

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S
Friday Film Fest Series



Nirgendwo in Afrika - 2002

Director: Caroline Link

Screenplay: Caroline Link (adapted from novel by Stefanie Zweig)

Music: Niki Reiser

Spieldauer: 141 minutes

Cast: Julianne Kohler (Jettel Redlich), Merab Ninidze (Walter Redlich), Matthias Habich (Susskind), Sidede Onylo (Owuor), Lea Kurka (Regina Redlich), Karoline Eckertz (Regina Redlich), Gerd Heinz (Max), Kanya Man (Kimani)

Precis – Allen Krumm

Caroline Link begins her film by alternately focusing attention on joyous family scenes in Germany and on a boy on a bike, pulling us along with him through the ochre African landscape.

There is an urgency about his movement. The people in the scenes in Germany do not exude urgency. Things may be a bit out of kilter, but the mood is still one of contentment and belonging. Germany is cozy and comfortable and intimate and Africa is vast and indifferent. Germany is what is known, Africa is the unknown. Yet a letter comes which changes all of this, provoking a decade long identity crisis.

Many have debated the issue, and most would concede that it is hard to say how or when a consciousness of identity begins. Does it begin with the question "Who am I", or with the question "Who are we"? Is it something made, or simply an inheritance. How and when does the "I" become a "We" when pitted against a "They". Is the core of an identity essentially what we are, or what we are not? And if three lives, two countries, three languages, two adults, one child and one war are thrown into the mix, how many identities are in play? Most likely something more than simple math is needed here, perhaps even some linear regression.

What is the difference between an emigrant and an expatriate? When do immigrants become indigenous? Do different cultures ever penetrate each other, or are they only capable of colliding? Such questions are incarnated in the Redlichs: Walter, his wife Jettel and their daughter Regina, a veritable Jewish Family Robinson, exiled by history from their *Heimat*, geographically isolated, psychologically marooned, deprived of their past, doubtful of their future.

The Redlichs, fleeing Germany, take up life in the hinterlands of Kenya, served by their own faithful Friday, a Kikuyu amalgam of Tonto and Hop Sing named Uwuor.

There are many panoramic shots of this African setting, emphasizing the unforgiving vastness of the land, the loneliness and isolation. Africa is magnificent, but seems to be utterly lacking in *Gemütlichkeit*. The visual grammar does its job, making us know that we are neither in Kansas nor Breslau anymore.

Walter and Jettel are not in Germany, but Germany is still in them, and they are initially diminished by what is to them a cruel exile. Regina, fortified by the easy grace of childhood, grows and readily embraces the new life in a new land. Walter, formerly a rising attorney, clumsily struggles to manage the remote farm in Rongai, and hardly has that struggle begun when the war comes. The Redlichs are promoted from immigrants to enemy aliens, then released, as even the Brits are capable of realizing that Jews driven from Germany are probably not the greatest security threat.

They move again to still another farm, clinging to each other in their isolated nuclear existence. And even that nucleus is split when Regina is sent away to a British boarding school. Walter and Jettel stand beside the road, watching the truck take her away. In this moment, they are the children, lost and forlorn. Regina, so adaptive, so resilient, becomes the ultimate outsider, a German Jew who is not one of the "we" amongst the upper crust British children who surround her at the Nakuru school.

Walter is finally allowed to fight with the British, and Jettel must run the farm on her own. The war ends, but there is no domestic tranquility when Walter returns. He and Jettel have switched perspectives: he wants to return to Germany, and Jettel wants to remain in Africa. Under the pressure of a freedom and autonomy she had never known, she has found still another identity, one emanating from the question "Who am I." Walter and Jettel fight, struggling to decide what they are to each other. Walter, sensing that Regina is wise enough to know the answer to both the "I" and the "We" questions, enlists his daughter's aid in trying to persuade her mother to return to Germany, a country which has become *die fremde Heimat* for all of them.

Nirgendwo in Afrika is a film adapted from the autobiographical novel of the same name by Stefanie Zweig, who later wrote a sequel titled *Irgendwo in Deutschland*. If the film has a weakness, it may be that the verbal sometimes doesn't measure up to the visual. In such cases the script simply tries too hard, replete with didactic dialogue and exposition about the historical context. Perhaps it could have done more by doing less. Yet the movie does enough. Caroline Link has succeeded in capturing the essence of a moving, thought provoking story, one which should resonate with the exile and the native in everyone.