Original Exposé:
The Man I Will Kill

When director Staudte was asked in a 1966-interview[1] about his reason for making *Die Mörder sind unter uns* (*The Murderers Are among Us*), he shared a personal experience: "I went into hiding in Berlin during the last days of the war and was discovered by an SS officer who knew me and naturally abused me, and who drew his pistol. I was not a soldier. I had no documents that would have exempted me from any warlike activity. […] What audacity: wanting to threaten an adult with a pistol at this point in time! This was basically a situation that affected me personally. The problem itself had already become clear to me much, much earlier. I had already written the exposé for this story before the capitulation. Days or weeks before I had read it to a very trusted friend, the cinematographer Friedl Behn-Grund; and I told him that whenever this [WWII] drama was finally finished we would make this movie together."

After WWII, Staudte lived in the British sector of Berlin. Because he was awarded a British license to produce films, he first presented his exposé, entitled *Der Mann, den ich töten werde* (*The Man I Will Kill*) to the British Military Administration, but without success. The French officials were also not interested in the project. Staudte recounted his meeting with an American film officer: "Peter van Eyck told me in broken German, but wearing an incredibly well-fitted uniform, that we Germans shouldn't even think of making movies for the next 20 years."

Eventually, Staudte found support in the Soviet sector. In a letter dated October 9, 1945 and addressed to the central headquarters of the Soviet Military Administration in Berlin, he shared his concept for rebuilding the German film industry and suggested his film idea as one of the first productions. That same month, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin granted the Soviet Military Administration in Berlin permission to found a Soviet-German film production company. Only a few days after Staudte submitted his exposé to the Soviet Military Administration, he received the go-ahead, with the condition that he would change the course of the original story and omit the idea of self-administered justice and skepticism about the existing legal system. Only a few months later, daily papers reported, under the headline "The Rebirth of German Cinema," that Staudte had started filming *The Murderers Are among Us* on location on May 4, 1946. —hs

The following text is a translation of Staudte's exposé.

The Man I Will Kill

A film exposé by Wolfgang Staudte

Berlin, fall 1945

A rusted steel helmet lies among overgrown weeds! A simple cross—strips of wood nailed together—stands on an inconspicuous mound of earth. A bouquet of dead flowers in a canning jar: this is the last resting place for the dead, the side of the road.

The solemn tranquility of a graveyard does not prevail here. The sound of a muted trumpet from a dance club can be heard intermingling with the melody of daily life.

One cannot pause here in a tranquil, dignified meditation. People scurry and rush past heedlessly—caught in their struggle for a new existence with a view toward the future. Flashy posters scream from the ruins of houses: Rebuild

Dr. Mertens, unmoved by the categorical demands of the day, lives a withdrawn, aimless existence. The small studio apartment, of which he took possession during the capitulation, still shows all the traces of past fighting.

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[1] The complete transcript and translation of the 1966 interview between director Wolfgang Staudte and journalist Margit Voss for the GDR radio station Berliner Rundfunk is included on this DVD. The quotes in the short introduction are taken from this interview.

A decisive break in his life, full of unrest and aberration, occurs when the lawful owner of the apartment suddenly returns. One day, Susanne Wallner who, despite her own bitter fate, is unbroken and still imbued with an unswerving faith in a better future, stands in front of the man who has so unscrupulously taken over her property and refuses, with insulting cynicism, to vacate the apartment.

And that is how these two dissimilar human beings come to live under the same roof. All of the man's attempts to align himself with normal, middle-class life fail repeatedly. However, Susanne Wallner soon recognizes that Dr. Mertens is one of those men who returned home from an ill-fated war with invisible injuries, and whose healing requires a lot of understanding and tender care. In his brokenness, this man seems to her more valuable than those who were left untouched by grim experience.

But what started out for Susanne as simple human empathy, womanly care and a willingness to help, becomes a great, all-forgiving love. And so Dr. Mertens becomes aware that indestructible, eternal values have survived in this city of ruins and rubble, and that it is worthwhile to live for their sake and to take part in creating a new, healthy way of life.

