

Beyond the Wall: Dir. Christian Schwochow on His Intriguing Historical Drama 'West'

By [Carlos Aguilar](#) | SydneysBuzz November 18, 2014 at 9:00AM

In "West," Nelly (Jördis Triebel), a strong-willed mother, and her son Alexej (Tristan Göbel) leave the East and arrive in the West to become refugees



Dir. Christian Schwochow

Announcing the end of the Cold War in Europe and representing the long-awaited reunification of Germany, the fall of the Berlin Wall became a moment in history engraved on the world's memory as a symbol of regained freedom and the end of oppression. But while the physical division no longer exists, the fears and unaddressed violations of privacy continue to be a delicate subject 25 years after. Both sides had their own assumptions about the other. For those living on the Stasi-controlled state, the West was perceived a mythical land of prosperity and life out of the shadows. Evidently, for those in the capitalist side, the East was a gloomy house of horrors in which everything you did or said could be used against. But as with most situations, things weren't as clear cut as popular belief made out to be.

As someone who lived on both sides of the wall, German filmmaker [Christian Schwochow](#) can testify of these stereotypical assumptions. To him, Germany is still a country quietly divided by an invisible wall built on the notion that most people don't have any interest in revisiting this time period. At the same time, he is concerned about the unquestioning compliance and passiveness most citizens show. He believes we talk about the infiltration of secret organizations in people's lives as if this was a thing of the past, when it's more aggressively present today than ever before.

In his latest film "[West](#)," Nelly ([Jördis Triebel](#)), a strong-willed mother, and her son Alexej ([Tristan Göbel](#)) leave the East and arrive in the West to become refugees. Their new home offers more challenges than benefits. Nelly is constantly interrogated by an American intelligence agent John Bird ([Jacky Ido](#)) about her partner's whereabouts. In their eyes she is a criminal by default, and her every move is analyzed for any trace of subservient defiance. Meanwhile young Alexej is humiliated and mistreated based on the place he was born, even if that is simply on the other side of the infamous concrete border. Suddenly the land that promised endless wonders doesn't seem so different from the image of what the East is supposed to be like.

Schwochow talked to us from Ireland where he is working on his next film.

Carlos Aguilar : As a German filmmaker why was it important for you to make a film about this dark period in your country's history? Was it because you felt compelled by the source material? Was it the political implications of it?

Christian Schwochow: With her novel *Lagerfeuer* (Campfire), upon which the film is based, Julian Franck became one of the first young writers to have a different perspective on this time period. When I read it, what she described felt, on one hand, very strange because I didn't know about these places, these refugee centers. On the other hand, it felt very familiar because I grew up with parents who always discussed the state of the country we lived in. They were always reflecting on "Should we stay? Or should we leave?" My dad was 18-years-old when he went to prison because he tried to escape from East to West.

When I read the book for the first time I was in first year of film school, so it was totally out of reach to get rights for a novel like that. It took me almost 10 years to come back to this story. There are so many things that people, East Germans included, experience when they have hopes for a new life somewhere else. They take a big risk to leave their country and start in a new place. Most of them succeed in starting a new life, but many have a very hard time in the process.

I feel this is a subject that becomes more and more important nowadays because we have millions of refugees all over the world who come to Western Europe or the U.S. and in many cases they are just not welcome. This combined with the special atmosphere of the Cold War years in West Berlin struck me in a way. There are so many things in this story that relate to my personal family history that once I read this novel it just never left my heart.



Jördis Triebel in "West"

Aguilar: Tell me about the social mechanics in Germany today regarding the legacy of the East and the West. It's only been 25 years, relatively a short time, since Germany became a unified country once again. Is there still a sense of separation, of families divided by this border even if it's no longer there physically?

