

ERICH MEHL'S LEGACY: WORLD WITHOUT WALLS

Erich Mehl was a visionary. All his life he firmly believed in a unified Germany. With his work of sustaining the dialog between East and West, he turned his vision into reality.

"I do not fear anything anymore" - Erich Mehl's immense courage, bright spirit, and brave heart still resound in these words and remind us of a great mind who changed the course of 20th century history. His work in the intellectual sphere enabled his dream of unified Germany and Europe to come true. Behind the scenes, Mehl's vision of a world without walls, of a Germany united in its culture and heritage, brought about a lasting change; a change in the minds of the audiences and, ultimately, an end to the ideological walls of the Cold War.

When Erich Mehl came to the East German Studio in Babelsberg in the early 1950s, few of DEFA's cultural officials and filmmakers knew that his presence will dramatically change their cinema, their export policies, and even the politics of divided Germany. During the Cold War, Erich Mehl was one of the most influential and successful film producers and private financiers who enabled the dialog between East and West, as well as the fruitful, 35-year long cooperation and film

exchange between DEFA and West Germany. Without Mehl's engagement and hard work, hundreds of early East German films would have remained unknown to the rest of the world.

Erich Mehl was the first independent producer of the Federal Republic who entered a lasting and mutually valued collaboration with DEFA. With unwavering enthusiasm and remarkable determination, Mehl negotiated hard for five years with the West German government in order to enable the premiere of Wolfgang Staudte's film *Man of Straw* (*Untertan*, 1951) in 1956. Moreover, when in 1954, his government issued a ban on East German film import and any type of film collaborations with DEFA, Mehl came up with a new innovative strategy.

Mehl founded a film company named „Pandora“ in Stockholm in politically neutral Sweden and produced together with the East German studio four films that were successfully shown on the European continent and in the US: Wolfgang Staudte's "Bonfire" ("Leuchtfeuer", 1954), Eugen York's „Madame de Scuderi" ("Fräulein von Scuderi" 1957), Arthur Pohl's „Casino Affair" ("Spielbankaffäre", 1957) and Ernesto Remani's „The Beauty" ("Die Schönste", 1957/1959). Not only did Mehl manage to circumvent the 1954 ban of the

West German government on film collaborations with DEFA, but he also made a lasting contribution to the cultural and artistic exchange between Eastern and Western Europe.

DEFA's collaborations from 1954 until 1957 with Pandora are considered highly important for the dialogue between the two German states. Drawing on the works of European Classicism, these films complied with the founding myth of the GDR as the successor of German enlightened thought and with the need for education of the audience in the ideals of socialism. The joint character of these films facilitated the exploitation of German and French classical works from a socially critical perspective that, in some cases, allowed the artists to voice their concerns about the uneasy relationship among culture, art, and politics in a divided Germany.

More than 35 years lasted this collaboration with DEFA Aussenhandel, the major distribution company in East Germany. In a letter dated from September 10, 1990, the DEFA Aussenhandel director for film export, Otto, personally thanked Erich Mehl with the words: "We would like to use this opportunity to cordially thank you for our collaboration of more than 3 and a half decades. During this time, you have acquired the rights for more than 100 DEFA films and made them

known to audiences with unsurpassed vigilance and skill. With your unwavering enthusiasm, you have by large contributed to establishing DEFA's worldwide reputation. All contracts you have signed were carried out in a correct manner and your friendly and pleasant way of doing business has significantly enabled the export of our films."

The fact that Erich Mehl did not fit into an East-West pattern is still largely remembered by anyone who knew him. His dear friend and film director, Will Tremper remembered: ""He was a blond, athletic Rolls-Royce driver, with very vivid brown eyes... Erich Mehl paid for all as promised and always on time. ... his word was and is until today pure gold." In 1998, Hans Borgelt, Berlinale PR for many years, called Mehl a correct, fair, modest but also very generous and loyal partner whose love to film went beyond any business or financial interest. In his words, "Mehl's work and style proves the prejudice that the film industry is based on lies, wrong."

Erich Mehl lived to see his dream come true. In 1989, the Berlin Wall fell- a logical development after he and DEFA worked towards challenging the prejudices in Germans and Europeans alike. Mehl died peacefully in 2010 in Lugano, Switzerland. His legacy, however, in the form of numerous files of film documentation, valuable personal

objects, strife towards justice and truth, and, above all, the dream of a World Without Walls will always be preserved for the future generations.

Many of Erich Mehl's films are today recognized as cult films, yet beyond that they are monuments and witnesses of a bygone era, when European cinema was at its height. The European and world cinema owe more than 300 brilliant works to Erich Mehl's work. Today, Erich Mehl's legacy is carefully preserved by his long-term partner and the director of the Erich Mehl Foundation Berolina, Dr. Gabriele Ott. In her own words, "as a true friend and a loyal partner, Erich Mehl was always there. He could turn grey days bright. With wisdom and serenity, he saw the true nature of things, he was free and open to the world."