

Episode #4 TRAVEL

Intro

“Exactly, she was absolutely silent. And she was small and fine-boned and so serious with it.”

„I don’t know if I fell in love with her at that moment“

“She had exactly the right presence for a photographer”

“Her sense of humour was really quirky. I miss that“

This is Sibylle Bergemann – The Woman Behind the Pictures. My name is Anne Waak. In the four episodes of this podcast I will be exploring the life, work and character of one of Germany’s best-known photographers. In order to get to know Sibylle Bergemann, I visit the places that played an important role in her biography and I meet people who were close to her, who lives with her, loved her, worked with and celebrated her. Together with them, I retrace her life: From the beginning of her professional career in the 1960s in East Berlin, to the time when she began to photograph for the pioneering GDR fashion and culture magazine Sibylle, and later, when she experienced the upheaval, of the Fall of the Wall in her late 40s, until 2010, when she died at the age of only 69.

#4 TRAVEL – How Sibylle Bergemann discovered other countries – in GDR days and afterwards, when her world literally opened up

SIBYLLE BERGEMANN: *“I didn’t want to die without seeing New York. When Arno came back, that was 1979, he recklessly said: we’ll go!”*

Travel – or the not-being-able-to-travel that Sibylle Bergemann is talking about here for a documentary film made in 2006 – is a recurrent theme in her story. All her life she was eager to discover other countries and cultures. For a long time, though, there was an obstacle: the Wall that divided Berlin and Germany – and so the world – into East and West.

East Germans under the age of 65 could only travel to non-socialist countries by putting in an application, only for special reasons, and usually only if they were likely to come back to the GDR – because their children or spouse had stayed at home, for example. But like Arno Fischer, Sibylle Bergemann would never have remained in the West. She wasn’t trying to escape. She once said, looking back:

SIBYLLE BERGEMANN: *“My problem was that I couldn’t get out. I wanted to travel, I wanted to see the world. That was my biggest problem.”*

“I can’t sleep,” she put it on another occasion, “when I think of all the things I should be taking pictures of.”

Over the New Year between 1969 and ’70, a good eight years after the Wall went up, Sibylle Bergemann travelled with Arno Fischer to Moscow and Leningrad, now St Petersburg. She came back with black-and-white photos of onion-shaped domes, snow-covered squares where horses waited with carts, and Soviet citizens in winter gear. More journeys followed to Poland and the Soviet Union.

Ten more years went by before she first saw Paris. She had recently been admitted to the Association of Fine Artists, which meant that she could apply to travel to Western countries. By this time, the rules for travelling artists were not so strict.

SIBYLLE BERGEMANN: *“And the first time they let me go to Paris, I was 38. I fought for it for nine months and then I was allowed to go. Without money, of course.”*

Why Paris? Sibylle Bergemann’s friend and fellow photographer Ute Mahler was drawn to the city the same year:

UTE MAHLER: *“I think for people from the GDR Paris was the big dream. Just imagine you are 30 and you know you won’t get there till you are 60. Then it is bound to be the city of your dreams. It might have been Rome too, but I always wanted Paris.”*

ANNE WAAK: *“Does that have something to do with photographers you admired or with images?”*

UTE MAHLER: *“Yes, where did I know Paris from? From films, pictures, literature. It was a combination of things that no other city had to offer. I spent nine days there, four of those sick with double tonsillitis. It was awful. It was terrible, really. But with hindsight, the disappointment – no one can make up for the dream you fabricated, and no city either – had a positive outcome, because I did my first street photography.”*

Sibylle Bergemann also took photographs of people in the street, in parks and in cafés. One photo is particularly striking. It shows an older woman in a darkly shadowed restaurant. The bottom half of the frame is taken up by the counter where Bergemann must have placed her camera. Sitting at it is a lady wrapped in winter clothes with two glasses in front of her. Her gaze, lost in thought, perhaps even disillusioned, is turned away from the camera: she is unaware that her photograph is being taken.

Another four years will pass before Sibylle Bergemann – just as Arno Fischer promised her – is able to travel to New York for the first time. It can only happen if – in the eyes of the East German authorities – no one in the family does anything they shouldn't.

FRIEDA VON WILD: *“Especially me,”*

...recalls Bergemann's daughter, Frieda von Wild, who was 20 at the time.

