Locked Up Time
An Interview with Sibylle Schönemann

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Sibylle Schönemann was a filmmaker employed by the state-owned East German film production firm DEFA in Potsdam-Babelsberg. After DEFA had imposed severe restrictions on her and her husband's work (also a filmmaker at DEFA), they requested an exit visa in order to leave the GDR. Subsequently, they were arrested on charges of "harming the activity of the state through threat" and convicted to a year in prison. In the summer of 1985, after having served about half of their sentence, they were put on a bus together with other prisoners and expelled to West Germany.

Locked Up Time (1990) is an autobiographical documentary focusing on Schönemann's experience in prison and the people responsible for her conviction. Five years after her expulsion from East Germany, in 1990, after the wall had come down, Schönemann returned to East Germany with a film team to trace the history of her prosecution and imprisonment. The film consists primarily of interviews with the individuals involved in Schönemann's imprisonment including the prison wardress, the police interrogator, the judge, the lawyer who arranged for her release, the director of the film studio, and the lieutenant-colonel of the State Security in charge of DEFA. The final shot shows the walls of the East German State Security archive, and by the end of the film many questions still remain without answers. Only since January 1992 have victims of the State Security been allowed access to their files.

Locked Up Time, which won the Silver Dove at the Leipzig Film Festival in Germany as well as several other international awards, also received worldwide attention when it was shown at the 1991 New York Film Festival. It has been recently released for commercial distribution within the U.S. and is available from *Zeitgeist Films*.

Frölich: You were a filmmaker in the fiction film studio of the East German state-owned film production company, DEFA, where your film projects were rejected, which was the reason you then applied for an exit visa. Why were your projects rejected?

Schönemann: After graduating from film school I started working as a dramaturg. During this time, I wrote several scripts for children's films. The studio actually wanted to support me because I was a woman, and they needed women for the studio. There were very few female directors. But they didn't want my husband who was also a filmmaker in the studio, because he had the reputation of being a wrong-headed thinker with a very critical perspective. He wrote stories about outsiders, those who did not function in society and did not adapt so unconditionally as was desired. And always at the moment, when I said that I was going to work togther with my husband, the projects died.

Frölich: And were those projects then stopped before production?

Schönemann: Yes. One even in production, shortly before shooting.

Frölich: What kind of film was this?

Schönemann: It was a story about a family conflict. A boy who has always lived in an intact family, yet a little alienated from his parents, falls in love with a girl who lives in a crooked family. This girl is then confronted with the fact that her father has a relationship with another woman. It was all about this conflict in the family, about the questions "what is love?," "what is a relationship?" The topic was not that promblematic. Yet naturally you tried to drop in what kind of feeling you had for society, since you couldn't really make films that were critical of society. You always had to find an indirect way, and then it was only the characters that you could fill with conflicts. And the reason then for us to request the exit visa from the GDR was that after a certain number of my husband's projects were rejected, it was clear that he would never be able to realize a project no matter what he suggested. At that point I said, okay, then let's go someplace else.

Frölich: How was it then possible for you to continue your career as a filmmaker in the Federal Republic of Germany after your arrival there in 1985?

Schönemann: It was difficult. During the time when you are in prison, they try everything to destroy you. And it takes a long time until you finally get back on your feet. Even if you think you've gotten through the time without harm, once you are outside, you realize how great the harm is that you suffered. First of all, the personal things were difficult. We had nothing since we weren't allowed to take anything with us. Six weeks later our children arrived with one bag filled with toys. That was all. And so you were busy for quite some time in order to organize your normal life again. You need to learn everything anew, and you are quite confused

after such a time. I then pretty much organized a job for myself on my own. At the Hamburg Film Bureau [one the most important instituions for film subsidies for independent filmmakers in the Federal Republic of Germany] I developed a new area of film subsidies, which is called story- and project-development, and where I am still working today. I counsel the applicants who apply for grants.

Frölich: How did you get the idea to make *Locked Up Time*?

Schönemann: During those five years when I lived in West Germany without being able to go to the East and tell the people there what had happened, I felt pretty helpless. I always thought that one really ought to explain to them what is actually going on there, of which they know so little. When the wall came down, I received many phone calls from friends who had also been in prison and who asked me whether I too had these mixed feelings about the situation. On the one hand, you were passionately involved and could not grasp what was happening there. You were enthusiastic and had feelings of great joy. On the other hand, it was very depressing because all of a sudden it seemed so normal to come to the West. Before people had been killed at the border or put into prison because they wanted to cross the border. We felt that now what really occured would be forgotten very quickly as would the people who had been responsible for such things. Thus the feeling of obligation grew in me to make this film because the others who had the same experience didn't have the skill.

