

WHEN THE WIND TURNS: HELD FOR QUESTIONING



By Frank Beyer

Hermann Kant's novel *Der Aufenthalt* is a memoir. Kant narrates his story in retrospect, after much time has passed. There are childhood memories and inner monologs, numerous anecdotal digressions, and—as is common in Kant's works—linguistic artistry and a proliferation of words that sometimes obfuscate the core of the story.

In 1978, both East German Television (DFF) and the DEFA Studio for Feature Films inquired as to whether I could imagine making a screen adaptation of Kant's novel. The broadcasting corporation was prepared to produce a mini-series. I was not very keen on the types of television adaptations being produced at the time, however, which entailed slicing up thick books into several parts and subjecting viewers to individual parts on consecutive evenings.

Later, I spoke with [scriptwriter] Wolfgang Kohlhaase, who knew the novel well. Eventually, he suggested that we should not be so ambitious as to try to make an adaptation encompassing the entire novel. Instead, we could pull the story of Mark Niebuhr in prison in Warsaw out of the novel and make that the center of a film.

Changing the novel's narrative perspective had an impact and changed the main character. In the novel, Mark Niebuhr is steadfast; he always has the last word and makes jokes even in the worst situations. In the film, however, he is a young man of few words, introverted—somebody who becomes weaker as the plot progresses, but whose will desperately clings to his threatened existence.

The premise of our film, when Niebuhr is inexplicably removed from a group of [German] POWs, is reminiscent of the beginning of Kafka's novel *Der Prozess* (*The Trial*): "Someone must have been telling lies about Josef K., he knew he had done nothing wrong but, one morning, he was arrested." The situation in our film is similar: a distressed Polish woman points at Niebuhr, uttering an accusation that neither the young German nor the audience understands. So begins the investigation, Niebuhr's trial.

Mark Niebuhr's story was so interesting and stimulating for me because it plays out how someone can be innocent in a legal sense, and yet involved in undertakings that he doesn't understand completely.

In the spring of 1980, before I started preparing to make the UFA television production *Der König und sein Narr* (*The King and His Jester*), we had already developed the concept for the screen adaptation of *Der Aufenthalt* (*Held for Questioning*). Wolfgang began writing a scenario. We met with author Hermann Kant and the managing director of the DEFA Studios in order to discuss the production. Everyone involved knew I had received a year of unpaid leave from DFF to work in West Germany; and they also knew that I was still on a collision course with the DFF leadership in Adlershof.

Preparation and production of the film were planned for the second half of 1981. Hermann Kant had not yet transferred the film rights for his book to the DEFA Studio. Without being prompted, he told the managing director that he would only transfer the rights if the contract specified Kohlhaase as screenwriter and Beyer as director [of the film]. He likely assumed, with good reason, that the Studio would pressure him not to insist on a director who had just decided to work for the "class enemy" [in West Germany] for a year.

Two directions of cultural policy were still in conflict with each other and no easing of the tension was in sight. Some agreed with Emperor Wilhelm I, who once said: "If artists and wallpaper manufacturers leave, then just let them go. They will regret it sooner than I." In the summer of 1989—a time when not only artists and wallpaper manufacturers were leaving East Germany, but also young people were leaving across the open Hungarian border en masse—[Erich] Honecker¹ sharpened this cynical quote, adding that "no one would shed a tear over those who left." Others thought such confrontational policies, which continued to drive authors, directors and actors out of the country, had to be curtailed and replaced by more tolerant policies.

¹ Translator's note: Erich Honecker was the head of the East German state from 1971 to 1989.

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In fact, many years later, I found the following account in my Stasi file, written by DEFA employee and Stasi Major Gericke for Central Department XX/7:

(...) In June 1980, the President of the GDR Academy of Arts, Konrad Wolf, and the screenwriter Wolfgang Kohlhaase met with Comrade Kurt Hager² suggesting a plan for how to “save” B. for East Germany. According to his report, Konrad Wolf had discussed all the related factors with Hermann Kant, Wolfgang Kohlhaase and other members of the Academy of Arts.

Without a previous agreement with the Ministry of Culture, DFF or the Central Administration for Film, Comrade Hager declared his full approval of the plan if it would successfully win back B. for East Germany’s film industry. He had his office inform the DEFA administration that it was charged with preparing the production of screen adaptation of *Held for Questioning*. (...)

