

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

Friday Film Fest Series



Nordwand (North Face)

By Philipp Stölzl

February 17th 2012 • 6:30 PM •

Film, Food & Discussion

Donations \$15, Members \$12

The German Society of PA

611 Spring Garden St.

215-627-2332



Nordwand

Director: Philipp Stölzl
Screenplay: Philipp Stölzl, Christoph Silber, Rupert Henning
Production: Dor-Film West
Released: 2008
Music: Christian Kolonovits
Camera: Kolja Brandt
Spieldauer: 121 Minutes
Cast: Benno Furmann (Toni Kurz)
Johanna Wokalek (Luise Fellner)
Florian Lukas (Andi Hinterstoisser)
Ulrich Tukur (Henry Arau)
Simon Schwarz (Willy Angerer)
Georg Friedrich (Edi Rainer)
Petra Morze (Elisabeth Landauer)
Erwin Steinhauer (Emil Landauer)



Notes and commentary by Allen Krumm

Glory Bund

“Because it’s there” was George Mallory’s immortal retort to the question of why he wanted to climb Mount Everest. No one knows if he succeeded. Seventy five years after he made the attempt, his body was found high up on Everest’s north face. What is certain is that he shared a debilitating condition with Toni Kurz and Andi Hinterstoisser, two young men who wanted to be the first to climb the infamous North Face of the Eiger.

Most sufferers are born with the heartbreak of chronic megalothymia, although a smaller percentage have been known to contract the affliction later in life. It may be an exotic offshoot sprouting from Greek roots that has been grafted onto English by some pretentious academic, but like so many overgrown neologisms this hefty substantive gets right to the heart of things. Megalothymia (large desire), is, pure and simple, that competitive lust to win recognition from others and “... to win that glory which alone can outlive death.”

So there it is. Just like George Mallory, Andi and Toni were essentially Homeric dudes. Mountains have always been magnets for members of this fraternity and Mallory’s famous reply is said to have summed up their ethos for all time. The Eiger has always been one of the most powerful of those soaring magnets. The peak itself is less than half the height of Mount Everest (13,025 versus 29,028 feet), but the *Nordwand* of the Eiger, with its sheer mass of nearly 6000 feet of largely vertical rock and ice, its avalanches, rockfalls and sudden, violent changes in weather, has been fittingly nicknamed the *Mordwand* by several generations of climbers.

Coupled with the danger is the indigenous theatricality. Mountains have great screen presence and the Eiger North Face is a veritable heartthrob. The spectacle of tiny human beings clinging to that massive precipice fairly aches with drama. Spectators actually could and often did watch climbers from viewing platforms in either of two nearby villages, Grindelwald and Kleine Scheidegg. One would be hard put to find a better stage upon which a dramatist could portray the pursuit of glory.

Concerning the telling of tales, Walter Scott once said “... all must be told, for nothing can be shown.” And then along came movies and directors had the luxury of showing and telling. The only problem was to find the right ratio of words and images. A story with the Eiger in the middle of it makes this task easy. *Nordwand* begins and ends with some eminently respectable telling, but in the middle there is an abundance of beautifully thrilling showing.

It is not known what Mallory’s attitude to his condition was, but director Philipp Stölzl depicts Andi Hinterstoisser as eagerly embracing it while Toni Kurz is in stubborn denial. Early on the two of them have a little therapeutic chat about living with megalothymia, thus serving up some didactic dialogue for our benefit as well. Andi declares: “I want to prove to

the world what I can do and who I am.” Toni replies: “I don’t have to prove anything to anyone. I climb for myself. Understand? For me alone.” A bit later Toni concedes that what he said previously wasn’t true. “I don’t climb just for myself.” They may not climb just for themselves, but both of the climbers are completely repelled by the prevailing state sponsored megalothymia, and thus *Berg Heil* has displaced *Sieg Heil* in their elective affinities.

Herr Henry Arau, reporter at large for the Berliner Zeitung, knows all about megalothymia. He has not tested positive himself, yet as a self respecting cynic he knows that this lust for glory is the sine qua non for the drama that he dishes up to the public. And then there is the chorus that has always been around to kindle the desire and detonate the daring drive of *ruhmsüchtig* guys. “If you did it, you’d be on the front page ... famous all over Germany,” exhorts career girl Fräulein Fellner. “I don’t understand anything, but I find it terribly adventurous,” coos Aryan poster girl Frau Landauer. Some winsome lass probably whispered something like that to Achilles.

Stölzl indulges in understandable and perhaps more or less justifiable dramatic license when he emphasizes a rivalry between the Austrian and German climbers. According to various accounts of the actual ascent, there was probably more cooperation than competition. Although the Austrians Willi Angerer and Edi Rainer were on a separate rope from Hinterstoisser and Kurz when both parties set out on Saturday July 18th 1936, early on in the climb they began working predominantly as a *Viererseilschaft*.

On Monday Hinterstoisser and Kurz were within striking distance of the summit when they descended to help Rainer bring an obviously injured Angerer down the mountain. On Tuesday, Hinterstoisser spent several hours trying to perform in reverse the famous horizontal traverse which he had achieved on the way up. He failed in this attempt, and they were forced to negotiate the 600 foot sheer drop straight below them, exposed to falling rocks and avalanches, with no assurance that their ropes were long enough.

The suddenness of the catastrophe that befell them (probably induced by an avalanche) is testified to by Albert von Allmen, the guard in the railway tunnel within the Eiger. At around noon he had yodeled up from the Stollenloch gallery window to see if he could get a response. Multiple voices sang out in reply that they were okay and on their way down. When he called out again a short time later, he heard only Kurz’s desperate, anguished voice: Hinterstoisser had fallen off the mountain, Angerer had been strangled by the rope, and Rainer had been pinned against the rock face and had frozen.

It would be hard for a dramatist to exaggerate the pathos of the final hours of Toni Kurz’s life. The guides who tried to rescue him had to leave him there for the night and in the morning they could not initially get a rope up to him because of the overhanging cliff separating them from Kurz. They told him to untwist the strands of his own climbing rope, and lower it to them. With his teeth and one good hand, he struggled for five hours to create a new, longer rope.

Against all odds, he succeeded and lowered his unraveled rope to the guides. They tied on a rope of their own, then, discovering that one was not long enough, tied on a second rope. Kurz pulled this combined rope up and again, incredibly, began to lower himself.

But the knot that connected the two ropes became jammed in his *Karabinerhaken* (the metal loop with a spring gate which was attached to the harness about his waist) and his descent was abruptly stopped. Not having the remaining strength to force the knot through the loop, he uttered his last words (“*Ich kann nicht mehr*”) and died there, exhausted, dangling fifteen feet above his would be rescuers.

Contemporary reports from the July days leading up to the attempted ascent reflect the charming impression made on tourists and reporters alike by the four young climbers. Doubtlessly they were asked many questions about their hopes and fears and about what drove them on. Perhaps they tried to describe the dimensions of the large desire within them. But there is no record that anyone ever asked them the threshold question:

“What price glory?”