

Among Men

Gay in East Germany



„Constructing brigade of sport students“, Jürgen Wittdorf 1964

a film by Ringo Rösener and Markus Stein

JÜRGEN WITTDORF CHRISTIAN SCHULZ HELWIN LEUSCHNER EDUARD STAPEL FRANK SCHÄFER JOHN ZINNER JÜRGEN LEMKE
directors MARKUS STEIN, RINGO RÖSENER script RINGO RÖSENER cinematography BERNADETTE PAASSEN sound AKA F. UMME, THOMAS FUNK editing MARTIN MENZEL, MARKUS STEIN
assistant editor CHRISTOPH STURM music recording MORITZ DENIS vocals BARBARA KIND sound design CHRISTIAN EICHLER sound mixer HANS KÖLLING colour grading TOBIAS WIEDMER
production management PETER EFFENBERG production assistant GERALDINE PRANGE film accountance SVEN SCHMIDT, ANNE STEPHAN producer OLAF JACOBS coproducer BJÖRN KOLL
commissioning editor MDR KATJA WILDERMUTH a coproduction of HOFERICHTER & JACOBS GMBH with MDR FERNSEHEN and SALZGEBER & CO. MEDIEN GMBH
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Among Men Gay in East Germany

a film by Ringo Rösener und Markus Stein

with Jürgen Wittdorf, Christian Schulz, Helwin Leuschner, Eduard Stapel, Frank Schäfer,
John Zinner, Jürgen Lemke

Germany 2012, 91 minutes, German with english subtitles, Colour

Synopsis

Homosexuality was not an issue in the Socialist system. It was considered a "relic of decadent bourgeois morality", and it was thought that it would automatically take care of itself. Section 175, the anti-homosexual provision of the German Criminal Code, which had been tightened by the Nazis during the Second World War, was retained in West Germany. In the East, it was returned to its pre-Nazi version. Here one could initially live more freely – just not talk about it. In this film, six men tell their story about how gay men lived and loved in the GDR – and by no means are they always in agreement. AMONG MEN tells the story of individuality in a uniform system.

Press Release

For the first time, a film explores the question of how gay men lived in the GDR. The diverse group of men includes the artist Jürgen Wittdorf, the hairdresser Frank Schäfer, the civil rights activist Eddy Stapel, and John Zinner, who experienced his coming-out in a small village in the Thuringian Forest. The interviewer Ringo Rösener, born in the early 1980s in East Germany, wants to know whether it would have been possible for him to have lived in the East as an adult gay man. After all, this is a question he can't ask his parents or grandparents.

im Verleih der **Edition Salzgeber**

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Crew

Directors Markus Stein, Ringo Rösener
Script Ringo Rösener
Cinematography Bernadette Paassen
Sound Aka F. Umme, Thomas Funk
Editing Martin Menzel, Markus Stein
Assistant editor Christoph Sturm
Music recording Moritz Denis
Vocals Barbara Kind
Sound design Christian Eichler
Sound mixer Hans Kölling
Colour grading Tobias Wiedmer
Production management Peter Effenberg
Production assistant Geraldine Prange
Film accountance Sven Schmidt, Anne Stephan
Producer Olaf Jacobs
Coproducer Björn Koll
Comissioning editor MDR Katja Wildermuth

Locations: Leipzig, Lauscha (Thüringen), Bismark
(Altmark), Berlin

Shooting time: 2011

Feature film excerpts from: *Coming Out* by Heiner Carow;
Westler by Wieland Speck

Documentary excerpts from: *Winter Adé* by Helke Miseselwitz; Deutsches Rundfunk Archiv; film material of the Gay Initiative Berlin, now Sonntags Club. e.V.; ZDF

Photos: Matthias Kittlitz and Privatarchive

A Coproduction of Hoferichter & Jacobs GmbH with MDR Television and Salzgeber & Co. Medien GmbH

funded by MDM – Mitteldeutsche Medienförderung, Deutscher Filmförderfond, Kulturstiftung des Freistaats Sachsen, Kulturelle Filmförderung Mecklenburg-Vorpommern.

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More than two decades ago, a country in Europe existed that marked the border to a different political and economic system, yet was the very heart of the continent. This country, called the German Democratic Republic, made Socialism a reality and was home to 17 million people. Born in the deep eastern provinces, Ringo Rösener merely witnessed the collapse of East Germany as a nation. Ringing in the new millennium, he leaves his home town of Anklam to live out his homosexuality – something he had never dared to do back home. Would an openly gay life even have been possible in the real Socialist system?