It is suspected (without being able to process any evidence) that Frank Beyer’s film adaptation of Hermann Kant’s great novel is a provocation long prepared by the opposing side, and that opposition forces made use of the help of the president of the GDR Academy of Arts.

In support of this suspicion is the argument that B.’s previous work in West Berlin damaged the GDR and its reputation. B.’s political stance and his behavior gave proof of his hardened negative attitude toward socialist cultural politics, especially after the state measures taken against Biermann [...]

Among the directors at the Studio for Feature Films and the staff of the Central Administration for Dramatic Arts, it is said that B. can obviously only enforce his personal ambitions under the present conditions if he asserts public opposition to socialist cultural politics.

I had not earned any money in East Germany for a year, but I had worked for West money for the first time in my life. After finishing work on *Die zweite Haut* (*The Second Skin*), Monika and I wanted to take a trip to Spain.³ DFF management had agreed that she would be granted permission for this trip. Much to our consternation, however, when the DFF program director handed her her visa, he remarked that this marked the end of her job as a broadcaster at DFF. That thoroughly spoiled our trip, and it was clear that there would be further recourse after our return. I thought it was another attempt to push us out of the country. We decided not to panic, however.

After our return, Monika asked for a meeting to discuss her prospects at DFF. This took place, but they declined to re-hire her as a broadcaster. A tough and long fight for Monika’s employment at DFF ensued; eventually she was permitted to return as the editor and moderator of a program on fashion. Attempts to intimidate and blackmail people were part of everyday life in the GDR, when it came to so-called “ideological matters.” The legal system, however, had not been eroded to the point that they could terminate the employment of someone who was affiliated with no party just because, four years earlier, she had refused to stab her husband in the back around Biermann’s expatriation.

In the summer of 1981, Wolfgang’s scenario was completed. Our film version of Kant’s novel read like this:

Shortly after the end of [WWII], a very young German is removed from a group of POWs at a railroad station in a small town in Poland. He is arrested for a reason unknown to him. He learns how to make reports in Polish and, alone with his fear, how to stomp cabbage. He has to write down his biography several times because his interrogator, a young Polish lieutenant, repeatedly tears it up. He freezes and starves. He passes a gallows and does not know if it is meant for him. Christmas Eve in solitary confinement presents him with a salted herring, the visit of the prison warden, extreme thirst, and the small comfort of a distant German Christmas carol.

In a prison cell with Polish criminals, petty thieves, traffickers and con artists, he encounters the hate that has developed in this country, which is not only directed at the SS-jacket given to him against the cold. With these men, he is finally allowed to work outside the prison, where there is nothing but rubble. The highest wall

² Translator’s note: Kurt Hager was a member of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) and head of the Ideology Committee at the Politburo—ultimately responsible for culture.

³ Translator’s note: The author refers to Monika Unferferth.

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is reserved for him; if he falls, his case will be settled. He learns how to break down the wall without falling, but nevertheless does fall once, due to an unlucky circumstance. He breaks his arm and is brought to the sick bay, where he meets young Polish women for the first time. They tease him, until they discover—which is when he also discovers—that he is considered to be a German murderer. Now he is brought to a communal cell for Germans, where he finds civilians and members of the Wehrmacht and SS with military ranks as high as general. His compatriots are not as friendly as they seem to be at first glance. In being together with, and soon confronting such dissimilar people—including General Eisensteck, an SS-Hauptsturmführer; Major Lundenbroich, a young truck driver; Fenske, a gas meter reader from the Ruhr district and Railroad Councilman Sorgemehl—the young man experiences a “national community” that is only united when in opposition to the enemy of yesterday, the victor of today.

When Mark Niebuhr finally turns against Jan Beveren—the gardener and tulip lover from Holland, who was an SS-man in Auschwitz⁴—it is not so much to avenge acts of violence he has suffered, but rather out of a courage born of the desperate desire not to be one of them. The threat that he will not get out alive is believable; his ability to protect himself is meager. At the end of the film, the Poles discover that Niebuhr is not the person wanted for the murder of a young girl—and the findings of the Poles, in fact, save him from his fellow countrymen.

