left the FRG, Chetna Vora left the GDR for India with her young daughter and her German husband Lars Barthel (who operated the camera on *Oyoyo*). Later they lived in West Berlin. Chetna Vora died in India in 1987.

To be continued



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