What led you to tackle the film project *Unsere Kinder* (*Our Children*) and how did the work on this film, which took you four long years, begin?

When I was 14 or 15 years old, I began to write poems about love, death and the devil, beauty and destruction. I became more and more interested in the lives of other people and wanted to talk to them. I was also interested in a person’s dark side, perhaps because I had to deal with melancholy myself, since I lost my father when I was very young. At some point, I found out that, as of a certain age, you were allowed to observe trials in a courtroom. I made very good use of that in my youth.

In 1970, I applied to study directing at the Hochschule für Film und Fernsehen (HFF, Academy for Film and Television) in Potsdam-Babelsberg. After graduating, I made many films that, looking back, dealt with problems and conflicts that interested me. Perhaps because that’s where dark and light, the beautiful and ugly sides of things are brought to bear more quickly and potently. I made a series of films in the GDR that were banned—that is, slated for heavy censorship or banned shortly after they premiered. Because of this, I was subsequently not allowed to work for GDR Television, an avowed propaganda vehicle for the SED party. Filmmakers at the DEFA Studio for Documentary Films were also under pressure, at times stricter and at other times more relaxed, from the Ministry of Culture. As a DEFA director, you could have films banned and nevertheless continue working; with GDR Television, this was not possible. I bowed out of many films because they were to be changed too drastically—which I did not agree with—sometimes even before shooting began. I learned early on how to say No.

As I mentioned, I went to court proceedings and noticed that, in many of the trials against young people, certain legal paragraphs were cited—like the one against hooliganism—even though the trial was about a radical rightwing offense. Lawyers even cut deals to convict young offenders of lesser infractions, so the true nature of the crime wouldn’t make it to the press. Almost everyone kept quiet about it! I continued to meet people who, whether quietly or loudly, fought back against these cover-ups. There were quite a lot of us, but we had no organization. We had kitchen tables, at which the revolts began, long and insistent; the fall of the Wall in 1989 didn’t suddenly emerge out of nowhere. It was more like a turning point in the biographies of my generation.

The singer/songwriter Wolf Biermann had a line that went: “The little bit of Sunday and a driver’s license, that can’t have been everything….”

In 1984, I made the film *Woran wir uns erinnern…* (*What We Remember…*). The emphasis was on the “we”! I conducted interviews with nine people around my age; I was born in 1949, so we were all around 35 years old. Before I began the interviews, I said: “I am opening myself up to you completely and I ask you to do the same. You’ll see everything before it’s released. Much of what you say in front of the camera will not be shown, of that I am certain. But let’s speak into the camera freely.” Back then I was working with one of the best cinematographers at the studio, Christian Lehmann. Through him and cameraman Werner Kohlert, I learned to see again. Both are wonderful people who continue to influence me in my work to this day. We had time, we had little competition, and we had learned our craft from scratch. We had four semesters of film history during our studies at the HFF and had seen all the historically important films. We had great professors at the academy—for example, Prof. Peter Rabenalt, who introduced more than one generation of film students to the secrets of film dramaturgy. Many of them circumvented the political guidelines, interpreting film history primarily from the point of view of the craft, and also taught us what happened between the frames. In this way, our education strengthened us and gave us savvy arguments. Those on the other side of the table were trained by their party membership. They had arguments too,
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so there were debates—I wish there were recordings of some of those. They weren’t always just political; we didn’t always lose.

So, for What We Remember... I had assembled over four hours of footage based on a rigorous assignment I’d given myself. It could be described as follows: You on the other side of the table, in possession of power, want to raise the “new human being” who will stride toward the future in “real existing socialism” (as they called their view of our life)! We want to be close to the people and to document their life as authentically as possible. Trust us and listen to us. Don’t dictate what WE—the audience, the people in our films, creators—must remember and how we must dream our future.

The first approval session for the film arrived, our colleagues and friends were thrilled... but the censor wasn’t. And after four weeks of struggle, only 69 minutes of those four hours were left. The scenes that were to be cut were, of course, precisely the most important ones. I couldn’t take it. I was tired, exhausted, and for the first time really distraught. These weren’t just the memories and dreams of nine interview partners; they were mine, too, and those of the entire team. I was ashamed that I wasn’t really able to stand my ground. The last resort would have been to file an application to leave the GDR for West Germany, with a waiting period of several years during which I would be banned from my profession. But I didn’t want that. So, for me there were only two options: to stop being a filmmaker, or to really sink my teeth into my personal revolt in a more radical way.

In mid-to-late 1985, I went to Film Minister Horst Pehnert. We had a five-hour conversation; he explained his position to me, which I could fully understand. He said my film was honest, believable, real and well-made, but could not be released due to the cultural policy. That was the crazy but useful trick of cultural policy: they could simply declare that politics had priority. I told him I would withdraw the film... with all that implied.

