

**WEST**  
(Westen)  
a film by  
**Christian Schwochow**



**MONTREAL WORLD FILM FESTIVAL**  
**Best Actress Award for Jördis Triebel, FIPRESCI-Prize**  
**GERMAN FILM PRIZE Best Actress, Jördis Triebel**

Germany 2013 / 102 mins / German, English, Russian, Polish with English subtitles /  
Cert tbc

**Opens June 12th 2015**

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## SYNOPSIS

East Germany, late 70's.

When Vasily leaves, all he leaves behind is a white jumper he wraps around his son's shoulders when he is cold. Is to be just another short separation? Nelly's boyfriend Vasily Batalov is a Russian physicist and attends many conferences. This time, however, he will not return.

Three years later a car stops in front of the house in East Berlin, where Nelly and Alexei live. Nelly, 30 years old, obviously very nervous with her exit visa in her bag, is leaving her home, the GDR. She has pretended to get married to a man from the West while in truth she wants to start a new life together with her son and leave everything behind. The grief, the suffocation, the memories and the probing questions by the Stasi.

But her country doesn't make it easy for her to leave. Her hands tremble when the border guard takes her son into the back room. Shortly afterwards, Nelly has to follow another border guard into a flat-roofed building. She has to answer questions, undress, let them examine her – for the hundredth time.

But they finally cross the border into West Berlin.

The Emergency Refugee Centre is Nelly's sole shelter in the West, where she doesn't know anybody at all. All the same it is the place of her hopes. Nelly believes she will be able to find a flat and a job in West Berlin, and start anew with Alexei.

But in the Centre everything starts from scratch: The examinations, the questions, the completion of forms and the hunt for stamps for the residence permit – which can only be achieved by "cooperation", by reporting from the other side.

The Allied secret services are asking about Vasily. At home Nelly was told he was dead. A car accident. However, John Bird, a CIA agent, who interrogates her, doubts this. Suddenly Nelly has to ask herself if she has ever known the man she thought to have loved. Was he a spy? And if so – is he still alive? Instead of freedom, the feeling of suffocation and the Cold War continue to haunt Nelly in the West – and in her head. Suddenly she sees Vasily – or did she?

Torn between the hope for a better life, which so far she cannot even imagine and a deep mistrust towards institutions, Nelly struggles with the hauntingly long wait in the transitional world of the Centre. Together with thousands of others, who share a similar fate, Nelly and Alexei wait for a change.

Between bunk bed camps, interrogations and the queue for food they try to preserve their dignity, which is not easy, as there is fear and distrust. There are Stasi informants everywhere in the Centre, or so they say. Who is Hans, who so often looks after Alexei? Why is he always there when she is in need of something? Why has he been in the Centre for already two years and has never made it out of there? Over and over again the paranoia catches up with Nelly. Only when she is about to lose the bond to her son she realizes that she has to face the decision: Will she continue to let her past rule over her present? Or will she dare a completely new beginning, together with her son?

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## CREW

Director	Christian Schwochow
Script	Heide Schwochow Based on the novel "Lagerfeuer" by Julia Franck
Editor	Jens Klüber bfs
Director of Photography	Frank Lamm
Original Sound	Jörg Kidrowski bvft
Original Music	Lorenz Dangel
Sound Design	Rainer Heesch
Production Design	Tim Pannen
Costume Design	Kristin Schuster
Makeup Design	Wolfgang Böge BvM
Casting	Uta Seibicke
Production Manager	Andreas Jupe
Line Producer	Tassilo Aschauer
Producers	Katrin Schlösser, Ö Filmproduktion Thomas Kufus, zero one film Christoph Friedel, Terz Filmproduktion
Co-Producers	Helge Sasse, Senator Film Produktion WDR, Barbara Buhl SWR, Stefanie Groß rbb, Cooky Ziesche ARTE, Georg Steinert