FRIEDA VON WILD: *“That I don't start shooting my mouth off. That I don't throw a spanner in the works. {...} I was young and rebellious. We had an agreement that they wanted to go to New York together and that until then would I please please please {...} try if possible not to shoot my mouth off.”*

ANNE WAAK: *“Could you understand why?”*

FRIEDA VON WILD: *“Of course, of course.”*

ANNE WAAK: *“Did you keep your word?”*

FRIEDA VON WILD: *“Yes and no. There was that one story about 13 August 1981. We had this idea about spraying something on the Wall: a little rhyme to mark the 20th anniversary. I had an idea about how to do*

it, but it got dropped. Two friends... And the next morning they were standing at the door to arrest me. ...Stasi, crime squad, three regular cops... They told me to get dressed. There was a woman who never let me out of her sight. I was on my own at home. How could I let them know I'd been arrested? I didn't have a chance to write a note. After that we agreed that if anything like that ever happened again I would turn my toothbrush mug upside-down. Then whenever she came home she would pop into the bathroom to see if the toothbrush mug was upside-down.”

Despite this incident, with Frieda released 24 hours later, the US trip was on. Not least because Arno Fischer sold a few of his cameras to finance their stay. And because Frieda did not apply to emigrate to the West until after they got back. That was another agreement they had.

1986 saw publication of the book “Himmelhölle Manhattan”, where memories of the sociologist and writer Irene Runge were accompanied by Sibylle Bergemann's photographs. Although the text and images had originated separately, Runge's narrative tone was a good match for Bergemann's open, often astonished take on shop windows, street scenes and towering blocks.

Irene Runge wrote: “New York smells of food, of meat, of bread, of Chinese delicacies, of fish as you get closer to the harbour district, of perfumeries in the better neighbourhoods, {...} of ice, popcorn and fresh salads. It stinks of exhaust gas and garbage when the wind is blowing the wrong way or the refuse teams are on strike, when you reach the areas where the city ignores its responsibilities and heaps of the day's trash lie scattered across the streets.”

The writer and the photographer work together on their next book. “Don't keep calling it Holland” is born when Irene Runge spends a lengthy period in the Netherlands, with Sibylle Bergemann joining her several times to record the flavour with her camera.

At one point the book notes:

“Sibylle is here on the job, as we call it. What does she see that I don't? Dogs that seem to be flying, the sea under our feet? A promenade for everyone. There are hardly any guests in the glass-shielded beach restaurants. It is too chilly. People smile at her, are friendly. ... Sibylle photographs with clammy fingers. This capturing of countless moments. I am relieved that it all

flows past me. My duty to remember is different. Not as selective as hers, but just as precise. My moments last longer and merge with their consequences.”

Irene Runge also quotes Arno Fischer, aptly on the subject of travelling:

“Arno says: ‘Anyone who travels has a duty to report. Including about the yearnings we all share. And about the divided privilege of travel and then about the pleasure of coming home. And about the hope that everyone will have the chance.’”

A year later that hope becomes reality. The Wall comes down, Germany unites. Sibylle Bergemann is 49.

ANNE WAAK: “*Did she have any political hopes?*”

FRIEDA VON WILD: “*To start with, yes. We gave a big party for the first elections. And we were so disappointed that people were daft enough to vote for Kohl. That was that. I don’t think I got as drunk as I did that night for a long time to come.*”

ANNE WAAK: “*Out of disappointment?*”

FRIEDA VON WILD: “*Yes.*”

ANNE WAAK: “*What would you have liked?*”

FRIEDA VON WILD: “*For two Germanys to carry on for a while and not to repeat the mistakes after what we had learnt from the GDR. There were some good people at the beginning, including on women’s rights. To try something new, really new, and not let ourselves be eaten up by this shitty conservative Federal Republic. They voted for Kohl! You can understand it in a way. But I think it all happened much too fast. People should have been given more time to grasp what was going on, to find their feet. It was all far too fast.*”

To survive as a photographer in the new market, Sibylle Bergemann co-founds the agency Ostkreuz. She carries on taking pictures for the fashion and culture magazine SIBYLLE until it folds in 1995, for Der Stern and Der Spiegel, Die Zeit and The New York Times Magazine. But nothing will be as crucial to her travels as GEO, which specialises in reportage and is best-known for its suites of photography.

GEO’s editors are based in Hamburg at the offices of Gruner und Jahr on Baumwall, near the port. The building has bull’s eyes and railings like a ship, and its many window frames painted white were made of tropical timber in times that were less woke.

The publisher recently merged with the RTL Group. The building has long since been sold and the staff are moving.

Ruth Eichhorn was picture editor at the Hamburg magazine for many years. She welcomes me into her home in Eppendorf.