I’d had two cameramen for Our Children, Michael Lösche and Rainer Schulz, who had gone through the dark days and the risks of shooting with me and had burned wonderful images onto the screen. And our production manager, Rainer Baumert, was not just a production manager—he was also a good friend and inventive organizer, because cameras, lighting, audio and vehicles were sometimes not easy to find. We lived and worked in a country of scarce resources. These colleagues accompanied me, with much patience, through the nearly endless filming. And I must also give unending thanks to Anne Richter, my dramaturg, for her work. But back to my discussion with the film minister... He asked me: “What will you do, with your attitude? If you keep it up, you won’t be able to make any more films at all.” To that I reacted, not quite spontaneously, with a demand: I’ll make a film about skinheads, goths, and punks, here in the GDR, in the so-called anti-fascist state. And if you don’t let me do it, then I’ll do it outside of the film studio. And if you kick me out of the country, I won’t go. I’ll stay! You’ll have a lot of trouble with me. Then he looked at me for a long, long time and eventually said: “Well alright, then!” We spoke about a few details. It was a good reflection on our life in this country. Like I said, five hours; we even forgot to turn on the lights as it got dark. It was a dark, wood-paneled room in what was once a Jewish bank, diagonally across from our film studio, near the Gendarmenmarkt in Berlin.

That’s how my project Our Children began! As of 1985, I more or less worked on this film. In between, I also made films about Erich Fried and Günter Wallraff.

It sometimes took about six months to get two skinheads willing to talk in front of the camera. And sometimes, when I finally got them there, they looked around at the location, the room, our equipment and left again. They were on guard. The fear of being persecuted was strong. Their prison sentences—also for minor crimes—were very long. It was difficult work.

In 1986, while I worked on Our Children, I also made a short film about Heinrich Hannover, a West German lawyer who defended terrorists. A year later, I made a film portrait of the West German author Günter Wallraff. But the most important documentary for me in the latter half of the 1980s was my film about the Austrian writer and poet Erich Fried. When I look back today, I see that I always made my films because I wanted to learn something. From Heinrich...
Hannover: straight posture and the necessary precision for a revolt. From Günter Wallraff: courage, patience, and unconditional belief in the necessity of confronting reality, including one’s own. From Erich Fried: the poetic honoring of love, beauty, and goodness, paired with a well-balanced will to fight.

At the same time, I continued work on my skinhead film. Looking back at the four years during which I worked on Our Children and these other films, I consider it to be one of the most intense periods of my career.

In the summer of 1989, I presented Our Children to the film minister. He was personally moved, even somewhat unsettled, but nonetheless didn’t approve the film. I tried again in mid-October 1989; it was, I believe, on October 18. We sat in the viewing room at the Hauptverwaltung Film (Central Administration for Film), part of the Ministry of Culture, and after about 30 or 40 minutes the lights came on. The film minister’s secretary came in and said, “Horst, please come here. We have a situation.” After an hour, he came back and said: “Honecker has been ousted, and now we can view the film with completely different eyes.” There was a sparkle in his eye.

On November 1, the film premiered at the Leipzig Documentary Film Festival, where it won the Silver Dove and the FIPRESCI Prize of the International Federation of Film Critics. There was an amusing moment: The film critic from the SED party newspaper, Neues Deutschland, had to hand me the FIPRESCI Prize; instead of congratulating me, he hissed through his teeth: “If it were up to me, you wouldn’t have gotten it.” I happily forgave him right then and there. The film officially opened in theaters on December 1, and for a week it was shown all over the GDR as well as at some West German universities. After a week, the film was dead, and the fall of the Berlin Wall was already history! People were interested in other things, which I could absolutely understand. But the film remained current and continues to be shown on many television stations and at events where I participate in discussions, including internationally. Yes, the presentations I continuously do with this film tell me that it has remained relevant. After all, it’s not really just a film about marginal groups in the GDR, it’s a film about wanting to listen and understand.

How did you find skinheads and goths you interviewed and how did you get access to them?

Naturally, I took to the streets. For a long time, I tried to find their meeting places and other locations. By chance, I learned of a woman who worked as an interrogator in the juvenile prison in Rummelsburg. I met with her, and later she brought me some documents, including interviews with skinheads, which affected me deeply. What I read in the six-page interview with one skinhead really hit me because it contained critical passages that expressed opinions I shared. He depicted members of the GDR government as criminals, for example. That was at a time when I always said it was criminal to keep people confined and deny them open expression about their own lives. From today’s perspective, it was a crime. Unfortunately, we still see that in many parts of the world.

As a documentary filmmaker, I had worked in big foundries, steelworks, kindergartens and universities, etc., so I knew what went on in the GDR. I also knew a lot of people who were in prison for political reasons and I knew what they did to them. That really horrified me. It wasn’t anything new to me, but rather a clear confirmation of the conditions, without obfuscation or defensiveness. It almost tore me apart when I couldn’t keep certain scenes in my films.

The woman also gave me the address of a skinhead. I called him; he lived with his mother. He agreed to a meeting and we arranged to connect at a café on Unter den Linden. When I arrived, it was apparent that a whole group of young men from 18 to 22 was there at the café sitting at the tables. They were members of a special political unit, the Felix Dzerzhinsky Special Regiment of the National People’s Army (NVA), which guarded government buildings and was deployed for Stasi and military purposes. They sat there in jeans and short jackets, so stressed, all simultaneously deep in conversation about nothing… I had to keep myself from laughing. They were all ears. There was just one table free, so that’s where I sat. I observed that, outside, other people near the café were being told to keep moving. Then two or three skinheads came along and suddenly entered the café. They came straight to me; they’d obviously done
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their homework and, unbeknownst to me, we’d probably already walked a long way together. They were friendly and asked me why I would want to make a film about them. There they stood—they were really there—and I didn’t have an answer. We arranged to meet somewhere else and, just like that, we’d taken the first step. Afterwards I was able to meet other skinheads. With many, it didn’t work out to film them. But I knew that I couldn’t feature every skinhead in my film anyway. Some days, I was followed by three vehicles, with the skinheads, the Ministry of the Interior and the Stasi. It was an exciting and intense time. I’ll admit it was also fun. It was important. For me, it was also important to set this internal process of clarity in motion.