The moment it seems that these two people's lives are about to fit in with orderly, middle-class ways, a man crosses their path. It is the industrialist Ferdinand Brückner! With his refreshing, somewhat loud behavior, he is that type of upright, respectable citizen in an elevated position. He appreciates everything sentimental and that everything stand in its correct place, both in his uncomplicated inner life and in his home. The classics are well ordered in his bookcase, and in his music room are the bronze busts of Beethoven, Haydn—and, only recently again, also Mendelssohn. As an exemplary husband, an affectionate family man and a loyal company owner, he is a man who enjoys the greatest respect everywhere.

But with elemental force he brings back to life an event that tears open a wound for Dr. Mertens that has only seemingly healed—because he knows a different side of this Ferdinand Brückner. The demands of his conscience—to kill this man who leads a peaceful life, respected in his surroundings as a model of middle-class respectability— grow stronger and stronger. All further events take place due to this compulsion that is fed by an unidentified source…

A November storm whips up the cement dust from the rubble and chases it in dense, gray shreds of cloud over the endless sea of ruins, through which two men carefully make their way. It is Dr. Mertens and the industrialist Brückner who are trying to reach the houses of the suburbs, whose pale outline can be seen on the horizon. They are on their way to one of those disreputable places of entertainment, an undignified phenomenon of the postwar era. The industrialist's invitation to spend the evening together at the right time: Dr. Mertens wants to execute his plan at this moment.… Fate, however, wants it otherwise.

At the moment when Mertens levels his weapon at Brückner, a distraught mother comes looking for a doctor for her child, who is fighting for its life. Duty dictates that Mertens must help immediately, and for the second time, providence takes the weapon out of his hand, which he had leveled at this man once before.

He came intent on killing a man—but instead he saved a child's life that night. Christmas 1945!

In a complete turmoil of conflicted feelings, a man wanders through the snow-covered city. He passes lifeless facades, and the horror of past days stares out of dark openings. Only a glimmer of light from Christmas candles shines through a few windows onto the street. Music from a radio—Christmas carols—streams past him. Church bells ring in the distance. They ring in the holy time of Christmas, the celebration of peace.

Dr. Mertens stands in front of a church door. He enters the church. Emotionally detached, he looks at the devout crowd and hears, as from afar, the words: Peace on earth, good will to men…

Restless, he continues aimlessly wandering past burnt-out tanks and scrapped military equipment. A voice within admonishes him more and more forcibly, more and more imperiously of his neglected duty, however.

Working Title: *The Man I Will Kill*

That's how Dr. Mertens arrives at Ferdinand Brückner's factory. Here, too, the Christmas spirit reigns in the big hall. The staff is assembled and listens, deeply moved, while Brückner, standing between two big, brightly-lit Christmas trees, delivers his speech with beautiful emotion. He talks about Christmas, the celebration of love, the celebration of reconciliation! A shot is fired…

The courtroom is densely packed. The prosecutor praises the virtues of the man who died at the hands of a cowardly murderer on Christmas Eve 1945, the first feast of peace and reconciliation after those long, bloody [war] years.

And then Dr. Mertens has permission to speak.

He describes a Christmas celebration in 1942. It was in Poland… Ferdinand Brückner, wearing the tight-fitting uniform of a captain of the reserves, stands in the living room of a farmstead, before a Christmas tree that he is reverently decorating with tinsel. Meanwhile, soldiers, at his command, randomly invade the homes of the villagers, capture them on the streets, both men and women, and round them up on the common. The sentimental captain feels compelled to have this done, owing to "some unpleasant incidents." Without interrupting the Christmas celebration that focuses on loved ones back home, one hundred innocent men, women, and children are exterminated that night!

Helpless screams of innocent people disrupt the tranquility of the night, and the singing of the beautiful "Silent night, holy night" blends with the distant rattle of submachine guns…

"The murderers are among us!" This is how the accused ends his statement. "Behind the masks of upright citizens—who animatedly rail against war and chauvinism and actively contribute to a peaceful future—they once again wear civilian clothing with hypocritical decency. However, only a uniform truly suits them. War is their true element, and their highest ideals are robbery and murder!"

The court withdraws for deliberation!

On the wall behind the judge's seat, where a picture of the bloodiest mass murder in history once hung, stands the goddess of justice—expectant and appraising—with blindfolded eyes.

Translated by Sigrit Schütz.

We thank the DEFA-Stiftung for their permission to use the English translation of the text on this DVD. (Paragraph breaks as in the original.) The original text was published in *Film und Fernsehen* 9/1986.