

Sara F Hall

PhD, Professor

Introduction to MEIER 19

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University of Illinois at Chicago

Erich Schmid's film *Meier 19* tells of a thaw that took place in Zurich over the course of the 1960s. A shot of skaters enjoying a pleasant day on the ice on Lake Zurich, which had frozen over for the first time in many years, functions as a keystone in his political documentary. Under the spring sun, the lake's icy surface begins to melt, and in the course of the film we see metaphorically how the ripples pool outward from there. The voice-over commentary compares the frozen lake to the frozen state of international relations during the height of the Cold War. I would also suggest that we compare the frozen lake to the appearance of tranquility and neutrality that enshrouded Swiss politics and social relations in the post World War II era. As the lake thawed, dissent was brewing and tempers and passions would soon boil over in this seemingly idyllic snowscape.

The youth movement took center stage in this social thaw. They, like youth in Paris, Prague, Frankfurt and San Francisco, refused to conform to the standards of social

relations set by their conservative elders. They expected to be able to enter a café in a mini-skirt, attend a concert as a vibrant and excited crowd, and to put the city's unused institutions and spaces to socially productive use. And they were willing to protest and put themselves in harms' way for the sake of those rights. As in the case the other cities I mentioned, the municipal police became the enemy in their war for social and political emancipation. The idea of the police as enemy, rather than as the benevolent keepers of civic order, shocked a public who felt comforted and protected by the old image of the constabulary. The mainstream press demonstrated society's ambivalence toward this shift in attitude with headlines that alternated between referring to the youth protesters as out-of-control mobs of misfits and condemning the police for their brutal methods and questionable motivations. The social thaw amounted to the creation of a new layer of ice—that that was accruing between the public and the police.

This is what was going on outside the police force. A parallel process of ice-breaking and icy reinforcement was occurring on the inside. In 1963, a young police officer Kurt Meier begins to suspect his colleagues

and superiors at the Zurich police force of various forms of professional corruption. His suspicions begin with an event that was at its time the biggest scandal to strike the Swiss police. Envelopes of cash that had been set aside for police salaries was stolen, seemingly in right under the noses of the presiding authorities, from the safe at the police headquarters. Meier began to question the implausible alibis and, frankly, excuses that came from those who should have been under suspicion. Along with his skepticism, he voiced aloud his concern that the very people who should have been under suspicion, the police officials, were leading the investigation into the crime. Frustrated that his concerns were going unheard within the police administration, Meier was forced to go outside, to the press with his concerns.

What goes on from there is a battle over one of the most sacred values in Swiss society—jurisdiction over the maintenance of law and order. Schmid highlights this struggle in the scene where Meier recalls his encounter a large American car on a narrow Zurich boulevard. The car drives down the wrong side of the road and when Meier challenges the driver about his disorderly behavior, the driver flaunts his status as a high-ranking

military official. It becomes clear that people of his stature are not required to obey the law and that when their flouting of the law is brought to the attention of the police, the police sweep it under the rug for the sake of political expediency. Meier, unlike the protesting youth on the streets and at the concert halls, was not interested in fundamentally changing the definitions of law and order; he simply wanted to see the institution responsible for the maintenance of those values held accountable for their own disorderly conduct.

In one of those unlikely marriages brought about by the winds of change, Meier's case becomes a focal point for the youth in Zurich's protest movement. The unlikeliness of this pairing of interestes is not lost on Schmid, who uses irony as a rhetorical principle in his film. The very opening of the film is dominated by abrupt changes in tone as Meier recounts in one breath the brutality of his father and in another the idyllic atmosphere in his childhood hometown. Swiss economic and social history are constitutive factors in the ironies that Schmid captures on film—the town in French Switzerland that Meier moves to to escape the brutality of his childhood home is completely idealized at

first. But then another truth comes out. First Meier says that the French Swiss are helpful and display no envy (unlike the Swiss Germans, he quips). But then, he notes, when economic crisis hit the town, the atmosphere is poisoned by the fear and jealousy that comes of hardship. The icy surface cracks and unpleasantness erupts. The irony cannot be missed when Meier states that from this town, he returned to Zurich to become a police officer which in his view was a "crisis-proof job."

As we learned yesterday in Schmid's film about the injustices inflicted upon the writer known as Peter Surava, anyone who viewed policing as crisis-proof in post-war Switzerland had bought into the illusion that European fascism had not impacted the neutral and reasonable Swiss judicial and law enforcement system. The imbrication of Swiss justice with the injustices of the previous era are the unspoken subtext of the police scandal and the youth rebellion recounted in MEIER 19. It is hard for us in the United States, and especially in Chicago, to comprehend the seriousness of some of what is at stake in this film if we view the events only at a superficial level. It is astonishing to imagine that the theft of a few policemen's

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pay envelopes was in fact the biggest scandal to strike the police to that date. It is hard to fathom why students would in fact protest so vehemently for their right to greet the Rolling Stones at the airport or to wear an orange mini-skirt into a café. This is not the sanctioning of lynchings such as what occurred in the US South or protest against drafting young Americans into a war that had yet to be convincingly justified in the public's eye. But is the gap between such events as occurred in Switzerland and those that were occurring in the US really so great? The maintenance of a certain kind of law and order, and especially of the appearance of a calm and self-evident social equilibrium in Zurich was actually a matter of skating on very thin ice. The small crack that Kurt Meier discovered quickly turned into a gaping hole in the Swiss justice system's façade of neutrality and rationality.

As Erich Schmid noted yesterday, MEIER 19 is a very different film from ER NANNTE SICH SURAVA, stylistically speaking. The Surava film was a straight-forward documentary; where as MEIER 19 is a film that reflects on the process of documentary film making and the mediated process by which Kurt Meier became a highly symbolic public figure. Schmid uses

staged reenactments of the criminal act of stealing the pay checks in a shadowy film noir style accompanied by a rock guitar soundtrack. The story of what truly happened has yet to be revealed, but the guitar soundtrack claims that story for the Rolling Stones generation. It shall be theirs and ours to tell. The staged television interview that opens and punctuates the film reminds us that we are not actually engaged in understanding Kurt Meier, the private man. This film is an investigation into the value of MEIER 19 for the 1960s counter culture and the process of the transmission of that value to a contemporary media audience. Schmid himself does not appear in this film as he did in the SURAVA film. This is a the story of Schmid's whole generation's relationship with the man, not his own process of discovery as a filmmaker. We as an audience come to understand the significance of MEIER 19 simultaneous to the protagonist's own process of self-discovery. We watch him, shown on a TV monitor, watching video recordings of others telling stories of what he meant and means to them. On these video screens Meier sometimes looks small and helpless, until the camera pulls in closer to the video screen and his visage comes to view our entire view of the scene. His gains in

presence and strength and for a brief moment appears to be the agent, not the object, of his own history.

In line with the work of American documentarist Erol Morris, MEIER 19 is a documentary indictment of all that the criminal justice system hopes that we will take for granted. Schmid's skill as a visual investigator allows us not just to see, but also to feel, the how historical precedent should motivate us not to be afraid to contribute to the thaw.