

Heimat 1 Documentary: "A Memorial for the Hunsrück". By Christa Tornow, SWR, 1982¹

Commentary and interviews roughly rendered into English by Angela Skrimshire with helpful suggestions from Thomas Hönemann, published on www.heimat123.de, March 2007.

[Commentary:] What do people really know about the Hunsrück? When the film maker Edgar Reitz told his Munich friends about his project to film the story of a family there, they thought he had made up the name "Hunsrück". All the more important to him, then, became the idea of making this subject into "A Memorial for the Hunsrück".

(Title: A few days with Edgar Reitz)

10th February 1981. 8am. It's cold. Discussion with the Director on the premises of Simmern railway station, and final preparations for setting up a scene from the second world war.

Franzl Bauer – film properties master from Munich , one of the most important people in the team. Historical scenes must be correct - the smallest mistake, and the spectators will stop following the story and only be looking out for more mistakes.

On the roof of the station building there is a TV aerial which has to be covered up. A masking structure is erected in the exact camera position of the aerial.

Edgar Reitz and cameraman Gernot Roll: Reitz worked for nearly two years on the script for a planned 13-hour film, together with his co-author, Peter Steinbach. The two of them were lodging in a log cabin in Woppenroth, researching the Hunsrück newspapers and consulting local people.

Franzl Bauer has changed his cap – he has an inexhaustible store of costumes. The preparation is going very sluggishly – sometimes it seems to be getting absolutely nowhere. Edgar Reitz is not one of those swift film makers, someone like Rainer Werner Fassbinder. The atmosphere is rather deceptive: in spite of intensive preparation it feels improvised, but at the same time that is its strength – it can pick up on ideas and spontaneously react to them.

And now it all goes ahead: the scene – an unexploded bomb is to be defused. The engineer, Otto Wohlleben, while working on the Hunsrück Highroad, came to know the Simon family whose story is told in the 12-part TV series. In WWII he returns to the Hunsrück as a bomb disposal expert in an infantry unit. In this operation he loses his life.

[clip of scene preparation]

Otto Wohlleben is played by Jörg Hube. He is the one nationally well-known actor in this production. When Edgar Reitz a few years ago filmed "Die Reise nach Wien" in the Hunsrück, he had stars like Elke Sommer and Mario Adorf to lend it glamour – but local people were playing in it too, and this mixture

made the film unbelievable, and Edgar Reitz has learnt from that. This time he is using fresh faces, less well-known actors, and amateur actors whom he discovered in Hunsrücker drama groups and elsewhere.

Jörg Hube's partner in this scene is Johannes Metzdorf, an amateur actor whom we will return to later. It is being shot on classic 35mm film which still meets our aesthetic demands, says film maker Edgar Reitz. He makes scant use of colour film, nowadays the usual medium of television. He films in black and white. Edgar Reitz: "a photographic method that affords us extraordinary beauty". Only events in which colour has an important part to play are shot in colour, and that in this scene is to be just the explosion of the bomb.

...

Working with a supporting actor.... Short pause in the Director's chair The sun has meanwhile come out, but it is still cold. No one complains, in spite of the waiting around. ... There is still something to be put right. A street light like that would not have existed in 1944.....

A take with Johannes Metzdorf. He is playing engineer Otto Wohlleben's assistant, Pieritz, in a Saxon dialect, a comic role, which has to be extra precise.

[detailed instructions to Metzdorf]

And Metzdorf is professionally well qualified for that, as incumbent pastor of Bacharach-Steeg, with responsibility for a huge parish, education of confirmees, care of the elderly, youth clubs, children's music groups, committed to Amnesty International. He has taken holiday leave for the filming, and the parish was rather taken aback when he appeared one day with short hair, but since then people have got used to their pastor having become a film star on top of everything else

[Metzdorf's sermon:] Dear parishioners, "Jesus wept". This deeply human emotion may not fit many people's image of Jesus. People might prefer him to be different, more heroic, more of a great man, one who comes across with clarity and authority – but weeping? That is a sign of weakness. Weeping - that's something for little girls. But I still remember very clearly how in my case it poured out of me in my childhood – weeping ...