Frölich: Your film, *Locked UP Time*, was made in collaboration with DEFA, the same film production company that years ago had made your work impossible.

Schönemann: You can't quite put it this way, since I didn't work for that particular studio. There were different ones: one studio for narrative films, three documentary film studios, one animation film studio, and also one for television. But they had little to do with one another. They only had the same structure and were subjected to the same rules. That is, the same thing that happened to us in the studio for narrative films also could have happened in the documentary film studio. I think the documentary film studio wanted to support my project to make up for something. From them I received the first money for the film. Later, it was also really important for the production that they were interested in the project, so that I didn't ask for permission to shoot as a private person or as a West German; DEFA studio did, since we filmed everything in the GDR.

Frölich: How were you able to face those people who took part in your imprisonment with such composure?

Schönemann: I didn't want to attack or judge them, but rather give them a chance and be fair to them and not do the same thing to them as they did to me. I hoped to find the human beings behind their functions and thought only if I faced them with the willingness to understand would I be able to find some of this. I did not expect that all of them would only justify themselves and would be as defensive as they were. The real information they didn't give me.

Frölich: And how did you get that?

Schönemann: I didn't get it all then, only later when I was able to see my Stasi [State Security] file. You couldn't see the files then, but this was the only possibility for me to find out about things since almost no one was willing to say something about the connections in the backround. The Stasi lieutenant colonel in the film states it most clearly when he says: "You can put me on burning coals, but I will not say anything about the former collaborators." We always suspected that the reason to lock us up was not the charge on which they sentenced us, but that there were other reasons behind it. But I couldn't prove this to anybody at the time, whereas now I could. The course of events was as follows; everything was staged. After we had requested the exit visa, they decided to lock us up as a warning to other filmmakers of our generation, many of whom were already considering leaving for the West since they realized the limits imposed on their work. We were the first at DEFA who requested this exit visa. And as a director at the DEFA studio you were in a very exposed position. If we had been able to leave quickly, and others had followed us, this really would have been a political issue. Therefore they said "better to nip the thing in the bud and lock them up, then the others will get scared and stop trying." And this worked. Then they instructed five informers to search for some pretext in order to lock us up. Another aspect played a role: the foreign exchange--since they sold us to West Germany. Per person, they got about 95,625 marks and 37 pfennigs [approx. $60,000]. And when they needed money, they increasingly locked up people, even those who had only requested an exit visa.

Frölich: In the film there is a conversation with a former prisonmate. What was your reason to film this conversation in the prison cell?

Schönemann: It was necessary to talk about the past and present. In order to make these events in the past comprehensible, I needed to make them somehow graspable. And the Stasi jail was completely deserted. No one was there anymore I could have interviewed.

I thought when you sit in that cell again, then also the memory of what you felt will come back, and I found it important to make a film in which you not only give information about what had happened but in which you can also communicate emotion. When you start thinking about how you would have felt in this situation, then you evaluate entirely differently and a number such as 35,000 political prisoners gets a different dimension as opposed to if something is just described. Actually, I do not describe at all in the film. I don't talk about the very bad things that happened. This communicates itself through the image or is told indirectly. And this conversation allowed me also to show that this didn't just happen to me but also to others. The film had a much more universal intent, and attempted to be about much more than my individual fate.

Frölich: You said that this Stasi prison in Potsdam for people awaiting trial was empty at the time you filmed. Also in the Thuringa prison, you get the impression that it is deserted.

Schönemann: I didn't expect this. On the day we filmed, the last inmate--the only one of the regular prisoners who was still there--was removed to another jail. Most of them had been political prisoners, and all of them had been granted amnesty. By the spring of 1990, all of them had been released. It would have been really absurd to keep the people who were in prison locked up because they had requested an exit visa--and for some time this was the case--while the police interrogators and judges, as well as people who worked in the prison, were crossing the border.

Frölich: Were you allowed to film in the prisons without any restrictions?

