

## THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

### ***Friday Film Fest Series***



### **Das Leben der Anderen The lives of others 2006**

Director: Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck  
Screenplay: Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck  
Producer: Max Wiedemann, Quirin Berg, Dirk Hamm,  
Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck  
Cinematography: Hagen Bogdanski  
Music: Gabriel Yared, Stephane Moucha  
Cast: Ulrich Muehe (Gerd Wiesler)  
Sebastian Koch (Georg Dreymann)  
Martina Gedeck (Christa-Maria Sieland)  
Ulrich Tukur (Anton Grubitz)  
Herbert Knaup (Hessenstein)

Length: 137 Minutes  
Country: Germany  
Year: 2006  
Language: German with English subtitles  
Awards: Oscar 2007 for Best Foreign Language  
Film  
Deutscher Filmpreis 2006( 7 awards)  
Barrischer Filmpreis 2006 (4 awards)  
Europaischer Filmpreis 2006 (3 awards)

#### **Coworkers we have known – Karl Moehlmann**

In America there were once fellow travelers. In the German Democratic Republic (GDR), there were once *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter*. The former were typically naive but ideologically committed amateurs who were not all that effective in their efforts to usher in the socialist paradise. The latter were an extensive network of very effective civilian informants driven by more earthly motivations such as greed or fear. These IMs, as they came to be known by their despised acronym, were recruited and controlled by the Stasi, which was the main security and intelligence organization of the GDR.

Das Leben Der Anderen portrays the human consequences of such inhumane surveillance practices by a totalitarian and paranoid state. The Stasi was ambitious, hoping to control almost every aspect of life in the GDR. By the time the GDR collapsed in 1989, it was estimated that 90 000 full-time employees and 300 000 informants were employed or connected to the Stasi. With a population of 15 million, about one in fifty East Germans collaborated with the Stasi, a remarkable ratio that Homeland Security can only dream of.

Anyone who disagreed with the official party line became a suspect and thus a target of surveillance. It is thus understandable why enraged citizens overran the Stasi headquarters in Berlin, on Jan.15, 1990 when reports surfaced that panicking Stasi officials were shredding files. Preserving those files enabled the declassification

ruling by the German government in 1992, which led to the identity of the IMs being revealed.

Millions of people began to read their individual files, and the predictable anger often turned to shock in cases where the IM turned out to be a spouse or a relative, or a friend or colleague. *Das Leben Der Anderen* is a powerful reminder of the legacy of the Stasi and should serve as an antidote to any Ostalgia for the good old days in the GDR.

### **The Metamorphosis of HGW XX/7**

**Captain Gerd Wiesler**, aka Stasi agent HGW XX/7, specializes in interrogation and surveillance, coveted skills in the never ending struggle to ferret out *Klassenfeinden*. Correct, devoid of sentiment, he lives alone in his sparsely furnished socialist *Plattenbau*, a veritable prototype of the loyal official and party member.

In East Berlin, circa 1984, Wiesler receives orders to surveil well known playwright **Georg Dreymann**. Dreymann has been completely loyal to party and state and Wiesler quickly realizes that this mission has not been inspired by the most pristine of socialist convictions. Indeed, the motivation emanates from more primal factors.

**Bruno Hempf**, the East German secretary of culture, thoroughly relishes his motorized liaisons with Dreymann's girlfriend **Christa-Maria Sieland**. But such back seat romps have their inconveniences and might transpire in more comfortable circumstances with Dreymann totally out of the way. Hence he concocts the surveillance plan with Wiesler's boss, Stasi lieutenant-colonel **Anton Grubitz**. Careerist first class Grubitz, cognizant of which side his *beruflich* bread is buttered on, eagerly sets the project in motion.

Christa-Maria Sieland is a careerist as well. What distinguishes her from Grubitz, other than her beauty, is that she suffers genuine guilt over her attitude and

actions. She believes she must endure the revolting relationship with Hempf to protect and promote her career. Her character epitomizes the prevailing dynamics in the relations between Machthaber and artists in an authoritarian state. The perceived alternative to compromise and corruption is the dreaded *Berufsverbot*.

The rich inner world of Dreymann and Sieland and their circle of friends proves to be a corrosive solvent which begins to eat through Captain Wiesler's socialist convictions.

Monitoring everything from their love making to their quarrels and domestic chatter, he is drawn relentlessly from his horizon to theirs. He listens to Albert Jerska, a friend of Dreymann and fellow director who suffers under the *Berufsverbot* imposed on him by the state. He is exposed to the thoughts of Bertolt Brecht. His emotional barrenness is confronted by their genuine love, rebuking his pathetic attempts to connect emotionally with the capitalistic prostitute for whom he is merely a regular client.

Gradually, almost unconsciously, Wiesler shifts from antagonist to silent accomplice, taking indirect measures to protect Dreymann, whose faith in the state has also begun to wither in the wake of the suicide of his friend Jerska. Wiesler also attempts to reach out to Christina-Maria. Encountering her in a bar, he assures her of the importance of her work and encourages her to "trust her public", words that will resonate strongly as the plot develops.

Wiesler's direct involvement in the removal of evidence against Dreymann leads his boss Grubitz to suspect Wiesler's complicity. He demotes him to the basement of the MfS where Wiesler's job consists of opening and checking suspicious letters. Wiesler remains in that degrading position until the wall comes down in 1989. The portrayal of Wiesler as someone who is merely demoted despite refusing to comply with orders is one area where the script lapses. In reality, there was little forgiveness by the head of the Stasi, Erich Mielke, for acts of betrayal or escape attempts. Gerd Trebeljahr and

Werner Teske were in fact two of such agents who were sentenced to death and executed for acts similar to Wieslers.

In every other respect, the script is superbly crafted, particularly with respect to the fascinating ambiguity inherent in the sequence of scenes where the Stasi men under Grubitz search Dreymann's apartment for the subversive manuscript they believe he has written. Wiesler's casual reply to the store clerk at the end of the story wonderfully recapitulates the meaning of his metamorphosis.

### **Ulrich Muehe ( 1953 – 2007 )**

On July 22, 2007 Ulrich Muehe died of stomach cancer at the age of 54 in his home in Sachsen-Anhalt. Despite his many theatre and film credits, his most memorable role will certainly be that of Wiesler in 'Das Leben der Anderen'. In the light of his personal history, perhaps it was easier for him to inhabit this role. Muehe grew up in the GDR, and served in the army before pursuing a career in acting. He participated in the famous demonstration against the regime on Nov.4, 1989.

But the most intriguing aspect of his background concerns his former wife Jenny Groellmann, whom Muehe believed to have been an informer for the Stasi. Muehe subsequently brought a civil suit against her even as she was dying of cancer. Although roundly condemned at the time for what seemed a heartless action, it appears now that Muehe's charges were accurate.

Muehe was awarded the Bavarian, the German and the European Prize for Best Actor for this film. The colleagues of the "Stasi-Unterlagenbehoerde", the office that supervises the declassification of the Stasi documents, mourned Muehes early death: " Muehe hat einen wichtigen Beitrag zur Aufarbeitung der SED-Diktatur geleistet. Mit seiner Rolle als Hauptmann der Staatssicherheit in "Das Leben der Anderen" hat er unzaehlichen Menschen aufgezeigt, welche katastrophalen

Auswirkungen die SED-Diktatur auf das Leben in der DDR gehabt hat."