We began preparing for production in early October [1981] and concurrently wrote the script. We combed through the GDR drama schools in search of a young man for the lead role. Finally, I had two candidates: Sylvester Groth and Ulrich Mühe. They had both just graduated from drama school and were engaged at theaters in Schwerin and Karl Marx Stadt, respectively. The decision was not easy; both of them were very talented. Eventually, I decided in favor of Sylvester Groth, who came across as somewhat younger and more childlike.

It was clear from the start that we could not shoot this film without the participation of Polish colleagues. We needed a dozen actors for medium and smaller roles, as well as experts who could advise us on a plethora of questions related to settings, costumes and props. We found an outstanding production manager in Jerzy Rutowicz. During our first stay in Warsaw, in November of 1981, he arranged for us to meet first-rate actors and get excellent advice on costumes, especially regarding the authenticity of Polish uniforms in 1945. Jerzy even obtained a permit for us, from the Polish Justice Department, to visit the Warsaw prison, where most of the film’s action takes place.

Back at DEFA, I insisted that the critical role of the young Dutch concentration-camp guard should be filled by a Dutch actor. [Hans-Dieter] Mäde⁵ had nothing against it, but he had no foreign currency to pay a western actor. I offered to travel to Amsterdam to try to persuade an actor to work for East German currency.

Such negotiations were not particularly enjoyable, but I had already had experience with this from making *Geschlossene Gesellschaft (Private Party)*; I had persuaded the high-profile Swiss actor Sigfrit Steiner to play a big role in that film for East Marks. There was a special provision for such cases, such that the honorarium could be spent for purchases in East Germany (for example, antiques) that would be exempt from export taxes.

A young actor from Amsterdam, Alexander van Heteren, was willing to work for East Marks. He had heard that children’s clothing was particularly inexpensive in East Germany, he did, in fact, spend part of his East German wages on his children. Thus, this hurdle was also cleared.

The first day of shooting was to take place in an empty detention center in Zwickau in mid-January 1982. On December 13, one month before we were to start shooting, a state of emergency was announced and martial law was imposed in Poland. The telephone network and all other connections to Warsaw were interrupted.

Would the Polish actors and costume specialists come, under these conditions? Were there any alternative solutions?

⁴ Translator’s note: In the film, Beveren never admits he was anything but the gardener.

⁵ Translator’s note: Hans-Dieter Mäde was the general manager of the DEFA Studio for Feature Films from 1976 to 1989.

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When I had shot *Jakob der Lügner* (*Jacob the Liar*), I had had to forego planned Polish participation. It had been a painful intervention into my film by the Polish administration, yet I had been able to compensate for the losses.

But *Held for Questioning* without Polish participation? Unthinkable! The German-Polish relationship—despite being safeguarded by all kinds of government treaties and declarations of friendship—was still highly volatile. Wounds on either side had not yet healed, even a generation after the German war crimes and subsequent resettlement of the German population.

We continued with production preparations, but I was determined not to start shooting without our Polish colleagues. The studio leadership apparently shared my opinion and did not pressure me to find any alternative solutions.

One day before we were to start shooting, news came from Warsaw that the Polish actors would come. They arrived by train. All agreements made under Jerzy Rutowicz's judicious leadership had been held to. It was especially important that the actors had brought their costumes with them—the Polish military uniforms that had been fabricated in Warsaw workshops.

We were overjoyed. The strain we'd all been under in the prior weeks, due to not knowing when we'd start shooting, let up, and we started working together. The movie was completed in May 1982, after 56 days of shooting. There were no objections to the film and no requested changes. The premiere was scheduled for January 1983, and *Held for Questioning* became the GDR's official entry to the Berlinale, the West Berlin Film Festival, in February 1983. I was very anxious to discover whether our audience would accept the film.