Christian Schwochow: I think there were quiet many families who were divided. However, there are also people who lived in either side of Germany, but who never had or have any relationship with the other side whether it was former East or former West Germany. There are people who are still not very curious about how people lived on the other side of the wall. Therefore, there are still so many stereotypes and misguided ideas about both sides. It's still very common for someone from the West to believe that a former Eastern person or a former Eastern family must have been unhappy living in East Germany. There is also the common assumption that a family or a person who left the East and moved to the West must have found happiness right away, which was far more difficult in most cases.

Aguilar: In your film, East and West don't seem to be so different. When Nelly and Alexej arrive in West Germany they immediately become suspects by the mere fact that they came from the East. They were running from the Stasi and came to find a similarly invasive system in the West. They find another group in control that wants to know everything and hide it away.

Christian Schwochow: It's a historical fact that the Stasi did horrible things and that they monitored a lot of people in East Germany, but I find it very interesting to think about the importance of the Western secret services back then and still working today. Since what happened with Edward Snowden we know that there is still so much going on. Secret Services are everywhere. They are part of our daily life. We just don't really care. We are not concerned at all.

I'm not sure how it is in America, but for what I can say about Germany, most people give their information willingly to anyone who asks for it such as companies like Google. We just don't question it anymore. When it we learned that our chancellor's phone was being monitored there was very little debate or outcry. I can't understand that. It's a bit of a coincidence that my film was released in Germany just a bit after Edward Snowden share all these details with the public. Still, people don't really discuss it for some reason.

Aguilar: In order to support the information on the novel with more historical accuracy, what kind of research did you do? Were you able to find reliable information on such a secretive time period for both sides of Germany, and most of Europe for that matter?

Christian Schwochow: There was quiet a lot of research from my part. I'm lucky to have parents who were very involved in political issues during the Cold War. I wrote this script together with my mother. In their work as journalists they always dealt with these issues related to the country's separation. We had many friends we could talk to about this, including Julian Franck, the author of the novel.

She spent many months in a refugee center in Berlin when she was a child. I also spoke with people who worked in these camps. I spoke with an American Secret Service agent. I talked to a former headmaster of the refugee center. This was the historical and political research I did, but I also tried to get a sense of how it felt to live in a place like this.

For weeks I kept going back to this big refugee center in Berlin for people from Syria, Iraq, and other countries. I also spent time in a center for homeless people to get a sense of the physical and psychological experience these people had to go through. There are refugee and homeless centers all over the world, and it hasn't really changed much.



Tristan Göbel and Jordis Triebel in "West"

Aguilar: Writing a script about a mother and a son with your mother must have been a rather interesting experience. How is your relationship with her as a creative partner? Did you infuse this work in particular with the personal experiences you share with her?

Christian Schwochow: We've written the scripts for my three features together, "West" included. We are already a team and it has always worked out pretty well because we share a similar sense of humor. We have a similar curiosity about the world. We have our own great way of discussing things and even fighting. There are no egos between us. Things that usually can get difficult while collaborating with another artist are not difficult between us. We left East Germany right after the fall of the wall.

My parents had submitted an application to East German government so we could leave to the West, the application was accepted on the morning of November 9th, the historic date. We left East Germany and we move to the West. Many of the things that Nelly and her son Alexej experience in the film come from what we experienced, mostly details. My mother was always a person who wouldn't just say what people wanted her to say. She would always question things, and she would always stand for her own opinions and ideas.

The situation Alexej experiences at the day care when he talks about his red neckerchief and what people thought it mean, it was exactly what I experienced at school. People didn't really know how to deal with us coming from the East. Our personal experiences were of crucial help when writing this script.

Aguilar: As you mention, it seems that as time goes by young people have less and less interest in looking back at the past. In those terms, was it challenging to work with Tristan, who plays Alexej, and explain to him the historical context in which the story takes place?

Christian Schwochow: As you can imagine for a 10- year-old boy - which is how old Tristan was when we shot the film - the whole historical background is very theoretical. Working with him on certain scenes I tried to find things that he can relate to from his personal life. He lives with his mother and four siblings. Therefore, he understand that sometimes a mother can't concentrate only on one child and she has difficulties spending time with each one as much as they need it. I tried to find ideas that he, as a 10-year-old living today, could connect with.