Interviewer (Q): Is working with amateurs fundamentally different from working with actors?

Edgar Reitz: Fundamentally, no. Nevertheless there are certain points that one can't reach with amateurs. By amateurs we mean people who are not actors, have a gift for acting, but otherwise in their performance they often have no idea what they are doing. That is not the case with Herr Metzdorf – he plays a role and brings to bear on it skills from the rest of his experience of the world.

Q: Is it like being in the pulpit then?

Johannes Metzdorf: No ... though there is an audience there too ...

Q: Is it the first time you have stood before the camera or in the theatre?

JM: No ... as a student I acted on the stage, in Bonn ... two-character plays ... some by Günther Grass ...

Q: Were a lot of people tried out for it before you found the right ones?

ER: We didn't do any trials at all – we have always filmed straight away with the people whom we liked ... and given the whole gamble of filming, I don't even think that one can do trial takes – most people casting for a film who do trial takes do them just to put themselves into the scenes ... But when one is right here in a real situation where we are all working together to bring the job to fruition, that is something that either carries people along with it or it doesn't. Then the best one can do, when one has completed it, is either let a character that has been created disappear again, or try to reinvent it with another actor and bring out something new. That's what we have done now.

Q: Can one work in front of the camera with any amateur actor?

ER: Yes. One can. The important thing is just that the right situation is presented ... one that is right, one that fits. If one presents some artificially thought out situation, then it doesn't work. People have to be able to relate their own life experience to what they are to play. Then it works. Then one lives through it with them. However that is not the case with, let's say, comic roles. So Pieritz for example, whom Herr Metzdorf plays, is a comic role. In comedy there is always something artificial, that one must already know how to play properly, and not everyone can. Thankfully he has the gift for it. I felt this as soon as I got to know you ... *[smiling]*

[Commentary:] Down there lies the bomb in the film. Fun for the uninvited onlookers. Not so funny, however, for the assistant Pieritz' feelings when it comes to defusing the bomb... A clip from the film:

[scene from HEIMAT: Otto leaves Pieritz and goes to defuse the bomb]

The most spectacular take of the day is when the bomb goes off ... though there must be no damage to anything on the station premises. So in order to look as though everything has been blown up into the air, it has to be carefully prepared beforehand. For that, an expert in special effects, Karl Baumgartner, nicknamed "Charlie boom-boom", has come from Munich ... Among other things Charlie Boom-boom created the mechanics of the boat, in the feature film "Das Boot". He was responsible for seeing that the underwater shots worked.

Q: when did you get the name "Charlie Boom-boom"?

Karl Baumgartner (KB): A long time ago, I got it from a film "The Longest Day", then a bunker had to be exploded by an American colleague ... and it failed, and then I got the order, and the English people nicknamed me Charlie Boom-boom ... and I've had the name ever since then ...

Q: You aren't working just in Germany?

KB: No, everywhere ...

Q: How many experts like you are there in the world?

KB: A lot, in America roughly a hundred ... and in England about fifteen ...

Commentary: And now back again to the work, in which the expert gets such special effects. Now Charlie Boom-boom in 1946 brought sausages to the studios in Munich Geiseltal, came to know the film people and got hooked – and then he learned and learned and learned. With this wind machine he can make real shock waves produced by the explosion of the bomb, representing an indirect effect the catastrophe has on the people who have gone for shelter ...

Preparation continues for the bomb whose explosion as we said is the only sequence in this complex to be shot in colour.

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Filming is illusion. The destruction that the bomb is to cause is set up beforehand. Afterwards when the film is cut it will look right.

[explosion]

That for Charlie Boom-boom, used to other things - was a doddle!

Change of scene: in Rohrbach, a village near Kirchberg, Edgar Reitz has rented an old farmhouse and set it up for shooting the indoor scenes. Here lives the film family Simon whose life from the nineteen twenties to the present time is to be portrayed. The owners of the house, the Scherer family, live across the street in a new house; here in the byre are the animals, 50 cattle and 150 pigs. The Scherers have had experience of film people: scenes were also shot in Rohrbach twenty years ago for the film "Der Schinderhannes", with Curt Jürgens and Maria Schell. The Scherers describe the carry-on at that time as "Wild West in the Hunsrück". They still tell jokes about it now. But Edgar Reitz' team behaved differently from the big team from the start. Someone or other came over at milking time and asked whether there was any fresh milk they could have.

