Monday Demonstrations and More: Reports from a Peaceful Revolution

The following is an excerpt from an extensive interview with documentary director Kurt Tetzlaff, which film historian Christiane Mückenberger published in Das Prinzip Neugier: DEFA Dokumentarfilmer erzählen *[*The Principle of Curiosity: The Stories of DEFA Documentary Filmmakers, *2012]. In this excerpt, Tetzlaff talks about making* In Transit: Report for Posterity *(1990) and* In Transition: Report on a Hope *(1991).*

How did you meet and get to know Alexander [Schulz], the pastor's son from Potsdam? And why did you want to make a documentary with him in March 1989?

We were planning to film a documentary about the Potsdam scene at Café Heider. We used to go there two or three times a week, and there were always these young non-conformists, all sorts of guys. I had singled out three or four of them: Robert, an intelligent young man who was amazing at playing the violin—later on, he had a band. KC: Karl Christian or Katze (Cat)—whom I later ran into again as a member of the squatter scene—his mother was a physician. The idea was to make a group portrait of young people who were making their way outside of the established norms; but we ran into problems with that.

That was when producer Uli Kling told me there was an interesting boy in his daughter Anja's class: a pastor's son who didn't belong to the Free German Youth organization, whom everybody liked and who was very bright and a good student. Dieter Rutsch, one of our colleagues, was staging a play by [outspoken Soviet playwright] with the class at that time—Mikhail Shatrov's *Diktatura sovietski* [*Dictatorship of Conscience*]—which was to premiere around graduation. We had to act quickly. Andreas Bergman was the cameraman. I met the boy during the pre-production shooting. We got to know and trust each other—he was critical and a freethinker who never beat around the bush.

The concept for the film was written in the tried-and-true way, with quotes from party resolutions and the *Neues Deutschland* newspaper. We had learned that over the years. We started filming in March 1989: a choir rehearsal of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* in the Erlöserkirche (Church of the Redeemer). In a conversation afterwards—we were talking about truth—Alexander said there was so much lying in this country, the GDR. I wondered whether he understood what he risked if I were to make this statement public. He understood. Luckily, I didn't have to show the daily rushes to anybody.

Back then, nobody suspected what would take place on the East German streets six months later. Then in early October, the Monday Demonstrations began at the Friedrichskirche in Babelsberg. It was obvious we had to film it. But how? We had only one video camera in the studio; it belonged to the industrial film group and was to be used only for industrial films. There was no way we could go in with a lot of technology and light the whole church, though. That would have killed the shoot before it started. Uli Kling got us the video camera. It was all pretty illegal. Then I went to Pastor Flade, who said that he couldn't approve it on his own, but that the Neues Forum speaker's council would discuss and decide whether I'd be allowed to film one hour before the event. The week before, there had been some people from the West German ZDF television network; they had not been allowed to film, in an effort to avoid any form of provocation. We did get permission to shoot, however. Both Weberplatz and the church itself were full of people. We couldn't make our way through. A man on a platform was shouting through a megaphone: "Those are colleagues from the DEFA Studio. You can let them through." The subtext was: You can trust them. People were scared they'd be denounced.

There were two more events after that one. We were sitting in the Blankschramme pub—our regular place, kitty-corner from the church—and were happy. We had the footage. That's when the Karl Marx factory brigade combat group commander came in, saying he had to make an urgent phone call. Mrs. Storch, the owner, told him: "This is not a public restaurant, it's a private club! You may not make a call here." She could guess what would happen

next. I was standing next to them and said, "Come on, Christa, just let him make his call, if it's so important." She put the telephone on the counter. We were sitting behind the folding wall in the main room and heard him say, "We need an immediate intervention. A DEFA crew is filming in the church. Something must be done." I took the rushes home with me; we were afraid they might disappear in the studio. The next day, I had to appear before the film studio's party leadership and the sudio's section manager. They had gotten a call in the night and were asked for an explanation. They'd obviously wanted to save their skins and said: "We know about it. Tetzlaff is there on behalf of the studio." So now they wanted to know what we'd actually shot there.

At that point, I understood we might as well throw away everything we'd filmed with Alexander six months earlier. In October 1989, was there still anything brave or worth talking about with this rebellious young man? Then I had the idea to splice sequences of current *Aktuelle Kamera* television news reports into our footage of Alexander's life. It would establish the temporal structure and had the appeal of contrasting this authentic life with the official version. It would speak for itself.

Alexander was a very thoughtful young man, who was plagued by fundamental questions and doubts, which sounded different from most of the slogans you heard on the street. What was his position?

The last big Neues Forum action, which we filmed on the Potsdam's Platz der Nationen, took place on November 4, 1989. From a balcony you could hear the slogan: "To demonstrate is to embark on a journey. We want to take that journey here and not in the Federal Republic." That was his position. He had the illusion that there was an alternative to both the GDR and the Federal Republic.

But what was happening on the sidelines is also worth telling. After the demonstration, it was already getting dark; we were on the way to our car and heard marching music from a side street. In their bottle-green uniform, the Red Army was practicing the goose step for their celebration of the October Revolution. That would have been great. But with our film stock, there was no chance in that light.

That was the film* In Transit: Report for Posterity*. Later you shot the film* In Transition: Report on a Hope*, which clearly shows that Alexander was not very happy with the situation after the Wende.

The slogan "We are one people!" shocked him. And he was appalled that those who had made the Wende happen were now suddenly outsiders again. He had hoped for more courage, pride and dignity. Instead, he had to witnessed people waiting in a long line just to beg a tobacco company salesgirl for a free cigarette. That hurt him. It had nothing to do with what he had fought for. The friction he experienced was inevitable. And I thought it was worth telling about.

Nevertheless, this film is titled* In Transition: Report on a Hope*. What did hope to look like to you?

I'd experienced a similar humiliation once before, after we had to flee [from the Russians at the end of WWII], when we were the scum of the earth. But that seems to be the fate of the Germans. They always need a winner and a loser. We [the GDR] could have transitioned to a confederation that then grew into unification. Then we wouldn't have been sold off as scrap. I don't know if that would have been better for people. But I think it would have been an opportunity for people to participate in unification a bit more hopefully, and that today both sides wouldn't be facing each other with mistrust. We were just overtaken by events. That is how I perceived it. Now, the Germans are divided again: into first- and second-class Germans. Generations will be struggling with it. That isn't mine—it's from Günter Grass.

Translated by Jan Jokisch

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