I was very anxious to discover whether our audience would accept the film. I was hopeful. I knew that many men who, in the early 1980s, were in their mid-fifties had had to go to war as 18- and 19-year-olds. They had suffered fates similar to Mark Niebuhr's and would see in him a figure with whom they could identify. No such figure had ever been portrayed in a German film. There were depictions of communist resistance fighters, Jewish victims and fanatical Hitler youths who underwent a transformation in the war. But the average young German, who had been ordered to shoulder arms and stumble into the war in the 'forties, did not exist... although, in reality, there were millions of average German guys. As it turned out, my hopes were fulfilled. More than 600,000 people saw my film in East Germany. There were many lively audience discussions after screenings, through which a dialog—including sometimes fierce arguments—developed between two generations: the 18-year-olds of the present and the 18-year-olds of the past.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Invitations to the premiere at the Berlinale had already been sent out when we again got bad news from Warsaw. The Ministry of Cultural Affairs cancelled the participation of our Polish colleagues. Not a single Polish actor or crew member was allowed to attend the premiere in Berlin. This was a severe affront. We would soon find out why they were snubbing the German side. In preparation for the premiere, the Polish Military Attaché in the GDR, who understood little German, had watched the film; he had notified Warsaw that our film ignored fascist German crimes in Poland, and instead portrayed an innocent young German soldier being bullied by Polish military staff in a Polish prison. The Polish ambassador to the GDR then requested that our film only be shown in East German art house cinemas and that it be withdrawn from the film festival. In order to lend weight to this request, a letter to Erich Honecker from General Jaruzelski, First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party, demanded that the film not be shown abroad, turning it into an affair of state of the highest priority. Poland felt its reputation in the world was at stake, as the echos from Warsaw denouncing our film—which supposedly strengthened revanchist forces in West Germany and awakened anti-Polish sentiments among East Germans—made clear.

In fact, in the film the Polish officers in the Warsaw prison do not handle the young German with kid gloves, since they believe him to be a murderer. Any other portrayal of the situation, however, would have appeared ridiculous. And the decisive turning point in the film was never addressed: once it is clear that Niebuhr is not a murderer, it is the Poles who save him from his own compatriots, who would like to kill him for being a traitor. By this point, the Polish attaché was likely no longer paying attention, however, but instead mentally engaged in formulating his alarming message to Warsaw.

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The atmosphere surrounding the film had soured—who could turn it around now? Kant wrote letters to Honecker, Hager and the Polish ambassador to East Germany. Kohlhaase and I offered to discuss the matter with the ambassador.⁶ I wrote a letter to Minister of Culture Hoffmann, asking for protection from unjustified accusations.⁷ We were assured that they did not share the Polish sentiment about our film; but they gave in to the pressure from Warsaw and withdrew the film from the Berlinale.

Joachim Herrmann's Department for Agitation [in the SED's Central Committee] had jumped the gun and ensured that radio and television interviews would not be broadcast, and that newspaper reports about our film would no longer be printed. To be fair, these measures were later revoked and the film was screened domestically; but the launch pad for a possible international success would have been the Berlinale.

Wolfgang and I met with [Polish film director] Andrzej Wajda, who was shooting *Eine Liebe in Deutschland* (*A Love in Germany*), based on the play by [Rolf] Hochhuth, in West Germany at that time. He watched our film. Wajda said that the problem was probably about something different, something that had nothing to do with the plot of the film. He thought that at that point in time—when martial law had been proclaimed in Poland, the Polish army was governing the country and the Solidarność trade union was being suppressed—Polish officials could not countenance that Germans, of all people, had made a film in which Polish soldiers were depicted as oppressors, in this case of a 19-year-old German soldier. Especially since the modern-day army was wearing the same uniform as the security agencies and prison staff wear in the film. The proud members of the Polish army as prison beatles. This image could not be overcome, it had to do with the current social environment.

It is true, indeed, that the Polish army and the security agencies wore the same uniform in 1945 as they did in the 1980s. Although our Polish actors wore the correct uniforms, in the eyes of the Polish administrators they were the wrong ones.

Translated by Sigrít Schütz and Christopher Hench.

This excerpt and the following letters were translated into English for publication on this DVD with the permission of Karin Kiwus, director Frank Beyer's last companion. It was first published as part of Beyer's memoir, *Wenn der Wind sich dreht* (*When the Wind Turns*. Munich: Ullstein Verlag, 2001, pp. 295-305).

⁵ See translated letter on page 6.

⁶ See translated letter on page 7.