Q: Has Frau Scherer come to terms with this new invasion of film people?

Frau Scherer: Yes, absolutely ... they've been here nearly a year and they're almost like family, aren't they ... yes, very well ...

Q: when they first came, did you get a fright or were you quite happy straight away?

Frau S: No, I was alone in the house, and I wanted to talk to my husband, and then Frau Richter came again and we came to an agreement.

Q: Did it make a difference that Edgar Reitz is a Hunsrücker?

Frau S: Well, Perhaps ... not consciously ... but not just that, no...

Q: Have you picked up the story of the film, do you know what it's about?

Frau S: Yes ... the main outlines of it – but I don't know exactly ...

Q: do you think there will be an effect ... when a big TV series about the Hunsrück comes out, and the Hunsrück becomes better known and it will be good for tourism?

Frau S: I think so, definitely

[Commentary:] In our sample clips only scenes from WWII were being shot, but the story begins after the first world war. Edgar Reitz explains, in the house of the Simon family, how he wants to depict it in his story.:

Edgar Reitz: In this room here we see, at the beginning of our series, the return of the son Paul from the first world war. He enters the house and sits on this chair here, and says nothing. He sits there and watches until the whole village has gathered in this room. There are more and more people. That's where the story of this film begins. Almost all the inhabitants of the village gather together and wait on the one who has come home from the war. The story that we tell then concentrates in the first place on this young man. In the war he has come into contact with something that for that time became absolutely definitive – namely the wireless. This is the time in the twenties when people had their first experience of wireless reception, and so even Hunsrückers were able to get a view out into the world, just through the ether. That fascinates people, and has the effect that the "Fernweh" (longing for distant places), that grips them all, grows so big for this young man that one day he leaves his family and relatives and runs away, out into the world. The story that we tell after that describes the story of those who stay behind, of those who out of fear and worry about this young man who has run away, gather in this kitchen and reflect on how times are moving on, and how life might yield a chance of happiness. That will now be described in many, many episodes, against a background of changing times, the twenties, with the years of inflation, '22, '23, the boom of the twenties, a kind of gold-seeking fever that is detectable even in the Hunsrück, then the thirties with Hitler's seizure of power, and the new hopes that draw people into relationship with this new system. Then come the years in which people are preparing for the war - no one knows that they are preparing for war, as everything is getting more modern, in every way life is becoming more pleasant, until a great road is built into the Hunsrück, thousands of workers come here, and there is a feeling of things looking up, no one suspects that all this is preparation for war. All of that goes on being played out in this kitchen.

Q: You once said that you want to represent History as it happens to ordinary people.

ER: I believe that is a most essential point, especially for understanding our own lives. In school we always learn to see history just as something to do with great people, those who determine the history of the world, the great protagonists of world history. But it's not Hitler, Himmler, Goering, Goebbels and people like that who were really the only ones who defined that period,

but the way in which they were turned into hopes of happiness, unconscious figures, penetrating deeply into many, many individual everyday problems, how they combined all that, that is truly history. It's really a scandal of our whole education system that we go on understanding history as facts about great people, but not as the real life of the many. To fill up that gap a little, not academically, not just recapitulating something from school, but as something that at the same time is an experience, something that is carried over from having been lived through, re-experiencing once more a life already lived, in that whole entertaining comical sense, that is really what history means for us.

[Commentary:] For the 23rd February, filming is planned for scenes at the Eastern Front. The script stipulates snow, and it actually started to snow from eight o'clock this morning. In Russia we know there are a lot of birch trees, so the action is set in a big Hunsrücker birch wood. So then waiting for the day's filming. The snow has indeed arrived exactly on cue, but no one had reckoned on so much of it. There is no time to go back to the stores for better clothes. By lunchtime, several members of the team are soaked to the skin. So the costumers and make-up artists have chartered a bus. They are turning respectable Hunsrücker pensioners into Russian partisans.

