

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Friday Film Fest Series



Der Kniefall des Kanzlers

(“The chancellor who fell to his knees.
The two lives of Willy Brandt.”)

By Sebastian Dehnhardt and Manfred Oldenburg

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Film, Food & Discussion

Donations \$15, Members \$12

The German Society of PA

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Der Kniefall des Kanzlers. Die zwei Leben des Willy Brandt (1913 – 1992).

Genre: Docudrama
Director: Sebastian Dehnhardt,
Manfred Oldenburg
Length: 90 Minutes
Released: Dec. 1, 2010 – Arte (First broadcast)
Dec. 8, 2010 – ARD
(40 year anniversary of the *Kniefall*)



Notes and commentary by Karl Moehlmann

This docudrama traces the life of Willy Brandt from his early childhood through his ascent to the German Chancellorship. We follow Brandt from his birth in Lübeck as Karl Herbert Frahm, through his exile in Norway and Sweden during the Hitler years and finally through his rise to power as Mayor of West-Berlin and to his election as chancellor in 1969.

Brandt became a political icon for millions of people, but his private life showed a different person. That person was unable to establish close relationships, being emotionally crippled by shyness, self doubt and depression. The oldest of his three sons, Peter Brandt, reveals the rather cool relationship he had with his father and the psychologist Günter Seidler connects Brandt's lonely childhood and his escape from the Nazis to his later tribulations in his private life. With accurate reenactments, previously unpublished files and interviews with close acquaintances, former politicians and renowned experts, this film yields an intimate and compelling portrait of the man and the politician.

Der Kniefall – December 7, 1970

Willy Brandt was elected chancellor of West Germany in the historic election of September 28, 1969. Via a coalition with the FDP, it was the first time that a Social-Democrat became the head of the government after five previous CDU/CSU lead administrations (Adenauer, Erhard, Kiesinger).

In his foreign policy, Brandt initiated a new *Ostpolitik*, hoping to normalize the relations of the Federal Republic with the Soviet Union, the GDR and other East bloc countries. He set out to achieve *Wandel durch Annäherung* (change through convergence or rapprochement). His first step was his visit to Erfurt East Germany in March 1970 where he met the prime minister of the GDR, Willi Stoph, and was greeted by an enthusiastic crowd.

Next he visited Warsaw Poland in December 1970. What started out as a routine day of diplomatic niceties at the tomb of the Unknown Soldier led to the most iconic gesture of post war history. When Brandt visited the memorial to the ghetto uprising of 1943 he laid down a wreath. After adjusting the German black-red-gold bow, he stepped back several paces and then suddenly fell to his knees. He remained kneeling for several moments, face frozen, expressionless, his eyes focused in the distance. This image was flashed around the world and was as consequential as any decision of his 5 years as chancellor. His gesture, conveying personal remorse and regret while embodying a sense of universal humanity and a call for reconciliation, eventually earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1972.

The gesture also gave my generation, the generation of the *Nachgeborenen*, what we had been yearning for since our political awakening in 1968. It was a gesture that reflected our deepest feelings and eased the burden of *Mitschuld*, helping us to regain a sense of normalcy at a time when “*der Mensch dem Menschen (wieder) ein Helfer ist*”. (Brecht) In Brandt's own words: “*Am Abgrund der deutschen Geschichte und unter der Last der Millionen Ermordeten tat ich, was Menschen tun, wenn die Sprache versagt.*” (Erinnerungen)

1972 – Die Krise und die Überraschung

In retrospect, over 20 years after the fall of the wall, it seems inconceivable that Brandt's visionary *Ostpolitik* was so controversial in Germany at the time, so inconceivable that we have almost completely forgotten about all the scurrilous vituperation that Brandt's opponents used to derail him. His policies, implemented in no small part via the power of his personality, were the first steps in a series of events that eventually lead to the unification of Germany.

How can anyone argue with that? But argue they did. Moreover, they tried to stop him by all possible political and constitutional means, including the FDP politicians who joined the CDU in 1970 as well as the SPD deputy Herbert Hupka, the head of the refugee organizations (Vertriebenen-Verbände) who could not accept the idea that the *Ostgebiete* were lost forever, who also joined the CDU in 1972.

Others had indicated that they would vote for Rainer Barzel (CDU) if Barzel asked for a vote of no-confidence in the Bundestag. But the constitution only allows for a constructive vote of no-confidence which means that Barzel himself had to get a majority of votes, not just a majority against Brandt. He needed 249 votes. He was certain he had enough votes after all the defections and public statements.

But when the vote was taken on April, 27, 1972, Barzel fell two votes short. Only 247 deputies had voted for him. Ten SPD deputies had voted against the measure with three invalid votes. The constitutional coup had failed. It was later revealed that two CDU members of parliament (Julius Steiner and Leo Wagner) had been bribed by the Stasi, the East German secret police. This documentary reports for the first time that Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet leader, and the KGB were directly involved in this dramatic action to save the Brandt government and with it the *Ostpolitik* which ironically led, at least in part, to their own demise.



Günter Guillaume und der Rücktritt 1974

In 1972, Brandt and the SPD celebrated a decisive victory in the federal election. The election had been moved up one year after their majority had eroded and the vote of non-confidence had failed. The SPD gained 3.1 % and became the strongest faction in the Bundestag with 45.8% for the first time in the history of the Federal Republic, beating the CDU/CSU by 0.9%. This victory seemed to vindicate Brandt's course and silenced all his critics and the outspoken opponents of his reconciliation with the East.

Thus it came as a total surprise when it was revealed on April 24, 1974 that his personal secretary, Günter Guillaume, was an East-German spy who had defected to the West in 1956 and worked his way up to become the chancellor's right hand man. It seems clear today that this revelation was the trigger but not the fundamental cause why Brandt stepped down as chancellor on May 5, 1974.

Concerns about details of his private life (serial adultery and a long lasting affair with journalist Heli Ihlefeld, alcohol, depression) came back to haunt him and made him vulnerable to possible blackmail. It is ironic again, that Brezhnev and the DDR who had prevented his fall in 1972 would be the public culprits of Brandt's departure. In truth, it was the contradictions in Brandt himself, his private, darker side, that came full circle and caused his downfall.

Brandt had to wait another fifteen years to see the full political harvest of the seeds of *Ostpolitik* that he had planted. The day after the fall of the wall, he spoke at the Schöneberg City Hall, famous for JFK's “*Ich bin ein Berliner*” speech, uttering his memorable aphorism: “*Jetzt wächst zusammen, was zusammengehört.*” This growing together would not have happened so quickly and peacefully if not for the life and work of Willy Brandt.