RUTH EICHHORN: “*I ran the photo department. From 1994 until 2016. It was good, because that was the heyday of photojournalism, circulation was juicy...*”

ANNE WAAK: “*...budgets were juicy ...*”

RUTH EICHHORN: “*... budgets were juicy, we did exhibitions, books.*”

ANNE WAAK: “*How much budget was there for a story?*”

RUTH EICHHORN: “*You know, the wonderful thing is that I haven’t a clue.*”

ANNE WAAK: “*So money was no object.*”

After the Wall came down, Ruth Eichhorn kept an eye on the East German photography scene and commissioned work from Ute Mahler, Werner Mahler, Harf Zimmermann and Harald Hauswald. She had Sibylle Bergemann’s number in her book too. In GDR times Bergemann did not like working in colour. She and many others found black-and-white more artistic, a more serious form of photography. Besides, the colour films available at the time were of mediocre quality. By now, though, she had put aside her reservations.

RUTH EICHHORN: “*And at some point we were ready to do the story about the position of women in Yemen. We had always talked about it at meetings and it made absolute sense to ask Sibylle Bergemann. Firstly, she was a woman. That was a must. The writer was a woman, too. Secondly, we needed someone who knew how to keep a low profile. Every time we met she showed that she could stay discreetly in the background, was friendly, but nevertheless*

understood how to take a photograph. She already had a career behind her, on the other side of the Wall, and the women she had photographed there were always very self-assured. We were very taken with the idea of sending her to a world that was almost entirely sealed off.”

And so, in 1999, Sibylle Bergemann travels to Yemen. A country with a desert climate and mudbrick architecture. One where women are not very visible in public life. As soon as Bergemann raises her camera, they vanish – behind veils, through doors, into shady homes. So she takes pictures of almost empty streets in glaring sunlight, women behind billowing curtains, a sandy alleyway lined by tall buildings the colour of the desert. In the middle of the picture, a child runs towards the camera clutching a parasol that seems to float a few inches above the ground.
Ruth Eichhorn:

RUTH EICHHORN: *“We were very happy with the photos, but it wasn’t reportage. It wasn’t what we mean by reportage. It was a series of portraits plus a feeling.”*

Even so: the story was Bergemann’s breakthrough at GEO. Over the next decade she produced 19 series of pictures for the magazine and its offshoots. In Vietnam, Senegal, Mali, Morocco, Palm Springs and Portugal. Most of the stories were for Johanna Wieland, who was an editor with GEO for many years.

ANNE WAAK: *“You said you became friends almost immediately. When was that?”*

JOHANNA WIELAND: *“That was in 2000 at the airport in Bangkok. We hadn’t met before, then we were waiting around at the airport. She came up to me, her usual self: Sibylle Bergemann dressed the colour of mud, very understated. Not at all globetrotter style, unlike me. Sibylle turned up looking very elegant and beautifully dressed. She was a lady when travelling.”*

She is a lady, and she is tough. The toilet on site might be a shed, the mattress on the hut floor might be thin, the path to the top of the hill might be plastered in leeches that cling to your skin:

JOHANNA WIELAND: *“Sibylle always had this saying: That’s just the way it is. She would look and say: That’s just the way it is.”*

On one occasion Johanna Wieland and Sibylle Bergemann travelled to Dakar, the Senegalese capital, for a fashion week. After a few days Bergemann decided that instead of a classical piece of reportage she would produce a fashion suite – with clothes by the Senegalese designer Oumou Sy. Bergemann cast the models, she went out scouting for locations in the hot, noisy city, and she observed when, where and how the light fell.

JOHANNA WIELAND: *“And one morning Oumou Sy was in a terrible rage, screaming at us that she was off to Paris. I thought: Super, I have got my research together but we don’t have any pictures yet. The Sibylle said: Nope, that’s not on. She said: I’ll get the car. I said: Are we making off with the clothes? Yes. That’s what I mean by tenacious. I buckled inside. She knew that we had to pull this thing off. She had just one day to do it, because the clothes had to be back and because we didn’t want even more hassle with Oumou Sy, so we shot the suite in a single day. Most of the pictures were done on that one day. Pretty crazy. We were exhausted when it was over.”*

That was the day she took that photo with the almost surreal quality. A roadside hut with a roof of corrugated iron, the front entirely in black, white and red, inscribed with the name of a brand of coffee. Outside and alongside are three men, two in outfits like the robes of an African tribe. They reflect the colours of the coffee stall, with the pale blue of the sky and the ocean in the background.

