

ÜBER DIE JAHRE (OVER THE YEARS)

A Film by Nikolaus Geyrhalter

“There Are Seven Bridges to be Crossed...”

Nikolaus Geyrhalter and Wolfgang Widerhofer—An Interview by Claus Philipp

Claus Philipp: You were working on this project for 10 years – what gave you the confidence that the protagonists would stay involved to the end?

Nikolaus Geyrhalter: Originally, we weren't talking about 10 years. We always assumed that we would film for three or four years because it was important to me to show the process of how, over a certain period of time, people lose work and then look for new work. The more time passes, the more will happen in that time, for sure. But then, at some point, a momentum developed and time didn't play a role anymore. Also, in certain phases, we didn't have such a close involvement with the protagonists. Time and again, it was quite difficult to find some of them and to persuade them to let themselves be filmed again. And once it became clear that this was going to be a real long-term project, once we had passed the three year mark, we made an effort, of course, to extend it as long as possible. That it is now finished, after 10 years, is due to a lot of things: The factory will indeed find a new owner now; we finally had to settle up with our sponsors for the movie. And ten years was just a beautiful moment to close up this vessel.

Claus Philipp: Talking about the design of this vessel: Wolfgang Widerhofer, at what point did you start to edit the film?

Wolfgang Widerhofer: We actually had the first material in the editing room quite early, just to see, “What can we do with this?” But in between, we were working on other films as well, such as “Unser täglich Brot,” “7915 KM,” “Abendland” ... The editing of what the film has now become began in earnest in January of 2014. Over the course of twelve months, I grappled with the material and then, last year, we filmed the last chapter of the movie, and we asked ourselves, what do we want to address one more time and with whom?

Claus Philipp: How did your questions change over the course of these 10 years?

Nikolaus Geyrhalter: We didn't really have any questions as such. From the moment the factory—which we were still able to describe in detail—had ceased to exist, it very soon became clear that the movie was ultimately going to follow whatever stories life had to tell. Just like a tree that you planted where you don't know which direction the branches are going to take—that's how this movie developed. While we were filming, I took care to intervene as little as possible, to simply wait and see what was going to happen in the individual biographies. Ten years in the lives of seven protagonists, that adds up to seventy years of life—an entire lifespan! Obviously, a lot goes on in that time. To pour all that into a movie, to find the images that will do it justice, that's what I saw as my main task. The fact is that this film was written primarily by the lives of its protagonists.

Wolfgang Widerhofer: We were in a position where we had to react to the lives of our protagonists. And I think it is crucial that this ultimately had an impact on the type of movie it became. In the beginning, there was a tremendous amount of material from the factory, and one can see that this material features a much greater amount of security; everything is very stable. There is a compact space, an enclosed building; all the people are on site. Thus, in the beginning, the camera has a more sovereign position. But then, there is this turning point—the factory is closed down, and suddenly, everything starts to move. Suddenly, there is a handheld camera. A playful dynamic emerges in the film. A form that is more open and spreads into all directions—like streams that flow together and divide again. With all the elements of chance.

Claus Philipp: On the whole, the protagonists of the movie are not very eloquent, if not to say, uncommunicative. For example, when right at the beginning one of your first questions, "describe a day in your life," elicits a non-description: It's amusing and frustrating at the same time.

Nikolaus Geyrhalter: I thought it was beautiful that the selection of the protagonists was virtually left to chance. It's just that they were still there at the time when we started to film at the factory. Had we casted them from a large number of people, that would've led to a lot of questions, such as: Why did you choose them? What is it supposed to represent? To me, it's wonderful to accept it as it is and to give people a space that they wouldn't otherwise have.

Wolfgang Widerhofer: Also, not answering is often an expression of one's character or even of resistance against a question. When I edited the movie, it was interesting for me to see how, as the filmmaker, Niki himself emerges as a person that drives the movie. In that sense, the film is also a portrait of what it is like to make a movie. Not getting an answer sometimes, or even having to stop an interview—I think it's fascinating to show these often uneasy moments.