Some of your interview partners mention that they were in juvenile detention. Can you say something about such centers in the GDR? You had a unique insight into these facilities, since you made a documentary on them, Jugendwerkhof (Juvenile Detention Center), in 1982. While shooting that film, you spent four weeks with young people who were living in the Hummelsheim juvenile detention center.

Yes, in 1982 I made the only East German film about juvenile detention centers, but it was banned.

In the 1980s there were about thirty or forty juvenile detention centers in the GDR, each with 100 to 400 inmates; there were always about six or seven thousand adolescents doing time. The juvenile detention centers were not part of the justice system, but rather a part of youth services and thus under the auspices of the Ministry of Education.

Youth services, as well as juvenile courts, the police and the district attorney system were legally empowered to commit young people to juvenile detention centers. In addition, there were juvenile prisons that reported to the Ministry of the Interior. It is also known that the Ministry of the Interior tried to use juvenile detention centers for its own purposes. So, the structure wasn’t simple.

The juvenile detention centers were for young people who had just barely missed being convicted of more serious crimes. They were so-called “asocials” and homeless youth and runaways. Of course, there were also politically defiant young people among them, but only a few—even if today people like to say that these detention centers were full of political youths. But that’s not true. Political youths were there too, but it was mostly the others I mentioned. There were also cases in which children/adolescents were admitted because their parents couldn’t deal with their problems and asked youth services to take over. The teens were manipulated and treated with a great deal of injustice, and often a completely wrong approach. They were often told that it was their own fault that they were locked up and away from home, and that they had to find their own way in life.

I was able to visit about ten juvenile detention centers. This was only possible because I always said that I had a permit from the Berlin authorities and that I came from the DEFA Studio. Clearly, no one in the GDR could imagine that someone would lie just to get inside a juvenile detention center.

So, for about two, three years, I traveled throughout the country and visited these detention centers. I remember two stories that I heard in a detention center in Burg, near Magdeburg. The director of the institution was a former lieutenant colonel in the NVA. It was a so-called mixed juvenile detention center, so both girls and boys lived there. There were approximately 350 inmates. They all worked in the well-known crispbread factory in Burg, the crispbread center of the GDR. Entire production lines were filled with these youth. It was exploitation. I must admit that the lieutenant colonel was a very unusual person. His tone was like a drill sergeant, but the teens respected him to a certain degree, and he had had success with some of them.

One day he was shopping at the market and saw that the kids from the detention center, who were on an outing with their attendant, were having a very friendly conversation with a woman. He waited and then went to talk to the woman. She was a typical fishmonger, full of life, with two feet firmly planted on the ground. She said to him: “From what I hear
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from those kids, I don’t think what you do with them there is right.” To the question of what she’d do, she answered: “Well, first I’d hug them until they ran out of air. First of all, they need love; some of them don’t even know what that is.” Later, I heard that the lieutenant colonel had hired the woman and was very satisfied with her work.

I experienced another story at the same juvenile detention center. The adolescents were having a “socialist competition” between the different brigades. After all, they were to prepare for life in socialism. One of these groups of about ten young people who all shared a room was top notch at production at the crispbread factory. For this, the director of the juvenile detention center recognized them. Their furniture was pretty tattered, almost falling apart. He bought all new furnishings for their room as a reward for their good work. They were really excited. I can attest to it, since I was there. I was at the detention center for a while and slept there. The next morning, the director called me, and we went to their living quarters and everything was dismantled, smashed up and broken. The teens were standing there. They weren’t grinning; they were very serious, but with provocative glances. I was naturally very curious to see what would happen next. I was glad I didn’t have the camera with me; we really wouldn’t have been able to show the situation that ensued. It would have been its own 90-minute-long film. You could have made a feature film out of it! The director stood there and considered the situation for a long time. “So, I think I get what you want to say to me. You don’t need a new room. You would rather get out and you need a new type of supervision; you need people who care for you. OK, we still have the old furniture. You’ll carry it all back in here and you’ll dispose of this trash yourselves. I can’t think of a punishment for this. But maybe you could keep up your good work. If you want out of here, work!” I looked at the faces of the teens. They had never experienced anything like this before. They had crossed a line, and the person in charge had understood their message, did not cross the line from his side, did not escalate, but instead took a step back. That a NVA lieutenant colonel could be so delicate really surprised me. I had also had to serve my 18 months of military service in the NVA and I experienced terrible things. That he knew how to handle this situation so humanely and attentively, that he knew so well how to proceed psychologically really surprised me—and my life as a documentarist certainly did not lack in surprises. Once more, I learned that you have to listen to get what is really meant.

Maxim Gorki, a Russian author—who, by the way, was also concerned with minors who broke the law—once said: “It is not about the real things, but rather, how things really are.” That’s also a good piece of advice for documentary filmmakers!

I traveled throughout the country and visited juvenile detention centers for over two years. Each of them was structured differently. For example, there was one near Berlin that was for youth who were nearly disabled intellectually. There were detention centers where boys and girls lived together, and there were separate ones. And there was a closed juvenile detention center in Torgau, with conditions like prison.