WHEN THE WIND TURNS: *HELD FOR QUESTIONING*



Letter to the Ambassador of the People's Republic of Poland to the GDR

From: Frank Beyer
Wolfgang Kohlhaase

February 14, 1983

To: The Ambassador of the People's Republic of Poland to the GDR,
Comrade Maciej Wirowski

Dear Comrade Ambassador,

It is with deep regret and concern that we heard that you have made our film *Held for Questioning* the object of a protest submitted to the government of the GDR. The resulting withdrawal of the film from the West Berlin Film Festival is damaging to our reputation and work. Speculations arising from this matter are helpful to neither you nor us.

Although we are bearing your motives in mind, we cannot understand the rigorousness of your actions.

The film is based on the novel by Hermann Kant, which has so far been published in five countries, including in the Soviet Union with an introduction by Konstantin Simonov. The novel has never been accused of any anti-Polish tendency. It has rather been understood as a German story presenting the dehumanization that takes place under fascism and more as proof of the multiple aspects of guilt that the Germans carry for what happened in Poland. The same applies to the film.

We have heard that there are controversial opinions about the novel in your country. It is, of course, up to Polish publishing houses whether or not to publish the book. With respect to the film, we do not assume the right to judge what feelings the film might touch upon in Poland, although we hope that it will be clear that the presentation of crime and punishment strikes the right balance.

In our opinion, however, transposing a potential Polish reaction to other places and audiences seems questionable. The fear that the film might raise anti-Polish resentments within or outside of the GDR must to be ascertained, not just supposed.

You surely have access to both East and West German reviews, which give a sense of responses to the film to date. So far, over ten post-screening discussions, with over one thousand viewers have taken place. There has been no sign of anti-Polish reactions. Instead, viewers condemn the fascist crimes that took place in Poland and consider the guilt and complicity of so many Germans in those years; they acknowledge Poland's stance to be fair and just and that this position is even more to be admired, because there are terrible reasons for hostility and hate. Many viewers, especially younger ones, share these kinds of thoughts and explain that they are deeply moved by the film.

We would be more than happy to make supporting evidence of such discussions available to you. We would also welcome the chance to talk to you, in the hope of resolving disagreements, or at least putting them into perspective.

With socialist regards,

[Wolfgang Kohlhaase]

[Frank Beyer]

WHEN THE WIND TURNS: *HELD FOR QUESTIONING*



Letter to the Minister of Culture

From: Frank Beyer

February 16, 1983

Dear Jochen Hoffmann,

I would like to add a letter to you, regarding *Held for Questioning*, to those sent to high-ranking officials in our country by Hermann Kant and Wolfgang Kohlhaase.

In my opinion, the Ambassador to the GDR of the People's Republic of Poland, without ever seeing our film, has made careless and negligent assertions about the work, which are discriminatory against the film's producers and the GDR's cultural policies.

Other Polish comrades, also without knowing the film, have repeated these assertions and made unjustifiable demands on the East German government. I was told that the government countered these allegations; in reality, however, they acted as if the Polish side has a point.

How else can one explain that the film's domestic release was delayed for several days, because a certain office interrupted publication of press reviews and audience letters, quarantined tapes for radio shows, prevented television reports, etc.? These measures are nothing less than a public admission of guilt with respect to the Polish claims.

It would be nothing new for me, if the government did not appreciate my advice in matters of cultural policy. But was there reason to also ignore the advice of Kant, Kohlhaase, Mäde, Pehnert—and Jochen Hoffmann? Wouldn't there have been enough time to at least wait and listen to them? GDR film critics are in rare agreement about the film, and many audience discussions have helped create a positive public perception of the film. Is this all meaningless, in comparison to the cheap, hysterical propaganda of few embassy employees?

You did not do enough to protect Kant, Kohlhaase, me—or anybody else who worked on and supported the film—from false accusations. This is no way to create trust and reliability in mutual relationships. In truth, for me it is yet another bitter experience.

What happens next? There will be plenty of people who will want to rid themselves of the matter as soon as possible. But we should stand together and tell them: We will only be rid of the problem when we correct our mistakes. When we tell our Polish friends that we will not only stand by our convictions, but will also act on them as of now. The first step in this direction is to release the film for all international screenings and submit it for the next available A-class festival. Only in this way, in my opinion, is the damage caused to be even partially made up for.

With socialist regards,

[Frank Beyer]