Ringo Rösener meets six gay men who lived in the GDR. Some of them speak openly about their sexuality for the first time in their lives. Little by little, they open up, begin to share their own personal stories and talk about their individuality in a supposedly uniform state.





For the graphic designer and illustrator **Jürgen Wittdorf** (1932), reflecting on the beginnings of the GDR, "daily life went on". Still an adolescent back then, he recalls having to repaint the Hitler Youth drums for the Free German Youth, also known as the FDJ. The topic of sexuality does not cross his mind at the time. It was best to remain silent about that. In the late 1940s, young Wittdorf begins drawing "practically anything and everything". Years later, in Leipzig in the 1950s, he dedicates himself to nude studies and discovers the male body. He is not yet aware that this has something to do with his sexuality. His first successes bring him into contact with men who are interested in his drawings. Wittdorf only then realizes that he is gay. A whole new world opens up to him – one that is still governed by Paragraph 175, and one full of looming danger at night on the streets of Leipzig.

Christian Schulz (1934) develops an early passion for sports. Although he realizes he is "different", for Christian, homosexuality is, as for many others, unspeakable and completely unimaginable. Later, during his training as a teacher of sports and Latin, he actively suppresses his homosexuality. He enters into treatment and meets a doctor who promises to heal him. Hopeless. Finally, Christian goes cruising in Leipzig in search of the man with whom he hopes to start a new life.

Helwin Leuschner (1934), the Chilean-born son of German immigrants, spends most of his life in South America – up until 1972. Here he has his first sexual experiences, goes through life-threatening discrimination and is forced to make his sexual life a mystery – that is, until he comes to the GDR. "What they go around saying, that homosexuality was prosecuted in the GDR, that's not true." For Helwin, the GDR

is a gay paradise. He describes the country as one with unusual liberties, which became his home, partly because this is where he finally finds true love.

Eduard Stapel's (1953) story could not be any different. Not only does he experience the GDR as a dictatorship that openly and ruthlessly persecutes opposition groups; but also, for gay men, as a state that offers no real quality of life. The state remains quiet, as long as gay men go cruising in secret. Since they do not run any publicly recognized bars, do not have their own publications and are not present in the media or press, Eddy begins to fight for the equal rights of homosexuals in the East. He studies theology, using the only place that gays have access to without needing the approval of the state: the church. Here he can commit himself to their cause. As an employee of the Protestant Church working for gay social issues, Stapel establishes a GDR-wide network of homosexual associations. Here he falls under the suspicion of the Stasi (secret service), which views homosexuals as an opposition group and declares them enemies of the state. When Eddy falls ill with cancer, he not only fights for his life, but, at the same time, for the movement he helped to start.

Frank Schäfer (1959) had "perhaps less fear than others in the GDR." As the son of the famous GDR comedian, Gerd E. Schaefer, he learns, early on, how to play along with the state and take setbacks with a sense of humour, rather than let them distract him from his way of life. The Berliner becomes one of the most famous hairdressers of the GDR, inventing the punk hairstyle of Socialism and doing everything to qualify as cool. This includes being arrested, because "Getting arrested meant I was cool." Schaefer carves out some freedom

for himself and begins a long-term relationship with a man – that is, until the GDR becomes too small for him.

John Zinner (1968) grew up in the Thuringian Forest. Like every other gay man in the province, Zinner fears for himself and his family – and that he will become the talk of the town. To him, the nearby border is not an opportunity for him to escape the country, but rather for him to escape ostracism in a provincial town. One winter night, he sets out to leave the GDR; he travels the distance to the border on skis. With the border fence already in sight, he decides to turn back, because he fears he will not be able to see his true love again. His school friend suspects nothing – he is heterosexual. John dares to come out and realizes: he is not alone.

Ringo Rösener (1983) was born in a country that bade him farewell before he could even perceive it consciously. Deep in the eastern German province, he witnesses the collapse of his homeland as the emergence of Western cars and chocolate surprise eggs. He gets a Pioneer scarf just in time, but never gets to wear it again. Nevertheless, he grows up as an East German. Strongly influenced by the impression that homosexuality, then and now, is treated as a problem in the Eastern lowlands, he eventually asks himself the question: How could gay men have actually lived in the GDR? But who can he ask? Not his parents and grandparents. In his search, he encounters these six gay men, who tell him their own personal stories.