In the juvenile detention center in Hummelsheim, near Jena, where I later filmed, the young people were given the chance to make up 9th grade. (In the GDR, there was actually a requirement to complete the 10th grade.) Adolescents could be admitted to the detention center for a year; the maximum time was 18 months. But many who were considered to have behavioral problems were kept for longer; they’d be released after 18 months and then sent back in a few days or at the next opportunity. The centers were often in old castles or manor houses that had been taken from Junkers and barons after WWII. There were similar institutions in West Germany, the so-called “youth homes;” at first, for example, the Baader-Meinhof people had pedagogical goals and cared for juvenile delinquents in Frankfurt am Main. So there were steps before imprisoning youth in other countries as well.

Sometime in 1981, I got in touch with the director of the juvenile detention center in Hummelsheim, whom I had previously met and who was very communicative. I told him that this time I had a permit not only for research, but also to film, which wasn’t true. He reacted positively to my request and asked me how I imagined the visit should go. My plan was to stay an entire month; I didn’t want to waste so much time driving back and forth. And I didn’t want to draw attention to myself. Any inquiries at the Ministry of Education would have sunk the project immediately. Out of this came
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a 30-minute portrait of young people in Hummelsheim. At the center was a girl who was admitted on the day of filming; but I also met other young people and gave them a chance to speak in the film. The film was never shown in theaters and was immediately banned. The absurd thing was that the film was also rated “highly valuable” and was screened at the Leipzig Documentary Film Festival, even though officially it never made it to the big screen—at least not before the fall of the Wall. Actually, you were the one who told me you had access to an official document that stated that the banning of the film was reversed in September 1988. I’d had no idea; nobody ever told me about it. But even though showing the film was permitted, I didn’t hear of an official screening at the time.

Roland, you were one of the few people who had access to skinheads, goths and punks and who sought to converse with them. Were you able to learn why certain young people felt drawn to these groups?

The people who came to power in the Soviet Occupation Zone after WWII... they were people who had come out of concentration camps, out of emigration; they’d come from some Russian camp or other, or had been preparing for Germany’s new path to socialism from Moscow’s Hotel Lux. At night, someone or other would occasionally be taken from there, by their own comrades, and shot or brought to a camp. The comrades who later became leaders should have all gone to therapy first. But they decided they knew how to build a state—and not just any state, but one that was to be closely tied to Moscow.

In 1989, I helped prevent the Free German Youth (FDJ) from getting rid of their documents. There, I read about things that hadn’t really been clear to me before. We always thought that these people also believed in something similar to democracy; but in documents from 1946, it was clearly written that certain things had to be done and that it only had to appear democratic. Every millimeter was to be controlled and everything was to happen the way they wanted. So, it was a generation of people who would have first needed time to recuperate and convalesce. They didn’t know this country or its people anymore. I can only repeat: It’s not about what we’re told; it’s about what states, governments, people or whoever intend for us. The most important pillar of democracy is not simply freedom of speech, but rather debate—radical, peaceful and knowledgeable debate.

I knew someone who was the oldest inmate in the Buchenwald concentration camp. I read his diaries. It was heartbreaking, but also crazy, of course. These people had an enemy. They had a very clear, incontrovertible image of their enemy. Talking with the skinheads in the film, author Christa Wolf says: “In the past, I had very strong images of threats” but then “I abandoned the concept of bogeymen.” Yes, and if the people didn’t do what the government wanted, they became the enemy—the people, the press—and they had to be educated, re-educated, locked up or sometimes worse.

After all these years, I know that the party had a secret curriculum for the people. And, of course, that can’t turn out well. And, especially not next to another state that has a completely different political system. In West Germany, too, someone may have had a plan for the West German people; but there were limits in place, so they could at least state their opinion and try, with some success, to prevent worse from happening. Today, it’s my impression at least, we have to be careful not to lose that.

I went to the cinema a lot as a 14-year-old. I was always allowed to go to the movies on Saturdays. I was fascinated by the film La tulipe noire (The Black Tulip), with Alain Delon in 70mm; and, at the same time, I had a small transistor radio to my ear to listen to Willy Brandt propose a vote of confidence. As a 14-, 15- and 16-year-old, I watched the West German political television program Der internationale Frühgeschopfen [lit. The International Morning Shot], with Werner Höfer; there were always five to seven international journalists talking around a table. Every Sunday they discussed things for an hour. I always watched that! I just loved the communication, the debate, the very idea that one person could say one thing and someone else could say the opposite and that was OK. They didn’t have to agree. Situations
where debate was really possible was something I looked for as a young person. These debates were something I insisted upon later and continue to insist upon today. That's why I still have problems with my films, even in this new country.

But do you think that the skinheads and other young people were like that too?

Yes, of course. There were clever people among the skinheads. Skinhead groups have normal structures. They were usually made up of ten to twelve people; they would break up and form new groups if it got too big. Like everywhere, these groups were informal. Fixed groups with a few dominant characters who take on certain roles. Every group needs a worrier, someone who always says “no” and keeps the debate and discussion in motion. It needs someone strong to protect everyone and also someone who is strong and mean, who will assert himself against the hostile world. It needs someone who takes on the mothering role, which can be a young man. And it needs a friendly person, etc. That’s how these groups work. And if a role is already taken, then someone may leave and form a new group.