Germany 2103 102 mins

## CAST

Nelly Senff	<b>Jördis Triebel</b>
Alexei	<b>Tristan Göbel</b>
Hans Pischke	<b>Alexander Scheer</b>
John Bird	<b>Jacky Ido</b>
Krystina	<b>Anna Antonowicz</b>
Jürgen Lüttich	<b>Stefan Lampadius</b>
Gerd Becker	<b>Andreas Nickl</b>
Frau Breitscheit	<b>Gabriele Schulze</b>

## DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Christian Schwochow was born in 1978 in Bergen on the isle of Rügen (GDR). He worked as author, reporter and videojournalist for German television and radio before studying at the renowned Film Academy Baden-Württemberg. In 2007 he graduated with the movie NOVEMBER CHILD, which was a big success in cinemas and which won a dozen awards. In 2011 his second long feature film CRACKS IN THE SHELL (Die Unsichtbare) followed. For both movies he wrote the screenplay together with Heide Schwochow. In 2012 he directed the adaptation of the best-selling novel THE TOWER for German TV.

## FILMOGRAPHY

**2014 Bornholmer Strasse**      TV  
**2013 Westen**  
**2012 Der Turm**                      TV  
**2011 Die Unsichtbare**  
**2008 Novemberkind**  
**2007 Terra X - Expedition ins Unbekannte**      TV Series documentary, 1 episode  
**2006 Marta und der fliegende Grossvater**  
**2005 Tantalus**                      Short



## INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTIAN AND HEIDE SCHWOCHOW

### **How did you come across the novel “Lagerfeuer” by Julia Franck?**

CHRISTIAN SCHWOCHOW: I stumbled over it in early 2000, when a number of books by young writers from the East were published, dealing with the times of the GDR and its aftermath. What fascinated me about “Lagerfeuer” was that it featured people who had left one life, yearning for another, yet they were somewhat stuck at a strange, transitory place. I felt this was somewhat connected to my family history.

### **In what way?**

CHRISTIAN SCHWOCHOW: We left in 1989, when the wall had already come down, yet there was still the question if we had to go to a camp like that as well. In the end, we didn't have to, but for a few months, the three of us lived in the small living room of my grandmother's friend.

### **You gave the book to your mother. How did you like it, Mrs Schwochow?**

HEIDE SCHWOCHOW: For me, it worked like an undertow. I also liked the idea of this transitory world. Let me compare the condition to a pregnancy: Somehow, there is a baby inside you, yet it is totally abstract. It was the same with our wish to go to the West: We didn't know what it would be like but the great yearning to go was always there.

### **What exactly fascinated you about the “Lagerfeuer” story?**

CHRISTIAN SCHWOCHOW: This very special place: We knew that those kind of emergency camps had existed, but not what it meant to live there for such a long period of time. To me that was totally new and exciting. Also, I realized that nobody is aware of this part of German history. Hardly anyone knows that the secret services were in those camps, interrogating people. And that the people had to more or less strip naked, before they were accepted.

HEIDE SCHWOCHOW: Before our emigration, the West was like a phantom for us. We had not looked into how the procedure of immigration actually went forth, never thought about it. Neither did we know one had to say sentences like: “I was politically persecuted”.

### **How did you imagine leaving and your arrival in the West?**

HEIDE SCHWOCHOW: It was somewhat blurry and it was mainly the leaving that played a role in my mind – and not for political reasons only, mind you. Julia Franck managed something extraordinary in her novel: A character, who in her interrogation states that she hadn't left for political reasons but that she “wanted to get rid of memories.” I was impressed by that. Because in the West there is only the notion that one would leave for political or economical reasons – nothing else occurred to the public mind.

CHRISTIAN SCHWOCHOW: My ideas were far more childlike. I was eleven, when we left. My school was at Falkplatz, at Prenzlauer Berg, right where the wall was. When somebody could get his hands on a “Bravo” (Teen Magazine) or we could exchange some stickers for our collection – to me, that was the West. Later I thought: The moment of leaving is comparable to a separation. When you're in a relationship, which suffocates you, you will eventually think: I want to split up. But that doesn't necessarily mean there is already an alternative for this relationship. You don't

immediately know what kind of a new relationship you want to engage in – or what kind of life you want to live.

