

THE GERMAN SOCIETY OF
PENNSYLVANIA
Friday Film Fest Series



Und der Zukunft zugewandt

Directed by Bernd Böhlich

April 21, 2023

● 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.



Und der Zukunft zugewandt (2019)

Director: Bernd Böhlich
Screenplay: Bernd Böhlich
Production: Alexander Martens
Music: Sebastian Schmidt
Camera: Thomas Plenert
Editing: Gudrun Steinbrück
Length: 108 minutes
Cast: **Alexandra Maria Lara** as Antonia Berger
Barbara Schnitzler as Susanne Schumann
Karoline Eichhorn as Irma Seibert
Robert Stadlober as Konrad Zeidler
Stefan Kurt as Leo Silberstein
Carlotta von Falkenhayn as Lydia Berger
Stefan Lochau as Gerhard Berger
Peer Jäger as Wilhelm Pieck



Commentary by Karl Moehlmann

National Anthem of the GDR (1949)

Text: Johannes Becher

Music: Hanns Eisler

Auferstanden aus Ruinen
und der Zukunft zugewandt,
laßt uns Dir zum Guten dienen,
Deutschland, einig Vaterland.
Alte Not gilt es zu zwingen,
und wir zwingen sie vereint,
denn es muß uns doch gelingen,
dass die Sonne schön wie nie
über Deutschland scheint.
über Deutschland scheint.

(Starting in 1970, the anthem was played without the text because of its reference to Germany as the "einig Vaterland", the unified country. With the fall of the wall in 1989, the anthem ceased to exist.)

Kolonne Links

In 1938, shortly before the outbreak of World War II, Antonia Berger, Susanne Schumann, and Irma Seibert, being young communists, decide to leave Nazi Germany and move to the communist Soviet Union. They were part of an "Agitprop-Group" called "*Kolonne Links*" that was founded in the late 1920s by Helmut Damerius and staged performances for the "*Internationale Arbeiterhilfe*". (An "Agitprop-Group" uses songs, plays, theatre, and other art forms with an explicitly political message in favor of communism.) In 1931, this group had been awarded a tour through the Soviet Union for recruiting 16,000 members for their organization. In 1933 they established a "*Deutsches Theater Kolonne Links*" in Moscow with members of "*Truppe 31*", another cultural group.

When these three women arrived in Moscow, they felt as though their dreams were coming true. Not only did they leave the hated Nazis behind, but they were enthusiastically embracing Stalin's Soviet Union as the international homeland of all communists/socialists and the "*Proletariat*" where they were part of a bold attempt to build a new future. What happens next has been the subject of widely diverging theories by many prominent historians. Our three fictitious women - as did countless other believers, party members, functionaries, military leaders, ethnic minorities, Jews, peasants (Kulaken), and many others - become caught up in the infamous "*Säuberungen*" or purges ordered by Josef Stalin in the 1930s. The years of 1936-38 are referred to as the "Great Terror" because the political purges reached their climax with about 1,000 people murdered every day. The exact number of victims is not known. Estimates range from at least 3 million to over 20 million dead. One of the "*Erklärungsversuche*" is that Stalin truly believed in the conspiracy theories that were the bases of the indictments and convictions of the many "*Schauprozesse*", alluding to a strong paranoia of the dictator. The Russian historian Dimitri Wolkogonow writes that it is "*denkbar, dass das Abgleiten zur Idee der Gewalt eine Reihe von Etappen durchlief: Zunächst war es ein Kampf gegen wirkliche Feinde, dann folgte die Vernichtung von persönlichen Gegnern, und schließlich wurde die Gewalt angewendet als Zeichen der persönlichen Ergebnisheit gegenüber dem ‚Führer‘.*" (DIMITRI WOLKOGONOW: *Stalin. Triumph und Tragödie. Ein politisches Porträt*).



Whether it was Stalin's paranoia or that the violence spiraled out of control, there is no doubt that the charges of spying against the members of *Kolonne Links* were completely arbitrary/"*willkürlich*". All three women suddenly find themselves falsely convicted and

incarcerated in an "*Arbeitslager*" (Gulag) in Workuta north of the Arctic circle and just west of the Ural mountains where they were forced to perform hard labor under inhumane living conditions. It is hard to imagine how these imprisoned communists come to terms with the fact that they had to endure this treatment for 12 years not by their enemies, but by their own comrades. To make matters worse, when Antonia's husband Gerhard, incarcerated in a nearby camp for male inmates, wants to see his sick daughter Lydia, he is shot to death by a guard and his body dumped into Antonia's cabin.

Innocently incarcerated by the same people they had once supported and together with whom they had fought, enduring 12 years of hard labor under inhumane conditions, witnessing the murder of one's husband, killed for wanting to see his daughter, who is herself near death due to lack of medical treatment – how could anyone still believe in the future of a socialist system that treats its own supporters so unjustly and so brutally? Well, when the three women return to the GDR in 1952, the young East German state, founded just three years earlier under the protection of the Red Army in the Russian Zone, they do exactly that: they look to the future and seek to establish a new socialist society on German soil.