There were the Antifa people, there were the skinheads, the faschos and many other subgroups. From the outside, you could identify skinheads, for example, by their shoelaces. One group had white laces, the other had black. So those in the know could more or less tell who they were dealing with.

Often, when two groups that weren’t exactly friends—say, skinheads and Antifa—encountered each other on the street at night, some of them would know each other from elsewhere. So, if they started fighting and one group was winning, then one of their members might say: Not that guy in the back, I know him from school; don’t beat him up!

In my film there’s an Antifa group, and when you listen to what they say and what conflicts they have, it always comes down to: You can’t say anything in this country! It’s not only young people who need to be heard. Every person, every society has an adolescence. I’m sorry, but I have to insert a quote here from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Maybe it isn’t exactly right, but here’s how I remember it and maybe it’s more my own interpretation: In certain eras, servants break away from lords, beneficiaries from their benefactors, children from their parents. Such an attempt to stand on one’s own two feet, to live as oneself, whether successfully or not, is always in accordance with the will of nature. And that’s exactly it: it’s all about the attempt. Like, I didn’t know whether I might fail or not with this film.

You described how young East Germans found their country to be lacking freedom of speech, among other things. What personal experiences did you have with the lack of free speech?

I can still remember very well how, in September 1989, I attempted a revolution in my film studio and tried to replace the studio manager. I stretched a banner across the picture of Erich Honecker in the cafeteria and wrote underneath: “A Round Table for a new studio.” I was just a regular film director! Together with Christiane Hein (the wife of author Christoph Hein), who was a dramaturg at the DEFA Studio for Documentary Films, we invited the entire staff to meet the next day. Approximately 1,000 people worked for our studio, with about 500 based at the Berlin location. They all came. Christiane and I asked for a mandate to remove the studio leadership and take over their work. And that’s what we did. Once I had their mandate, I went to the manager and thought that now the trouble would start. I stood before his door and took a deep breath—I don’t know any more how long I stood there. I was very clear that if the whole thing went sideways, I might spend the coming years in prison. At that point in time, that could have still happened. We didn’t know whether things would go peacefully, and if things had gone slightly differently in Leipzig or Berlin, then it wouldn’t have been peaceful. So, there I stood, outside the door, and it was clear to me that everything would be decided in that moment. Then I went inside… The director greeted me in a friendly manner, offered me tea and said, “So Roland, what do you all want? Tell me and we’ll do it. We don’t need a lengthy discussion!”
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So, in that situation, in late fall 1989, you could simply walk through a door and take control. And there was even tea and, if I remember correctly, cookies as well.

Four years before, I had sat, distraught, before the film minister, with whom I had the five-hour discussion I mentioned earlier. At that point he’d said: “Alright, Roland, you can make the film about skinheads. You’ll get the necessary equipment, and I won’t interfere. Of course, I must inform the relevant offices.” He then notified Egon Krenz, the Acting Chairman of the State Council at the time. Anyone who was even partially informed in the GDR knew that Krenz was responsible for security matters. So, I assumed that everyone knew about my film, including the Stasi.

About four to six weeks after we began shooting, I was called to the SED Central Committee. There sat a Stasi officer named Hetzer [literally, “instigator”]. Really, that was his name! And, in his good Saxon dialect, he said: “Comrade Steiner, yesterday evening we received a report about you. About how you talk to the skinheads; well, the way you talk is almost like the skinheads. For this reason, we must say: Enough! Or you can sign here, that you’ll report on the skinheads to us.” “Of course, I won’t do that,” was my immediate reply. “But then could you at least tell us if any drugs are involved?” “I can tell you that right now: there are no drugs involved!” I stood up and left. And after that I often had a second shadow, even when I wasn’t filming.

One day, I was shooting with the goths… the scene in the film when they are sitting in a dark room, having a party. They’d asked me ahead of time if I’d like to come to their party; then I could talk with them. One of the goths called me where I worked at the DEFA Studio for Documentary Films; I didn’t have a telephone at home. He told me to come to a certain address in Lichtenberg at a certain time. I asked him what I could expect there and if I should bring the camera. Yes, I could bring the camera; the other goths knew and had nothing against it. I sent my film team ahead, so they could set up the camera and have everything ready and, if anything happened, they could turn it on right away. You should know that back then we worked with 35mm technology that required a lot of light. The equipment included heavy cameras with separate sound and image. I’d told my team I’d come an hour after them. As I turned into the street—I’d been at the goths’ apartment a few days earlier—the whole street was torn up, as though pipes were being installed. None of that had been there just days before. Now, in the darkness of the old gas streetlamps, there were construction vehicles and the street seemed to stand still. There were no cars, nothing… and so close to Lichtenberg train station, where it was normally very busy! I stood still and thought to myself: something smells rotten here, something isn’t right. It was clear to me that the scene had been set up for—or rather because of, or even against me. Suddenly, a door opened, and a few young people came running out dressed in jeans and bomber jackets. They grabbed me and pulled me into a building. They knocked me down and slapped me in the face. But it was all done so that it didn’t really hurt, and no one would be able to tell afterwards. “What are you doing here? Why are you hanging around here?” I said: “You already know everything! You don’t have to ask me.” “But what are you doing now?” “I’m going upstairs there.” “No, you’re not.” Then I said: “That’s not up to you. Otherwise, I’ll go to the closest police station and report you.” There was a pause, I heard the buzz of radios. Then suddenly they said it was OK for me to go up, but to get my team out of there.