Claus Philipp: How can we imagine the creative dialogue between the two of you?

Nikolaus Geyrhalter: In our work, many individual tasks have become so established between the two of us over the years that a lot of the work seems to happen by itself. For me, Wolfgang is something of a corrective. When you film, you see different things than you do when you edit. And it's a big advantage that Wolfgang is never there on set. That way, in the editing room, he only reads what is actually there, in the material, so to speak.

Wolfgang Widerhofer: Niki once described it like this: Field work and back office. And that's how I see it too—like work that is done on the inside, to the interior of the film. Niki doesn't look at the entirety of what he has filmed—I do that. And from this material, I start to draw something like the substance of what this movie can tell us about life. What's inside all of this? How does the story tell itself best in this open form? What is the innate, essential foundation of this film?

This time, it's very important for the film that Niki is so present in it with his questions. That you can see how the people react to the film team. That it's a situation that the protagonists help to shape, and not one that's imposed on them. Rather, they can free themselves from these situations if they choose to. The film shows these moments of interaction over and over.

Claus Philipp: How come the movie in its final form seems so compact, in spite of the long period of filming?

Nikolaus Geyrhalter: I was surprised by that as well. It's probably due to my style of filmmaking, which I'm very committed to. Where I'm also not very flexible, I would say. Certain principles about how I want to depict places and also, most notably, people and encounters—I have held those for more than just these past ten years. I guess that's why it seems so continuous now, and I myself am a little surprised about that, too. I didn't create a visual language for this film in particular; I just wanted to apply my standards, which I've always held, to this movie as well.

Wolfgang Widerhofer: At the end of the day, what was important was to give the movie a positive, powerful momentum. You watch the film, you experience change and impermanence, sometimes even tragedy, but—and that's the big but—all the protagonists eventually find their own personal way to deal with all these changes and this special situation that they find themselves in. When I was editing, I often heard this old German hit, "Über sieben Brücken musst du gehen" ("There Are Seven Bridges to be Crossed"), in a version by the band Karat, and it features these lyrics: "There are seven bridges to be crossed, seven dark years to survive. Seven times you'll be the ashes, but then, for once, you'll be the light. . . ." It was like an inner guideline to get out of all these crises, even in the editing process, but at the same time, to keep confronting the setbacks that you have in life and to keep that door open.

Claus Philipp: What do you associate with the term "course of life"?

Nikolaus Geyrhalter: We all course through life, we can't change that. You go to the unemployment office, or you don't go to the unemployment office: Ten years will pass, no matter if you are the one who shapes them or if you let them be shaped from the outside. In the end, you are ten years older. We are, too. As I am growing older myself, I sometimes think: One becomes more forgiving towards life, one's own life and also towards the lives of others and towards fate. Ten years ago, had I known the amount of tragedy that was going to occur, in part, in this film, it might have scared me. In the meantime, I am more equanimous because I know that you have to take it all, anyway. Especially towards the end, this serenity has probably had an impact on the filming.

Wolfgang Widerhofer: Yes, a kind of anti-dramatization. Trusting the calm and the normal. Time, indeed, has a special meaning for virtually all Geyrhalter films—also in terms of an aspect that I am more and more aware of as I work on them. All Geyrhalter films deal with the question: How is the time after something? How is the time after the catastrophe? How is the time after the factory was closed down? What comes after? It seems that taking this long view is necessary to expose the many layers that arise in this “afterwards.” How do people cope with change? That's a basic theme that runs through the entire work with Niki.

Nikolaus Geyrhalter: It's funny—in my own life I'm usually very forward looking. But it's probably true. When we filmed “Das Jahr nach Dayton” (“The Year After Dayton”) in Bosnia, or “Pripyat,” around Chernobyl—my interest usually grows stronger at that moment when a topic has been dropped from the daily news, when it is forgotten. Apparently, I like to wander in forgotten places.