JOHANNA WIELAND: *“...the warriors by the Nescafé stall. I asked her: ‘So what have you seen today?’ In my efforts to work out what this woman spends her time doing. ‘A coffee stall.’ I go: ‘A fashion suite with a coffee stall?’ Then we drove past it again and somehow everything suddenly gelled: those two warriors, the red of the stall, the colours of their clothes. All of that came together in her head on that one day. You know the photos. Perfect.”*

Sibylle Bergemann, for her part, was not at all convinced that her photos were perfect. Quite the reverse. She always worried – albeit half tongue-in-cheek – that she would be found out. That she was not as good as everyone thought. GEO picture editor Ruth Eichhorn has clear memories of the day when the photographer came to Hamburg with prints of the pictures she had taken in Yemen.

RUTH EICHHORN: *“The way it worked was: the photographers would present their work. Usually they brought slides. Those would be projected so the room was darkened. The chief editor, art director, photo editor, note-taker and so on would be sitting there. And afterwards the curtains would open and everyone went their own way. With Sibylle it was different because she came along with an Ilford box of prints. She went to our light table, so everyone was standing alongside. Normally the photographers would then explain what was in the pictures. Sibylle unpacked her box, laid the photos out from left to right. Everyone was looking excitedly, craning their necks, nobody said a word. Sibylle said nothing. And none of our editorial team said a word. When she was finished she said something like: ‘That’s it.’ There was a standing ovation, people clapped but then they left. Sibylle was confused, if relieved. She said: ‘Ah, they all thought it was terrible. It’s all over for me.’ I said: ‘Sibylle, sorry, but they were holding their tongues almost religiously because they were so fascinated.’ Then she was relieved.”*

Relieved, but no less assiduous – driven, even. In 2006 Sibylle Bergemann was told she had cancer. Chemotherapy followed, and periods in hospital. But she carried on working and travelling almost unabated. In 2010 she was in Dakar again for an exhibition of her work. Johanna Wieland accompanied her.

JOHANNA WIELAND: *“I thought we would be sitting by the pool, going to the market. Quite the opposite. She said: We need a model, clothes. Then she took photographs. It was a tremendous effort, but she was tough, as ever. I was enormously worried about her, because I could see: a day with the camera meant a day in bed. I kept remonstrating with her, but she said: ‘You know, it’s not long till I will be resting.’ Yes.” {cries}*

Meret Becker recalls her last encounter with Bergemann:

MERET BECKER: *“I remember they were both in the conservatory. It was just before she died. I’m not sure if it was the last time I saw her. She wasn’t in good shape. The birds had died. I thought it was so awful. She had birds. I wasn’t there, but in her little house she had lots of little birds in a cage. Some animal got in and finished them all off. All dead. That was just before she died and I thought... – So I said: ‘How are you?’ And she goes: ‘Not great.’ With the headscarf,*

turban, pretty as ever. Beautiful as ever. And so composed. And then it was obvious that it wasn’t going to last much longer.” {voice breaks}

Perhaps – it struck me while I was interviewing people who knew Sibylle Bergemann – perhaps one measure for the gap a person leaves when they go is how many people left behind still cry when they remember that person twelve years later.

ANNE WAAK: *“Did she wear perfume?”*

FRIEDA VON WILD: *“Mm. Lancaster.”*

LILY VON WILD: *“I always burst into tears when I smell that perfume. It’s insane. Sometimes I smell it. Oh!”*

FRIEDA VON WILD: *“I really like it too and sometimes I like to put it on for events related to Sibylle, because then I have the feeling that I’ve brought her along with me. But I can’t do it if Lily’s with me.”*

LILY VON WILD: *“If I was an actor it would be great, because it turns the tears on.” {laughs}*

Sibylle Bergemann died on 1 November 2010 at the age of 69 in Margaretenhof. Arno Fischer ten months later. Meret Becker honours their memory in her own way:

MERET BECKER: *“I always go to the graveyard now and say hello to them both. My Dad’s resting there too, and lots of people I know. So I always take a little tour and one of the spots I pass is where the two of them lie. Two little roses, tidy up a bit, but not too much, because they loved their garden.”*

UTE MAHLER: *“That’s the great thing about Sibylle, that the unplanned things kept coming. That she was always on the lookout for her pictures. The things she spent her life photographing are all from the same mould. You can see that. Basically her earliest pictures already contain what she was capturing at the end.”*

ANNE WAAK: *“Did you learn anything from her?”*

JOHANNA WIELAND: *“Not how to see, I’m sure. Because whenever I looked at Sibylle’s pictures later, when she showed them to the team, I always had to wonder: ‘Was I actually there?’ Because although I recognised the people, I didn’t see the beauty or the*