It was clear that they wanted a free hand with the goths. That was one more reason for me to go up: to prevent worse from happening. So, I went up… the apartment was laid out with green grass, headstones and lots of candles. My team had realized that something was going on downstairs. We began filming immediately, since I didn’t know how long things would stay calm. After three or four minutes, the doorbell rang and two of the people who’d stopped me downstairs were at the door. I went to the door and told everyone to stay in the room. I opened the door; first they spit at me and then they said I was to come with them immediately! I didn’t, of course, and they started making a racket. They conveyed the order that my team and I were to leave the building immediately. So, my production manager and I got in a car and drove to the nearest police station to file a report. Of course, the “regular” police understood what the deal was right away. I had to wait for about an hour and then some uniformed officer came out. I assume that this older man was from the Ministry of the Interior, the Stasi. I told him everything that had just happened. I urged him to contact the film minister. He went out and clearly made a phone call. He came back in and said: “You can keep shooting.” Then we drove back again and continued to film. The goths didn’t have any further problems either, although usually they were constantly harassed.
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What was happening there behind the scenes, I never learned. In any case, I had saved my filming and shot good stories with these young people. We, the team, felt very affected and worked up. At some point that evening, we turned the cameras on ourselves and poured our hearts out.

Another example was when I went out with my wife on weekends. Two or three cars were always on our heels. Once, when they were following us again, I mentioned it to my wife, and she said I shouldn’t consider myself so important! I really wasn’t that important. So, I quickly turned and drove into a forest path… and all three cars followed us and came to a stop, one after the other. That sounds dramatic, and it was, but it was also fun. Hollywood in East Germany.

Someone from the Ministry of the Interior once told me that a few of their members had fought with some Stasi guys. All of them were dressed like skinheads and staged this show to demonstrate how dangerous skinheads are. There were surely all sorts of things going on that weren’t always visible to me. But it was quite a feeling to be alive in the middle of it all.

Did members of your film crew have similar experiences with the Stasi?

They were definitely being observed, but I can’t remember anyone telling me stories. It could also be that I’ve forgotten. But I’m 100% sure they were being watched! The Stasi was always interested in finding out where we would meet, so that they could prepare something. But we sure made it hard for them.

Were there moments when you thought about halting the shooting because it got too dangerous?

There were several hour-long conversations the skinheads had with me that felt a bit like interrogations. I was OK with that. They had a right to learn more about me, given that I was asking them such direct questions. But I had decided not to stop, and for a very simple and egotistical reason: I thought that if I stopped now, I’d be in more danger than if I kept going. I always shared my thoughts and told them what I saw as right or wrong about their criticisms. I always told them that if they planned to do anything that was outside the limits of what was possible for me, then I would drop the film. Or if I heard that they had beaten someone up or anything like that, then I’d oppose it. So that was clear to them.

The film was officially released in theaters on December 1, 1989. During the premiere at the Colosseum Cinema on Schönhauser Allee, there were about 50% skinheads and 50% goths among the audience. The usher looked at me and said, there won’t be a seat left intact if they’re in there together. The fights between these two groups were legendary and well-known among Berliners. But after the showing, everyone came pensively out of the theater.

The leadership team for Berlin—the skinheads’ own “government”—gathered in front of the cinema. Then one of them looked at me, took a drag on his cigarette, exhaled the smoke and said: “Fair, Steiner, fair!”

I’m no hero and I got just as afraid as any other person. Sometimes very afraid, sometimes just a little. At the Leipzig Film Festival awards ceremony, we got boos and applause—half and half. That moves you. When my film played at the Berlinale in 1990, I was filming in Palestine. The taz newspaper commented: “Steiner failed with his film, had to fail, but terrific.” Well, OK.

In my opinion, there’s a lot that’s wrong in Germany today, as well—for example, in regard to the AfD.¹ No one actually talks with them, really; but they’re a fifth of the voters. Many journalists act as if there’s a crocodile next to them that they can chasten, by means of aggressive declarations or by cutting them off mid-sentence. Just like they did with the teenagers. So that has not gone away.

¹ The Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, or Alternative for Germany) is a nationalist right-wing party in Germany today.
The New, Old Danger: Young Neo-Nazis in the GDR

I read that, in the 1980s, there was apparently a team of sociologists—at the Ministry of the Interior as well as the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences—who were studying youth groups. Did you have contact with them back then, or were they interested in your film work?

Of course, they knew all about me, I was aware of that. There was a certain Mr. Wagner with whom the skinheads also spoke. He spoke with them on behalf of the party. I don’t know what institution he came from, but I assume he was from the Ministry of the Interior. “You can talk to Mr. Wagner,” is what many skinheads said to me. Especially the ones who were in prison. Apparently, Wagner had visited skinheads in prison and spoken to them there. By the way, the skinheads also called prison the “academy.” Those who hadn’t been couldn’t take on any leadership roles. Prison experience was needed to advance in their social hierarchy. I also heard that Wagner had met with some of the skinheads “privately.”

I can’t remember whether there was a group at the Academy of Pedagogical Sciences, however. I mean, I had no contact with them. Of course, that was thirty years and many other films ago! But I knew about Wagner the whole time.