We taught him Russian for the part. He did pretty well. I had great adult actors like [Alexander Scheer](#), who plays Hans, took good care of Tristan. The same goes for [Jördis Triebel](#). She has two small children of her own, and it was very easy for her to create the mother and son relationship with him. We tried to act very professionally with the young actor. We didn't want to treat him too much like a child.

What also helped was that we had numerous extras in this film. We had many people, adults and children, from Eastern European countries that had gone through similar experiences. Many of them share with us what they had gone through, sometimes just a few weeks before we met them to make the film together. I tried to help him create his own truth with his character by showing him as much as possible about the historical details and searching for those things that he could relate to today.



Jacky Ido in "West"

Aguilar: The character that I found the most intriguing was Hans. He becomes a target for people at this center to express their resentment and anger towards the repression they experienced in the East. Why was it important for you to include an ambiguous character like in the story?

Christian Schwochow: He is very important for me because it's a fact that there are many people that left their lives behind and tried to start a new life in the West but didn't succeed for many reasons. They probably were too scared, too overwhelmed, they were shocked by what they found or by how they were treated, or they just developed certain fears. Hans is one of them. I needed a character like him in the film because these people never really spoke about their experience. Still now, people assume that those who lived in the East were unhappy and once they escaped everything turned into something wonderful and free. They believe in that cliché of the "Golden West."

The ones who didn't succeed couldn't tell success stories. Even today they don't talk about it because it's just too difficult for them to speak about plans that failed. You will hardly ever find this kind of people in the media doing interviews or mentioned in books. Hans is a voice for these people. It was also important that the man who everyone suspects of being a villain is in the end the person who carries hope for Nelly and Alexej. She decides to trust this man even though she probably will never find out what's the truth about him.

Something very unique about Germany these days is that once you are suspected or accused of having worked for the Stassi, it doesn't matter if you were 18-years-old, or a child, or an adult back then. Even if you deny it you won't get rid of this suspicion. It doesn't matter what you do, this stigma will stick with you. In some cases it's true because there are many people who collaborated with them, but there are many other cases in which someone suspected them without proof. These people will never get rid of this.

Aguilar: Nelly is a determined woman with a strong personality. Besides what's on the novel, did any qualities from your mother or other people in your life influence you while writing this character?

Christian Schwochow: I grew up with very strong women who would have their own strong opinions and who would speak their minds. My mother is like this. My grandmother was like this. They were women who took the risk not to fit in because they were strong characters. In East Germany it was very normal for a woman to go out and work even if she had children. A few weeks after giving birth women would return to their normal working life. We never had housewives in East Germany. Nelly is a very familiar person for me because I think I know quite many “Nellies.”

Looking at it from an outsider’s perspective one could say, “She is stubborn,” “She could have cooperated with them,” “She could just say what they want to hear from her,” but she is not like that. She is a woman with characteristics we usually attribute to a male protagonist. She defies this.

There is also the fact that she has a secret. I feel like we can believe everything she says in this film. I believe everything she says, but I know that for the audience she might be a character that you can’t really see through in the beginning. I hope that eventually people can feel her emotions, her trauma, and her fears. I just thought it was more interesting for her not to be nice or understandable right from the start.

Aguilar: 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall where do things stand?

Christian Schwochow: In Germany we have started to make many films about our own history. However, we tend to make the stories as simple as possible in order to find very simple truths. I made this film to provide another perspective and to show people something they have probably never heard about.

On the other hand, the secret services still play such a prominent role on our daily life and we seem not to care anymore. This has nothing to do with East and West. It’s so easy to look back and say, “There were two different countries, one was the free country and in the other people weren’t free,” but it was so much more complicated. Looking back at this time I’ve realized why it’s still so difficult for German people to communicate with each other.

At the same time I wanted to make a film about what it means to be a refugee today. I believe this will become an increasingly bigger issue for the Western World. We are still desperately trying to find answers for this problem.