Schweigegelübde

The returning women are greeted warmly; they receive an apartment and a job; and Antonia finds Dr. Zeidler who is able to save Lydia's life by successfully treating her severe lung infection. Finally, some of their hopes and aspirations seem to come true — that is, until they are summoned to a meeting with "*SED-Parteifunktionär*" Leo Silberstein, who tells them that they have to remain absolutely silent about their past in the Gulag. The truth

about Stalin's purges, the arbitrary convictions of innocent comrades, the death and harsh treatment of millions of people - all of this is taboo in a country that praises Stalin as a great leader and victor over fascist Nazi Germany. Silberstein urges/forces them to sign a "*Schweigegelübde*", which they reluctantly do. Only the oldest, Susanne Schumann, confesses her change of mind ("*Ich bin keine Genossin mehr*") and soon leaves the GDR. The other two, grateful for the housing and work opportunities, maintain their loyalty with the socialist cause and keep their beliefs in a better future. Their hope for and belief in a better socialist future help them reconcile with the horrors committed in the name of that future.

If this narrative sounds unbelievable, director and screenwriter Bernd Böhlich, who himself was born in Löbau/East Germany, got the idea to address this topic, one that was taboo in the GDR, when he met the actress Swetlana Schönfeld in 1988. She told him of the fate of her mother, mirrored in the film by the story of the protagonist, Antonia Berger. Interviews with other eyewitnesses and historic reports complemented Böhlich's story. The fact that Antonia's mother is played by Schönfeld, whose own mother suffered a similar fate, lends another layer of authenticity to this complex tale from the early years of the GDR.



Bernd Böhlich

One might wonder how Stalin's death on March 5, 1953 affected all parties involved. Was there a chance for a reckoning with the past including the crimes against innocent exile comrades? Would there be a new era of addressing the mistakes of the past, of reconciliation with the truth, of greater understanding and a more open approach to opposing opinions, of a more liberal discourse about all matters of society?

Stalin's death was certainly cause for our three protagonists to celebrate. Antonia is joined by her two "*Leidensgenossinnen*", and with a bottle of champagne they rejoice in the demise of their former torturer. But when Dr. Zeidler stops by, Susanne confronts him with the truth about their past. He is shocked, and soon after he confers with Silberstein about the fact that the three women had broken their

vows of silence. While Zeidler decides to leave East Germany and move to Hamburg to join the medical practice of his father, Antonia refuses to join him. She would not leave "weil sonst alles sinnlos war." Hopes for a post-Stalin liberalization are soon dashed when the June 17, 1953 uprising in East Berlin and other cities is violently crushed.

It took three years after Stalin's death until February 25, 1956 for Nikita Chruschtschow to finally deliver an albeit secret speech to the 20th congress of the KPdSU in which he exposed the cult around Stalin and his atrocities. The steps of destalinization that followed, e.g. closing gulags and releasing and rehabilitating innocent victims, led to a certain liberalization, but the violent crushing of the uprising in Hungary later that year put a quick end to any more substantial changes.

Will the truth about their past in the Gulag ever come out? How does Antonia deal with the pressure of the "Staatssicherheit" to keep the truth hidden? And how can the GDR survive in the long run when its leaders define the truth as "das, was unserer Sache nützt"? Isn't the building of the wall in 1961 and then its fall 28 years later an historic indictment of the fact that a society built on lies or the suppression of the truth cannot survive in the long run? It might surprise the audience to find out how Antonia survives and reacts when the movie fast-forwards to the opening of the wall on November 9, 1989. Is she "der Zukunft zugewandt?"

Calendar of Events

April 2023

- April 22 Spring Clean-Up, 10:00am
- April 23 AATG Award Ceremony, 10:00am
- April 30 Galli Theater presents Rotkäppchen (auf Deutsch), 3:00pm
- April 30 Galli Theater presents Rapunzel (in English), 4:30pm

May 2023

- May 7 Gentle Yoga, 11:00am
- May 7 Library Treasure Tour: "The Silence of the Archives: A Look at the German Society records from the 1930s-1950s", 2:00pm
- May 11 World Affairs Table: Germany, 6:00pm
- May 13 Buchclub: *Amok* by Stefan Zweig, 1:30pm
- May 13 Eurovision Viewing Party, 2:30pm
- May 19 Zoom Lecture by Birte Pflieger: The Central Role of the Women's Auxiliary in the GSP during the Twentieth Century, 12:30pm
- May 19 Friday Film Fest: *Schachnovelle*, 6:30pm
- May 20 Wandern at the Willows, 11:00am

June 2023

- June 4 Gentle Yoga, 11:00am
- June 4 Annual Members Meeting and Elections of the Board of Directors, 3:00pm
- June 10 Buchclub, 1:30pm
- June 17 Wandern at the Willows, 11:00am