I knew that if I got involved with Wagner—I mean, if I too spoke to him—then we would find ourselves in a sort of triangle situation. I only wanted to dialogue with the young people. I wanted them to speak as freely and openly as possible. I was not in charge of them. Plus, I would have had to speak openly with Wagner, too, and may have had to tell him things that he shouldn’t and would rather not have known. So, it was also for my own protection that I always said: I don’t want to speak to anyone other than the youths themselves. I explained that to them repeatedly. I also told them that they could count on me not to spread rumors any further. I was also never approached by Wagner or anyone else.

Wagner is still around today. I read a commentary by him somewhere a year or two ago. In 2018, he also published a book about rightwing radicalism in the GDR.

In your film, there are scenes in which author Christa Wolf converses with the young people. Why did you choose this author? Were the youths open to the idea of speaking with Wolf? And why did you decide to open up your dialogue to a third party?

For the members of the Antifa group in Pankow, for example, Christa Wolf was a moral authority. After all, she spoke during the Alexanderplatz demonstration on November 4, 1989. I respected her a great deal, read her books and learned a lot. She openly addressed big problems in soft tones, whether it was in Der geteilte Himmel (They Divided the Sky) or other works. That was exactly what I wanted. I had spoken with and been advised by many intellectuals, including authors Stefan Heym, Christa Wolf and Christoph Hein, among others. One of our most important topics of conversation was always the question of how to handle these young people.

Christa Wolf wrote the book Kindheitsmuster (Patterns of Childhood). I don’t know if it’s too much of a reach, but the patterns of childhood experienced by the youth groups were similar to those in Berlin of the 1920s. There were times when Antifa guys and skinheads protected each other. Well, that happened in the ‘20s too… the Nazi SA and the Rotfrontkämpferbund (Red Front Fighter’s League) sometimes protected one another, and they were young people too. I’ve heard a lot of stories like that. For example, one of the Red Front Fighters had a hand grenade or smoke bomb and was supposed to throw it into a pub where the SA was hanging out; but he knew that Heinrich went there too, so he didn’t do it. Or he warned Heinrich in advance.

I often drew uncomfortable attention to myself in the GDR because I said that every country has about 15-20% radicals. They show themselves or they don’t, but they’re always there. You don’t talk to someone in order to convince them of something, but because they’re a person.

But to come back to your question. I had long conversations with the writers. I also spoke with Stefan Hermlin, but then didn’t use that conversation in my film. He was friends with Erich Honecker, and I assume that everything I told him,
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Honecker would also hear, but probably as anecdotes. I would have told Honecker everything myself, in my own words.

I filmed the internationally-known authors Stefan Heym and Christa Wolf. After our first conversation, Wolf was the only one who said: “Roland, everything you’ve told me is very interesting, but if I’m to say something about it on camera, then I want to meet these young people. Bring me together with the skinheads.” So, I did just that and added it to the film.

And the skinheads were willing to meet Christa Wolf and speak with her?

Oh yes, immediately! They knew the author’s name from school. Back then, there were still really good, effective literature classes in GDR schools. Heavily political, of course, and sometimes with brutal and banal intentions; you had to memorize poems, too, which isn’t the case anymore. The skins were even proud to have a chance to speak with her. They really listened. And from conversations afterward, I know that it impressed them that such a smart and famous woman—who appeared in pictures with Honecker and such—had spoken so intensely with them and even admitted her own mistakes.

I then considered who I would have in the film. I wasn’t sure I should even use the conversations with the writers. But I was also worried that the footage might disappear into a drawer for years, if I didn’t have a few important, recognized people behind me. The conversations were important in terms of content and were my insurance, should I run into big problems with the film. I’m no adventurer, but sometimes you have to be a bit of a stuntman.

I don’t remember exactly when the conversations took place anymore. Stefan Heym was the first—maybe in 1987 and Christa Wolf maybe in 1988, but I don’t know anymore.

The final production work on your film took place in summer 1989. Many GDR citizens were leaving the country for West Germany. Did you feel that it was increasingly urgent to finish the film and bring attention to the youth problem?

As I mentioned, during the period that I worked on Our Children, I also worked for a year with Günter Wallraff in West Germany and made a film about him. Wallraff had chained himself up on the Syntagma Square in Athens, Greece and had distributed flyers to draw attention to the political situation in Greece. I had also considered—it sounds a bit egomaniacal—undertaking something similar with a few friends. I had thought about chaining myself up on Berlin’s Alexanderplatz in September 1989—about distributing flyers and demanding that we finally have an open and constructive discussion about youth issues. And well-known authors were ready to protect me; I’d alerted them, so that if I were arrested and locked up, they would tell the press.

Also, in September 1989, I had a long talk with the director of the juvenile detention center in Ichtershausen, Thuringia, a really terrible youth prison, including for the worst offenders. I knew him from my earlier film project. I called him, and he was willing to meet me. I assumed that he’d report my visit to the Stasi afterwards… but maybe not. So, I visited the prison in September 1989. Somehow, he was already all aflutter, as one might say. He was afraid that the revolution would overtake him and that he’d end up swinging from a lamppost; that’s more or less how he put it. He absolutely wanted me to come and hear his opinions about juvenile detention centers and prisons and how terrible he thought they were. But then everything went so quickly, and I didn’t get to film the interview with him as planned. The revolution of ‘89 beat me to the punch!

Were you in contact with the East German filmmaker Konrad Weiss, who did a lot of research into the topic of neo-Nazis in the GDR? He worked on an essay about neo-Nazis in November 1988, which was published in the GDR, in West Germany and in international newspapers in February 1989. Were you familiar with the essay?

