



Author and Witness  
Dietrich Garstka

Zehlendorf he is granted the status of a political refugee. Between December 25 and December 31, the other 14 students follow suit, traveling in small groups. They all meet again in West Berlin and decide to stay together as a class. They end up in Bensheim a.d. Weinstraße in West Germany where they all pass the *Abitur*. They go on to have successful careers and lives in the West, staying in touch with each other and with their families, as well as with their *Heimat* in the GDR.

Staying in touch with their *Heimat* became much more difficult after the wall was built in 1961. Only in 1972, after the beginning of the new *Ostpolitik* and as part of the

basic treaty between the Federal Republic and the GDR did the students receive amnesty and have their status as *Republikflüchtlinge* expunged. Their latest reunion occurred in 1996 with 11 of the 15 students attending.

### Historical Truth and Fiction

In 2015, director Lars Kraume released his highly acclaimed movie about Fritz Bauer, the Attorney General of the state of Hessen who succeeded in locating Adolf Eichmann and bringing him to justice. This took place in 1957. With his newest movie, taking place a year earlier in 1956, he has created another historical drama about life in the 1950s. Based on the book by Dietrich Garstka, who was one of the 15 students who fled to West Berlin, it is another genuine historical account that seeks to evoke the complexities and nuances of life in the early GDR by interweaving fictional elements. According to Kraume: "*Es ist alles im Grunde so ähnlich, wie es sich in Wahrheit zugetragen hat, aber die Figuren, ihre Familien und auch der Drehort sind verändert.*"

The movie was filmed in Eisenhüttenstadt, a locale which symbolizes the hopes and aspirations of the young republic due to having the largest planned *Plattenbau* districts of the GDR. Erik, one of the students, is given a complex fictionalized background which allows Kraume to narrate the central contradictions engendered by the search for a new society. Erik exemplifies that portion of the younger generation who believed in the socialist utopia after 1945, but who are subsequently disillusioned by the restrictions and repressions of the communist party and government.

An even more pivotal fictional character is Edgar, the old non-conformist, whose house outside the city border becomes the headquarters of the group. It is in his *Außenseiterrefugium* that the students congregate to listen to RIAS and hatch their conspiratorial plans. These characters and concomitant scenes enable the director to portray the awakening of the students' political consciousness as well as to highlight the sociopolitical boundaries which they were transgressing. Above all, Lars Kraume's rendering of the story compellingly evinces the manner in which a seemingly innocent gesture by a group of young students became a threat to the entire system.

# THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF PENNSYLVANIA

## Friday Film Fest Series



## Das schweigende Klassenzimmer

Directed by Lars Kraume

October 11, 2019

● 6:30 PM ●

Film, Food & Discussion

The German Society of Pennsylvania

611 Spring Garden St.

Philadelphia, PA 19123

Support provided in part by the  
Philadelphia Cultural Fund.



# Das schweigende Klassenzimmer (2018)

**Director:** Lars Kraume  
**Screenplay:** Lars Kraume  
**Camera:** Jens Harant  
**Production:** Miriam Düssel, Susanne Freyer, Isabel Hund, Thomas Kufus, Kalle Friz  
**Music:** Christoph M. Kaiser, Julian Maas  
**Editing:** Barbara Gies  
**Length:** 111 Minutes  
**Cast:** **Leonard Scheicher** as Theo Lemke  
**Tom Gramenz** as Kurt Wächter  
**Lena Klenke** as Lena  
**Isaiah Michalski** as Paul  
**Jonas Dasseler** as Erik Babinski  
**Ronald Zehrfeld** as Hermann Lemke  
**Max Hopp** as Hans Wächter  
**Florian Kukas** as Rektor Schwaz  
**Judith Engel** as Anna Wächter  
**Jördis Triebel** as Frau Kessler  
**Götz Schubert** as Pfarrer Melzer  
**Michael Gwisdek** as Edgar  
**Rolf Kanies** as Wardetzki  
**Burghart Klaußner** as Volksbildungsminister Lange  
**Commentary:** Karl Moehlmann



Based on the book *Das schweigende Klassenzimmer* by Dietrich Garstka, one of the 19 former students of the *Oberschule* in Storkow/GDR.

## Hungary 1956

After the Soviet army defeated Hitler's forces in the Second World War, they liberated Eastern Europe from fascism and promptly subjected it to communism, establishing military and political control over the occupied nations of that region. Thus the emerging democratic movements in several Eastern European countries were replaced by communist power structures and cadres that were loyal to Stalin and his dictatorial principles.

The June 17, 1953 uprising in East Germany was the first movement in the eastern block to demand political freedom and democratic reforms. Nikita Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" at the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in February 1956 denouncing the atrocities of Joseph Stalin encouraged people in Poland and Hungary to also agitate for political and economic changes. While Wladyslaw Gomulka was able to quell popular demands in Poland by establishing a reform-oriented communism, the situation in Hungary escalated.

On October 22, 1956, students in Budapest demanded freedom of speech and press, free elections, national independence, and the withdrawal of the Russian

troops. When their peaceful protest was met with bullets, the outrage only grew. When the reform-minded President Imre Nagy announced the neutrality of Hungary and the withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact, this Hungarian uprising was brutally crushed by Soviet tanks and troops. 2,500 Hungarians were killed, 200,000 went into exile, and many were arrested and tried as counter-revolutionaries. Ferenc Puskás, the legendary Hungarian soccer player, considered one of the greatest players of all time, also left Hungary in 1958 and emigrated to Spain where he enjoyed a highly successful career with Real Madrid.



Ferenc Puskás

## Schweigeminute

It is ironically Ferenc Puskás who becomes the catalyst for a moment of silence in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade history class of the *Kurt-Steffelbauer-Oberschule* in Storkow (Brandenburg), southeast of Berlin. Two of the students, Theo and Kurt, travel to West Berlin to visit the grave of Kurt's grandfather, a trip still possible since the wall in Berlin had not yet been built and crossing from East to West Berlin was rather easy. They decide to watch a movie before going back home. In the customary newsreel before the main attraction the two students see the pictures of the Hungarian uprising, the violent Russian crackdown, and the tragic fate of many protesters.

Back home they secretly listen to the *Westsender* RIAS and hear the erroneous report that Ferenc Puskás had also been among the victims. Armed with this upsetting news, Theo and Kurt inform their fellow students about the events in Hungary. The presumed death of Puskás, their hero, strikes a deep cord with their classmates. Spontaneously, they decide to hold a moment of silence in their history class out of solidarity with the victims by not responding to any of the questions the teacher asks.

What could have been an ephemeral episode limited to the confines of this classroom mushrooms into a *Staatsakt* when the teacher reacts in a highly agitated manner and informs the principal. The principal initially wants to downplay the students' behavior as an act of misguided youthful idealism. But the communist party members among the *Kollegium* don't see this behavior as innocent, but as a counter-revolutionary act.

Soon the head of the Education Board and eventually even the *Volksbildungsminister* Lange get involved. Together they demand to know who the instigators are. But even after threats of expulsion and several rounds of tough questioning and blackmail, the students stand firm and refuse to denounce any of their fellow classmates. So on December 21, 1956, the entire class (19 students) was expelled from the school and prohibited from passing the *Abitur* anywhere in the DDR.

Left with no future in the GDR, 15 of the 19 students involved decide to commit *Republikflucht* and go to West Berlin, which, although illegal and subject to punishment, was still possible at that time. Only four girls decide not to go. On December 19, Dietrich Garstka was the first student to depart. In a refugee center in