**Those who left the GDR, had to begin a completely new life from one day to the next.**

CHRISTIAN SCHWOCHOW: This is why the novel as well as the movie is a metaphor for many people. Emigration held a lot of hope for many, yet the new beginning turned out to be a lot harder than expected – especially on an emotional level. They entered this transitory space. Some have remained there, until today.

**Did you have difficulties, settling in?**

CHRISTIAN SCHWOCHOW: First, going away was more of an adventure, the yearning for a different life. I also remember, however, that it took us quite a while until we knew how to behave. For example, in school I was told: “You’ve got to be relieved to have escaped from this shitty country.” That’s when I realised that I felt different about it. Especially those first months were difficult. Sitting alone in the flat, in this small room, knowing that my parents were out of work. Dad roamed the streets like a mad man. And I found it unbearable that we had no money. I had no experience with being poor.

HEIDE SCHWOCHOW: Yet, it was actually quite easy for us, in comparison. Those, who went to the West when the wall was still up were not allowed to see their families for months, for years even. And if they couldn’t settle in there was no way to go back, to say: It was a mistake. That would have been interpreted as a defeat by the East. That’s what it’s like for Nelly Senff and Hans Pischke in the movie. Going back was hardly an option.

**Instead, Nelly tries to make it in the West – also by resisting the questions, the interrogations.**

HEIDE SCHWOCHOW: Yes, in the GDR we also tried that strategy and suddenly we were expected to conform to the West. And to be grateful at the same time! But Nelly insists on her scepticism and asks: Why should I deliver information? I was forced to give information to the Stasi and now that I’m here, I am to deliver information again? I’m not prepared to do that and that’s the end of it. That is in fact a great attitude.

CHRISTIAN SCHWOCHOW: But it wasn’t easy to communicate this kind of attitude in the West. One day at school I tried to explain that not everybody in the East had a terrible life and the teacher said to me: “Well, why don’t you go back to your damn Honecker, then!”

**The film also works with overtones and ambivalence. Many questions remain unanswered for quite some time. For example, if Hans Pischke really is a Stasi informer or if Nelly Senff is in fact unaware of the fate of Alexei’s father, Vasily.**

CHRISTIAN SCHWOCHOW: Yes, Hans Pischke is a shifty figure. He is unattached, has been living in the camp for two years now. Suddenly he’s a suspect, Nelly even asks him: “Why are you still here?” It might be, he’s trying to befriend Alexei in order to gather information about Vasily, yet he might actually be telling the truth. We leave many of those questions unanswered because we believe that this lack of certainty describes the interpersonal relationships of that time pretty precisely.

HEIDE SCHWOCHOW: Nelly can only see: How does this person behave as a human

being. In those days, there is no proof. In the script, we worked very hard on getting this point across. Because the most interesting aspect is: Nelly can only make her first step into freedom if she learns to trust again.

**Nelly's motivation is to leave things behind. To get rid of the memories.**

CHRISTIAN SCHWOCHOW: And this is totally detached from the East/West issue or from other asylum stories. It is something everybody has experienced at some point in his or her life, when the time had come to decide for a completely fresh start. And I believe that's what makes this story universal.

**How long did you work on the script?**

HEIDE SCHWOCHOW: All in all: three years.

**Did you meet often with Julia Franck, the author of the original novel, in the context of working on the script?**

HEIDE SCHWOCHOW: Yes, especially in the beginning we met often and I asked her to simply tell me a lot of stories, which she can do very beautifully and very sensually. Once, we visited the Emergency Refugee Centre in Marienfelde together. Later on I sent her the different drafts, regularly. It was very important to me that she likes the movie.