No, back then I didn’t know that essay!

Konrad Weiss was a colleague of mine and we made movies at the same studio. At that time, I was in a group that made
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documentaries for children. But then I switched over to the youth department.

No, I didn’t know about the article at all. It came as a total surprise, for me and many others, that he had written it. I first read the text much later, and I must say that I was not very happy with it. It was not differentiated enough for me. When you write an article like that—and send it to well-known newspapers and claim to have expertise as a journalist—then you have to differentiate more. For example, you can’t just refer to everyone as “fascists.” Almost all the skinheads I talked to repeatedly told me that they were not fascists! As far as I know, Konrad Weiss did not speak with any of them; and, upon reading the text again, I can tell. It was primarily based on official newspaper articles, which were already very selective.

Konrad Weiss did the opposite of what I tried to do. That’s OK. But you really have to clearly differentiate between these groups of young people: goths, punks, skinheads, etc.

In the film there is a scene in which a letter is read aloud—a letter a skinhead wrote to his mother from prison. This letter is honest and very emotional. This boy is reflecting on his life and describes how and why he got into this situation. For me, this letter is one of the really important pieces of information in this film. I knew this young man. He called himself Schmutz [Dirt], although his real name was something else. The goth in my film called his music band Fehlinformation [Misinformation] and himself Abfall [Trash]. This alone tells you something. This film was a constant balancing act for me, because I wanted to leave these young people as whole human beings. I didn’t want to judge anyone!

In September 1990, after the fall of the Wall, the West German journalist Lea Rosh invited me to her well-known SFB talk show Freitagnacht… [Friday Night…], one of the more important political talk shows on West German television at the time. Lea Rosh was such a brash woman, a very strong and persuasive moderator. She sought me out. Back then I lived on Auguststrasse, in the Scheunenviertel section of Berlin-Mitte. I wasn’t in the public eye much, just like now. She asked me if I’d be on a show on the topic ”Braune Wende – Rechtsruck in der DDR” [Nazi Wende: A Swing to the Right in the GDR]—and if I could bring some skinheads with me. Sure, I could do that and, if the skinheads wanted to, then I’d bring them too. So, I went on the show with three skinheads. And there sat the author Günter Grass, the political scientist Claus Leggewie and the CDU State Secretary Bernd Neumann, among others.

We talked with Lea Rosh beforehand, and she asked me if there was anything she should bear in mind when we spoke with these young people. I told her that, if she wanted them to stay, she had to hear them out; that if they said something she found unsuitable, then she could correct them, as far as I was concerned, but that she should let them finish first. I couldn’t keep them there; they’d just get up and leave. What they’d do after that, I had no idea. Maybe they’d throw chairs around, no idea. So, please hear them out. I talked with the skinheads for a long time about what the show was about and what its format was like. So, I made preparations.

But there was one more, very important instruction the skinheads gave me: No one was to say they were Nazis. If that happened, they’d leave immediately. So, I told Rosh that and everyone listened. And then: we’re all sitting in the broadcast studio, the fanfare sounds, Lea Rosh comes down the stairs and says: “We have three Nazis on the show today.” I stuck my hands out and restrained the three of them. They stayed, too. That reminds me a bit of the article by Konrad Weiss.

I worked with Erich Fried for a year and accompanied him across Europe. He read poems in the smallest dives and biggest halls. I got to know his home. We experienced a lot together... until his death. Erich talked to me about why he had visited Michael Kühnen, a leading rightwing radical, in prison in West Berlin. He was of the opinion that you cannot practice tolerance just when you feel like it, but rather that feelings give us insight into the necessity for tolerance. That way, the fight for good is not eliminated. That’s why Erich Fried wrote poems, and that’s why I make films.
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Why did you name the film Our Children?

At the time, many opinion makers in the GDR—those with a “socialist consciousness,” from which they derived “strong arguments”—said that skinheads were a product of the West. They said, there was no place for these young people in East Germany. They were offshoots of western society and its right fringe. But for me they were simply our children. These youths, and all the others with worldviews one might not share, didn’t fall from the sky. And they don’t today, either.

This film is actually not a film about skinheads, goths and punks. It’s not a film about the GDR. It’s about listening and understanding, before it’s too late.

A postscript from Roland Steiner

Our interview was a month ago. But our conversation is still on my mind. A thought has been nagging at me that is connected to the story about a Chinese painter. If we were to have the interview today, this story would be my summary of our conversation. The story is about the opportunities that an artist has to speak his word and be heard.

So maybe everything we’ve talked about can be summed up in this old story about the power of imagination. It is about the wondrous event experienced by the Chinese painter Wang Fu, who had escaped torture thanks to the magic of his painting. Here is how it goes…

In front of the Chinese Emperor and the entire court, the painter Wang Fu was made to finish a painting that was considered “unfinished.” From this moment, the painting took over reality and the painter gained power over the emperor. The more he clarified things in the picture, the more his brushstrokes turned this image of his inner vision into reality. The ocean was no longer just in the painting. It flooded into the court and threatened to drown everyone. In this moment, Wang Fu boarded the boat he’d painted, which had begun moving thanks to the tide, and disappeared on the pale jade-colored sea that he had created in his imagination. He vanished into his painting….

How similar things are.

Translated by Kelly Champine and Skyler Arndt-Briggs