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With the help of bits of wood and small props it is possible to lay a railtrack over the uneven floor of the wood, so that the camera can slide along cleanly when following a scene

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What costumers and make-up artists have meanwhile managed to achieve looks impressively genuine. Again this time it's going to take a couple of hours before it is filmed, but this time too no one gets impatient.

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Here they are developing nearby another illusory Edgar Reitz scene. One of the pensioners is telling him about an event in the second world war, and though time is pressing, he listens. It might well be that it could turn into something important for the film.

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Scene: German soldiers lead out a group of captured Russian partisans to be shot.

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Between two takes – a coffee break. Anyone needing to answer a call of nature has to find somewhere to disappear in the wood... women as well. A situation like this can perhaps do a bit to dispel the notion that the life of film people is always a lot of fun.

...

The young soldier on the right is Anton, one of the sons of Maria Simon, who stands at the centre of the TV series. He is acting as camera assistant in a propaganda company.

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Anton Simon is played by Markus Reiter, we visited him on a day off from filming, in the Kreissparkasse (District Savings Bank) in Simmern, where he works. He is a bank trainee in his second year. His qualifications for a rather important role, apart from the fact that he fitted the required type of person, were that he had acted for two years in the Simmern amateur theatre group. Also first, like Pastor Metzdorf, he had to take filming days out of his holiday leave, and like him too, he had to sacrifice his long hair for the sake of the role.

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Interviewer (Q): What happens in this scene?

Markus Reiter (MR): In this scene Russian prisoners, are positioned over there and then shot, this happens not only to the first group of Russians, but there are more groups who are positioned there and then shot, they fall into the ditch and then are buried.

Q: And you are going to photograph it now?

MR: We are meant to film it, but on this occasion the camera doesn't work so it can't be filmed, but it is supposed to be filmed.

Q: It is supposed to be filmed as they are being shot?

MR: Yes

Q: Does that matter to you?

MR: Yes, it does matter to me ... one has to think that one is in Russia and it is really happening and that really does matter to me and anyway it's not much fun to play.

Q: That means that you enjoy the work in different ways? That it is sometimes fun and sometimes serious ...

MR: This scene is certainly not easy to play, even though it is not hard to put oneself into the position of the character, the man who has to film the Russian prisoners being shot, he is shocked by what he sees, which is quite a normal reaction ...

Q: You're looking white at the moment – that's make-up, isn't it?

MR (smiling): that's make-up ...

[Commentary:] The shooting:

[clip]

Back to the house of the Simon family: It might have been easier to film the whole thing in a studio, but the natural surrounding is more important to Reitz:

Edgar Reitz: We are depicting in this film, not just a kitchen-living room, but a whole house such as people in the Hunsrück lived in. Hunsrück houses really became, one might almost say, standardised over the centuries. We have here certain rooms in the upper floor of the house, this is for example the room in which the young married couple are supposed to have planted new life [*smiles*]. Paul and Maria, who become a couple, bring their first child into the world here, that is a scene that represents really a kind of origin of the narrative. There are certain dreams that are recognisable in these young people. They have a lot to do with how things have been arranged – Maria has inherited this bed from her own family, it is the bed in which she slept as a little girl, now it is a marriage bed, and the picture hanging above it, often brought over from England, depicts, in a romantic peasant fantasy, the young woman's dream of the bridal veil. But this life will be nothing like what is shown in such a picture, and that is then the story of our second and third parts. Here we have the bridal wreath, all these objects that we can see here, those baby clothes over there, come from houses in the region round here. For months we were asking around families here in the Hunsrück what old things were still left, and people very lovingly brought us things, and gave us advice about how to furnish this house. We went so far as to have the designs printed here on the wall with stencils which our props people had cut out by hand from linoleum to reproduce the wallpaper stripped from old houses, and local people round about advised us how to colour them.