## **HISTORICAL NOTES**

### **GERMANY DIVIDED (1949-1989)**

#### **1949 – Germany is divided. Creation of the German Democratic Republic (DDR, East Germany) and of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG, West Germany)**

After WWII, Germany is divided into four sectors and placed under the authority of the occupying Allied powers. Within two years, political divisions increased between the Soviets and the other occupying powers. In 1949, the country is divided into two blocks: the Soviet block in the Eastern part of the country, under control of the USSR (The German Democratic Republic was created on 7 October 1949), and the Western block, under control of the US, UK and French forces (Federal Republic of Germany). This border draws a line between two ideologies: capitalism and communism. The difference only got stronger over the years and led to vast economic and social troubles on both sides.

#### **1953 – Creation of the Marienfelde Refugee Centre in West Berlin**

Berlin, situated in East Germany, was also divided into four sectors. The Marienfelde Refugee Centre in West Berlin served as the first, and most important, place of sanctuary for the increasing number of refugees and emigrants from East Germany. Refugees and emigrants were housed and cared for and they also underwent the process required to obtain a residence permit for West Germany and West Berlin. Until 1961, the Centre was of symbolic importance as a “gateway to freedom”. Political leaders from West Germany and West Berlin came to Marienfelde to demonstrate their solidarity with the refugees fleeing East Germany.

#### **1961 – Construction of the Berlin wall**

In order to put an end to the increasing exodus of its inhabitants to West Germany, the Democratic Republic of Germany closed its border in August 1961. East German troops and workers had begun to tear up streets running alongside the border to make them impassable to most vehicles and install barbed wire fences along the 156 kilometres around the three western sectors, and the 43 kilometres that divided West and East Berlin. It was soon built up into a wall, the first concrete elements and large blocks being put in place on 17 August. A huge no man's land was cleared to provide a line of fire at fleeing refugee

The Berlin Wall, a border within a country, physically separated Berlin into East and West for more than twenty-eight years. It became the most striking symbol of Europe divided by the Iron Curtain. West Berliners initially could not visit East Berlin or East Germany at all - all crossing points were closed to them between 26 August 1961 and 17 December 1963. In 1963, negotiations between East and West resulted in limited visits during the Christmas season that year. Similar, very limited arrangements were made in 1964, 1965 and 1966.

In 1971, with the Four Power Agreement on Berlin, West Berliners were allowed to apply for visas to enter East Berlin and East Germany regularly, but East German authorities could still refuse entry permits.



### **1972 – Limited travel authorizations for East Germans**

East Germans started to be able to travel west in 1972, but in very limited numbers. They had to apply for an exit visa and a passport, pay high fees, get their employer's permission and go through a police interrogation. Very few permits were given. Refusals were often arbitrary and depended on the good will of local civil servants. East Germans were allowed to visit the West mostly for 'urgent family matters', such as a wedding a terminal illness or the death of a relative.

### **1975 – Helsinki Agreement**

The **Helsinki Agreement** recognised Soviet control over Eastern Europe, concluded a trade agreement, and had the Soviet Union promise to respect human rights. The DDR signed this Agreement. One of its goals was to improve relations between European countries. Many East Germans tried to use the clause on freedom of circulation to get exit visas. Towards the end of the eighties, over 100,000 visa applications were submitted, and only 15-25% were approved. The government remained hostile to emigration and tried to dissuade candidates from exile, with an extremely slow treatment of applications, humiliating, frustrating and often vain. Candidates would often get marginalised, downgraded at work or fired, excluded from university and become victims of ostracism, The law was used to punish those who would pursue their emigration application: over 10,000 candidates were arrested by Stasi between 1970 and 1989. Leaving was therefore a difficult decision, and coming back was not an option.

During the cold war, a lot of spying was occurring on both sides of the border, by the Stasi and by the CIA. This led to endless interrogation sessions for those who crossed the border either side.

### **1989 – Fall of the Berlin Wall**

The slow weakening of the Soviet Union as well as the opening of the border between Hungary and Austria led to a series of events that culminated in massive protest demonstrations all over East Germany in September 1989. The protests grew considerably and culminated on 4 November, when half a million people gathered in Alexanderplatz. The 'Wall of Shame' officially fell on 9 November 1989, but the Wall in its entirety was not torn down immediately. This paved the way for the reunification of Germany.