Schönemann: Yes. Perhaps it would have been more difficult had there still been inmates. Only I thought that there still were some and that I could show those moments where human dignity is violated, which no journalist who comes there as a stranger and simply doesn't know the daily routines and details is able to see. So all the time I had to rethink my ideas because I never knew what to expect. To film in prison was the least problematic. To get permission to film in court was the most difficult. And there I didn't expect it at all. I assumed that all of us, court officials as well, would want to work through the past and talk about what had happened. But this was the greatest mistake I made, since the old judges were still there.

Frölich: Were there vital things that you would have liked to film, but couldn't?

Schönemann: Yes. I would have liked to have seen my Stasi file then to find out who the unofficial collaborators for the Stasi were, that is, who of our friends were the informers, and I also would have liked to have talked with them.

Frölich: What responses did your film trigger, particularly in the former GDR?

Schönemann: The film's first screening was in Leipzig. I was afraid until the very end that they would steal the film and destroy it to prevent this screening. To show the film first in Leipzig was emotionally very moving for me because it was there where all the political conflicts my husband and I experienced with the regime had begun when we didn't sign a pamphlet supporting the expulsion of Wolf Biermann in 1976.[1] It was also important to me to show colleagues who hadn't protested then or had even worked against us that something like this happened. Many of them knew us and knew that we hadn't done anything. The response of the audience was really fantastic. The theater, a huge theater with more than a thousand seats, was sold out, and many people had to sit on the floor. After the screening, there was strong applause, and people came up to me who had similar experiences and told me that it was very important to them that such a film existed because it would allow more people to understand what had happened and what it actually means to be in such a prison. In the East, the film was shown very little because the entire organization had collapsed. The movie theaters had been bought by large American distributors, and the people in the East didn't quite know how they could organize the films they were interested in now. In the West, the film received a lot of media attention and the eight copies that exist were constantly circulating somewhere.

Frölich: The special feature of your film is that it is a very personal experience you are recording. How do you explain the very broad international interest in your film?

Schönemann: I think that this film is not just about Germany, but rather about the functioning of social structures. It is about responsibility. If everybody had been responsible the whole thing wouldn't have worked. And this trust in authority or the lack of

courage to stand up for one's beliefs and say "no"--you find this in nearly all countries. On the one hand, people around the world are interested in knowing what it was really like in Germany; on the other hand, they feel that the film is directed to themselves and ask, "how do I function and how do things actually work in our country?" Another reason is that the experience of watching the film is very intense because the film is very emotional, which is not often the case with documentary films, which tend to be more general rather than personal.

Frölich: *Locked Up Time* has been compared to Marcel Ophüls's documentary film *Hotel Terminus*, which is about the responsibility of those who took part in the Holocaust. What do you think about such a comparison?

Schönemann: I have been asked frequently if Ophüls's method was a model for me. I didn't have a model for the film. When I started I didn't know what kind of film it would be in the end since I didn't know what I would find and how I would react when confronted with these people, and since I was personally very involved and often didn't want to see the people. To simultaneously have a distance and to decide which step to take next as the filmmaker was often very difficult. There are, of course, parallels to the Nazi period. Simply how it worked: this "not knowing anything" and "just acting according to the law." You simply can't help thinking about these parallels, and in almost every discussion, no matter where in the world I am, someone asks this question. Yet the Holocaust cannot be compared to anything. However, the characters of the people who are capable of doing something like this are similar, of course. But I think that they do not only exist in Germany. A prison wardress in the United States or in West Germany, in Turkey, China or wherever, does not differ much from the woman with whom I spoke. There are certainly prisons--we all know this--where things are considerably more terrible than was the case in the GDR. I don't find a conclusive answer here. I do not feel particularly comfortable with this comparison, but I also can't say that there aren't any parallels.

Frölich: What would you like the viewer to get out of your film?

Schönemann: Apart from the understanding of the country, the people, and the period, the most important thing I would wish is that the people think about their functioning as a particle within a society, and that the film perhaps will help them to have the courage to say "no." I would wish that they convey to their own children that it is better not to function, even if it leads to consequences, since no state likes people who do not function. And, finally, that there will be more of such people so that these things will have increasingly less chance to happen.

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[1] In 1976, Wolf Biermann, well known for his protest songs in both German states, was expelled from East Germany. This was a major turning point in East Germany's cultural politics toward an increasingly restrictive climate. Several intellectuals and artists who protested Biermann's expulsion suffered discrimination, which led many to request exit visas from East Germany in subsequent years.