

Exploring German Archives

An Exciting and Dramatic Relationship: Joris Ivens and Germany

Throughout most of the 20th century Joris Ivens travelled across different countries and forms of society, staying on wherever he believed he could live and fulfil his revolutionary visions, and work on his cinematic oeuvre. Part of his life long journey involved meetings with the German avant-garde movement, some work in West Germany (FDR) and a longer, notable stay in East Germany (GDR) – where he was relegated from being a protagonist of socialist Utopia to a mere court-jester.

The project “Joris Ivens and Germany,” promoted by the DEFA foundation, wants to describe this lifelong and ever changing relationship with Germany and the GDR. The emphasis of this research will be on Ivens’ socio-cultural history, but will also look at the history of his films and the recent renewal of his filmography. Furthermore, it will include a review of how his films were received in Germany.

The Research Field

The objective of the research project was clearly outlined. However it left unanswered what steps ought to be taken first - where and how to begin? It seemed logical to organise the research along basic biographical information, in chronological order. From the start, Ivens’ family roots are connected to Germany. His grandfather emigrated in 1867 from Efferen (near Cologne) to Nijmegen, after he had finished his Study of Photography at the technical college (later Polytechnic) in Berlin-Charlottenburg. A generation later, his son Kees did the same course. Therefore Ivens’ was following the family tradition when he enrolled in photography and photochemistry classes at the same college from 1921-1923. Here, he made his first contacts with the German avant-garde and was confronted with the ideals of The Labour Movement. In 1924, Ivens finished some longer periods of practical training in German companies, at Ernemann-Werken in Dresden and at Carl Zeiss in Jena.

After returning to the family owned company in Holland, he worked more intensively on his film projects and made his first films (e.g. RAIN, THE BRIDGE) which brought him recognition and his first invitation to the Soviet Union, and during the 1930s he stayed in the USSR on several occasions. While there he completed a number of films in co-operation with German artists (KOMSO-MOL, SAARABSTIMMUNG UND SOWJETUNION/ SAAR REFERENDUM AND SOVIET UNION) and the UFA-studios (CREOSOOT). In the beginning, he worked as a creative assistant on a German-Soviet production (BORZY/KÄMPFER THE FIGHTER).

The 1950s was the next important period for the research project. From 1951, Ivens rose to become the leading figure at the documentary film studio of DEFA (the German limited liability film company), producing his own work, co-directing other pictures and being the overall creative director. Films from this period include FREUNDSCHAFT SIEGT / FRIENDSHIP TRIUMPHS, FRIEDENSAHRT



During the 11th Documentary festival in Leipzig Ivens was honoured, but afterwards appointed *persona non grata* by the GDR-government, 1968. © Collection Marion Michelle / EFJI.

WARSCHAU-BERLIN-PRAG, LIED DER STRÖME / SONG OF THE RIVERS, MEIN KIND / MY CHILD, DIE WINDROSE / THE WINDROSE and DIE ABENTEUER DES TILL EULENSPIEGEL / THE ADVENTURES OF TILL EULENSPIEGEL. Apart from his work at the DEFA Studios Babelsberg, he was also encouraging the development of a film culture for documentaries in the GDR. He was involved in the founding and expansion of the documentary film festival in Leipzig. He was an honourable member of the society of filmmakers in the GDR and a corresponding member of the East German Art Academy.

The major turning point in Ivens’ relationship with East Germany came in 1968 when he was openly sympathising with Mao’s Cultural Revolution protesting against the invasion by the Soviet Red Army. Despite a ban, he and Marceline Loidan were showing films about the May protests in Paris at the Leipzig Film Festival. With this scandal, the FDR started Ivens’ elimination from the Festival history books. The government distanced itself from the once favoured international documentary filmmaker and declared him *persona non grata*. For a long time they did not offer any official explanation for the removal of this most distinguished founder of the Leipzig Festival from GDR film culture.

Several attempts by the festival management to lift the ban were refused by the Department of Culture for the Central Committee of the United Socialist Party of

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East Germany. It was only in the 1980s that they tried to re-establish links with the filmmaker. Over two days in 1983, The Academy of Arts and the state run Film Library of the GDR showed: “Joris Ivens – Films from Six Decades.” However, this attempted reunion involved new restrictions: the screening of the film THE PHARMACY: SHANGHAI from the China cycle was cancelled at the last minute because of an objection made by the Foreign Office and the subsequent refusal of approval by the Film Head Office. The friendship between Ivens and the socialist part of Germany was irrevocably ruptured. Ivens would never again walk on East German soil.

Ivens’ relationship with West Germany was mainly limited to visits to film festivals in Berlin and several other festivals in Mannheim, Oberhausen, Munich and Augsburg, although they were important to the younger generations of the 1960s and 1970s. One of the highlights was a series of organised meetings in 1974, where Ivens talked to students, teachers and guests of the German Film and Television Academy in Berlin. In addition, various retrospectives, forums, expositions were held over the years.

The Procedure

The aforementioned biographical data dealing with the particular periods of his life were based on numerous sources of secondary literature all carefully determined and investigated. These specific periods formed the basis for planning and structuring the research. There are very few significant testimonies from Ivens’ first stay in Germany. There are some official documents in the archive in Nijmegen, but they offer little information on the details of his trip to Germany. Just as incomplete are the files about Ivens’ first exchanges with the avant-garde movement and his training period in Dresden and Jena. However, there is a possibility that some material connected to this period might be found in the stock of documents at the BiFi (Paris Film Library), so a visit is being planned.

The files covering his journeys to the USSR are also limited, although some documents concerning this period are available at the Berlin Film Museum and in the archives for the Art Academy. Information on the missing film SAARABSTIMMUNG UND SOWJETUNION / SAAR REFERENDUM and SOVIET UNION could not be found despite the dedicated support of the literary archives of Saar-Lux-Lor-Alsace. It is possible that new clues will be found in the historical archives in Moscow, but despite several requests to them, no contacts have been established yet.

The years when Ivens was working for DEFA provided the most productive findings. The reason for the extensive stock of files is the fact research into DEFA produc-