In the days that followed, several million East Germans made their way to West Germany and several hundred thousand settled there. Almost entirely demolished, the wall still pretty much determines the urban organization of Germany's capital, and the scars left by its existence remain today.

## **THE MARIENFELDE REFUGEE CENTRE – The gateway to freedom and the challenge of integration in the other Germany**

Between 1949 and 1990, about four million people left East Germany (the DDR) for West Germany (the FRG), with 1.35 million of them passing through the Marienfelde Refugee Centre in Berlin. The 'Notaufnahmelager', literally Emergency Reception Centre, was opened in 1953 in the Southern part of Berlin. It supplied refugees with housing and provisions. Refugees would also complete the official procedure to receive residency permits for West Germany and West Berlin.

The period leading to 1961 saw a mass exodus of East Germans. With the regime becoming harsher on any kind of criticism after 1953 and the construction workers uprising, a huge number of people started leaving: all those persecuted by communism, especially in political circles, intellectuals and people with financial means, left the Soviet part of the city. East Germany, weakened by a financial crisis, first increased the level of control along the Iron Curtain, from the Baltic Sea to Saxony. Berlin remained the last open door to the other Germany.

In the divided capital, one only needed to use public transportation to get to the other side. When Willy Brandt, the then mayor of Berlin then and future chancellor, visited the camp in 1960, everything seemed modern and comfortable. The influx of refugees quickly destroyed all sense of space. These refugees were guilty of fleeing East Germany and therefore not willing to go back. They were flown to other parts of Germany. Once in the camp they had to undergo numerous control checks, as the allies were trying to get as much information from them as they could. Slowly, post-war poverty changed into growth in West Germany and a law forced each region to welcome a quota of refugees according to their employment needs. The refugees' wishes were deemed secondary.

Mistrust was king. Administrative procedures and doubts on the future filled the days. Where to go? How to live in a Germany that was so close and yet so different?

The construction of the wall in the summer of 1961 was a breaking point. The most aware of the people packed their suitcase and the queues in front of the Centre's gates got longer and longer: extra beds were brought in and nearby factory warehouses were being used. The number of procedures fell from 207,000 in 1961 to 21,400 the following year. The wall thus separated the systems, but also the families. They would have to wait until 1971 to be granted the right to visit family members, and this under close scrutiny of the Stasi. Rare were those who managed to cross the border clandestinely. The others arrived with an official permission. East Germany gave exit permits to those she no longer wanted: criminals, intellectuals who spoke too much, pensioners. The others faced years of procedure and humiliation in their daily life.

At the end of the eighties, the regime was on the brink of economic and political bankruptcy and no longer seemed able to resist the powerful effects of collective disillusionment. The old camp became busy again. The months preceding the fall of the Iron Curtain were particularly busy, resonating strangely with 1961. The old centre was renamed Berlin Central Reception Centre for Repatriates (ZAB). Its residents had sometimes transited through Hungary and Czechoslovakia, whose borders had become porous.

Marienfelde never ceased to welcome immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers and other passing individuals. The emigrants from East Germany were replaced in 1990 by Eastern Europeans whose German roots let them apply for German citizenship. The flow of people from the former Eastern bloc slowly ended, and in December 2010 the former refugee centre was transformed into a residential home for asylum seekers.

Today Marienfelde is the symbol of flight and emigration in the period of Germany divided. Located on the historic site of the Refugee Centre, Marienfelde is also a museum preserving and memorializing the causes, process, and consequences of inner-German flight, exploring not only flight from the DDR itself, but also the official process of emigration and the subsequent integration of refugees into West Germany.

Sources:

Claire-Lise Buis (Berlin correspondent), 'La Petite porte vers l'ouest', *Libre Belgique*, 5 August 2011

Marienfeld Refugee Center Museum (website)

Translation and adaptation Diane Gabrysiak