[*Commentary:*] Rose Monday morning [*ie. day before Shrove Tuesday*] in Woppenroth. Frau Bauss has just fed the hens, moved the pigs elsewhere, and the pig stalls have been fixed up as a school somewhere in Russia. In the family Bauss' garden the Reitz team has erected another set. A facade with nothing behind it. The effect – deepest Russia. Here too a group are getting along together, Frau Bauss has set up a temporary canteen in the basement of her house for the freezing actors. In the scene that is to be shot today: Anton Simon's proxy wedding. He is in Russia, his bride, heavily pregnant, is with his family in the Hunsrück village Schabbach, connected for a moment just by the telephone. In the stable, the work causes no disturbance [*shot of sleeping white rabbits*] The following scene gives a small glimpse of how complex things were rigged up for one short sequence, which later will be 10 seconds of the ready-cut film.

[*arranging view under the table, before filming the scene. ER and Ger-not Roll discuss the sequence of scenes between Russia and Schabbach*]

[*Commentary:*] On 25th February, also in Woppenroth, in Gasthaus Molz, actors and extras are waiting to go on set, and meanwhile the team too is at last able to warm up. It's minus 12 degrees outside. Rural wedding guests towards the end of the second world war. That is Katharina Simon, grandmother and head of the family, People are waiting for a plane which is going to come up over there in the Westerwald and cast flowers over the village to crown the wedding festivities. Again the team has had good luck with the weather. A couple of takes for this sequence were shot a while ago. At that time there was snow on the ground. Without snow the scenes wouldn't be compatible. But now snow is lying, and the view is clear. The flight plan is worked out ex-

actly to the last metre, so that during the waiting time the movements of the wedding guests can be exactly pin-pointed.

[actors watching for the plane and the falling flowers]

We meet again Frau Bauss *[who is playing a little role in this scene]*. There in front is Katherina Simon, played by Gertrud Bredel, accomplished amateur actress at the Volkshochschule (further education college) at Bad Kreuznach. Frau Bredel is a war widow. She first started acting when she was 48. At that time her son left home, and she thought: "Is my life now going to go on being just waiting for him to call? I must do something about that." So she joined an amateur theatre group. Today she is firmly entrenched. Here's the first rehearsal of Günther Weisenborn's "Ballade vom Eulenspiegel":

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Gertrud Bredel is a discovery of which Edgar Reitz is particularly proud.

[ER directing GB]

For about 3 hours cameraman Gernot Roll has been hanging out of the fire-service turntable ladder till it's all over. *[the plane flies over ...]* The plane: a T-6 reproduction Fokker-Wolf. The specialist pilot for these kinds of operations: the Frenchman Schou-Schou Häflinger. He learnt his extraordinary skill in Algeria, where flying below the radar often saved his life. The roofs of Woppenroth were not damaged. *[plane flies over again]*

Once again a little foretaste – behind this façade, which the people of Woppenroth have been living with for a year and a half, the wedding reception:

[Scene from HEIMAT; Wilfried orates, Kath mocks him]

Interviewer: Herr Reitz, you yourself are a Hunsrücker. How far is this story a personal story?

Edgar Reitz: I am a Hunsrücker born and bred. Much of what we are relating here of course comes from times when I wasn't yet born, and is based on tales of my parents and grandparents. But that can also stop one looking at things more directly. I depend on encountering anew my parents' generation. I have noticed with this film, already while working to prepare the filmscript, that I am really getting to know my "Heimat" for the first time, through this kind of work. As a child one lives in it rather unconsciously. As a child, one takes it all for granted, and concentrates on growing up in this world. Now as an adult, who has not lived in the Hunsrück for so many years, I find it a world that I can discover a lot about with my mind. That should be an adventurous journey through this century, and I would like to give it expression through this film.

¹ The documentary is contained on the Heimat Bonus-DVD which is part of the "Heimat-Trilogie Premium Edition", EAN 4006680032535, and the "DREHORT HEIMAT – Chronik einer deutschen Jahrhundert-Saga"-Edition, EAN 4006680040035, both by Kinowelt/Arthaus. For more information see <http://www.heimat123.de/heimlit.htm>.