Markus Stein about **AMONG MEN**

"Gay in East Germany". The topic promised something unheard of, a different take on Socialism. Some big surprises already came up in Ringo's research: Compared with the West, gay men were able to live more freely in the Socialist state after the war. Our initial expectations were refuted differently than anticipated; rather than a group of poor and oppressed people, we met a group of individuals, who dealt with being a minority in quite different ways. Our protagonists' reports were personal, intimate and more contradictory than earlier supposed.

It quickly became clear that we would not be providing an account of the GDR in which gay men and their lives are presented as a bonus. We would only be able to depict the GDR in so far as it was part of the protagonists' concerns. Against ideology and against the current account of the traditional ideology of the GDR, we were able to approach the topic through the protagonists. This was the only way we could get a sense of what they experienced and the time they lived in.

To make a film based on the individual and on the very different lifeworlds of these six men was a challenge that enabled us to see how often the portrayal of history becomes entrenched. In fact, history is always in a process of transformation, but it can only first be experienced when we get close to the people that were there.

Biographies

RINGO RÖSENER (Writer & Director)

Ringo Rösener was born in Anklam in 1983. He studied Cultural Studies, Theatre Studies and Business Administration at the Universities of Leipzig and Bologna. Since 2009, he has been working full-time in marketing and business development at Hoferichter Jacobs & Film- und Fernsehproduktion and is in charge of releasing various documentaries. He wrote the script for *AMONG MEN – GAY IN EAST GERMANY*. It is his first film.



Ringo Rösener



Markus Stein

MARKUS STEIN (Director & Editor)

Markus Stein was born in Mannheim in 1965. After working as a camera and director's assistant and studying in Berlin, he completed his film directing studies in Lodz (Poland) in 1998. In the following years, he worked as a director, cinematographer and writer, residing in Berlin. He also currently works as an editor and story editor.

FILMOGRAPHY

- 2012** *AMONG MEN – GAY IN EAST GERMANY* (director and editor; documentary, HDV, 91 min., co-directed with Ringo Rösener, production: Hoferichter & Jacobs GmbH, in co-production with MDR and Salzgeber & Co. Medien GmbH)
- 2011** *BEERLAND* (dramaturgy, editing, documentary, HDV, 86 min., production: Hoferichter & Jacobs GmbH in co-production with Telepool, BR, directed by Matt Sweetwood, distributor: Movienet)
- 2010** *SCHWESTER* (author, film, development of "script & pitch" – Torino Filmlab / Turin Film Festival)
- 2009** *ZINS* (author, film)
- 2008** *BALKAN TRAFFIC – ÜBERMORGEN NIRGENDWO* (director, feature film, 83 min., 35mm, co-director: Milan Puzic, production: Hoferichter & Jacobs / Lotus Film, Austria, release 2008)
- 2005** *RIEN NE VAS PLUS* (second camera, short film, directed by Katja Pratschke, premiere: Venice 2006)
- 2003–04** Various video installations, camera, editing, design, including Gdansk Theatre, Theatre Regensburg, Edinburgh International Theatre Festival, among others.
- 2002** *AMOR EN CONCRETO* (second camera, film, 90 min., DV - 35 mm, production: Zyga Film, Caracas & Cameo, Cologne, ZDF Kleines Fernsehspiel, festival: Cannes 2003)
- 2001** *IDENTITY KILLS!* (camera, feature film, 90 min., DV - 35 mm, production: Living Films Berlin, festivals: Berlinale 2003, Karlovy Vary, Moscow, Vienna, London)
- 2001** *FAUST – PROBENZEIT* (director, documentary, 90 min., DigiBeta, ZDF 2001)
- 2000** *DER MARATHON* (director, documentary, 45 min., DigiBeta, ZDF; 3Sat)
- 1998** *KOMIWOJAZER / THE BEGINNER* (director, feature film, 27 min., 35 mm, colour, ARTE: 1998, festivals: (selection) Festival du Court Métrage, Clermont Ferrand, International Short Film Festival of Drama, Greece, Adriaticocinema, International Short Film Festival Amsterdam)
- 1994–98** Several short films, studied at the Polish Film School in Lodz
- 1984–98** Director and assistant camera, among others for Peter Patzak, Otar Iosseliani, Wim Wenders, Peter Stein, Thomas Mauch, etc.