

Interview

Remembering student-movement firebrand Rudi Dutschke

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On December 24, 1979, Germany lost a shining star - Rudi Dutschke, leader of the 1960s student movement that demanded social change. DW looks back at the man and his times in an exclusive interview with Dutschke's wife.

Forty years ago, during the 1960s, masses of young people looked to the eloquent, charismatic Rudi Dutschke to be their voice for change in German society.

Rebellion was rolling through streets. Together with the SDS, the Socialist German Student Union, Dutschke and other protestors exposed what they considered flaws in German culture: the stern, undemocratic reforms being imposed on universities and society, and the hypocrisy of former Nazis once again holding positions of power in government, just twenty years after World War II. They also joined others around the world in protesting the US war in Vietnam.

On the home-front, Dutschke and the rest of the anti-authoritarian "1968," - or 68ers generation as they came to be known - turned the country upside-down, altering Germany forever. But the social changes they prompted were not without their price.

Earlier, in June 1967, student Benno Ohnesorg had already been killed by a policeman during Berlin demonstrations, enraging students and hardening opposition against the government.

As the student movement developed, Dutschke became a beacon for change for many, although for others, he and his fellow protestors were a nuisance. Some Germans confused them with other rebels who splintered off and formed terrorist groups.

Eventually, Dutschke was singled out by conservative media, particularly the Bild tabloid published by Axel Springer Press, whom students blamed for stoking hatred against the student leader.

On April 11, 1968, Josef Bachmann shot Dutschke on a West Berlin street. Dutschke barely survived the bullets to his brain, and suffered health problems for the rest of his life. He died 11 years after the shooting, on Christmas Eve 1979 in Denmark - from drowning in the bathtub following an epileptic seizure. He left behind two children, and his wife was pregnant with a third at the time of his death.

Today, on Dec. 24, 2009, Deutsche Welle looks back at Rudi Dutschke - a man who helped change

German society forever. In an exclusive interview, Deutsche Welle spoke with the person who knew him best, his American wife, Gretchen Dutschke-Klotz.

Deutsche Welle: What was Rudi Dutschke like as a person?

Gretchen Dutschke-Klotz – He was a very energetic person, he was concerned about other people. If he saw them in difficult situations, he wanted to help them. He studied, he read - he read all the time...he liked sports, he liked to run.

What was he trying to achieve in his political activities as a student?

In the early period, in the 60s, there were many liberation movements occurring in developing countries, and he thought that students and critical people in the West could support those liberation movements. He also thought that the social and economic structures were created in such a way that only a very small group of people were profiting from them and that many other people were suffering.

The developed world was split between the Soviet sphere and the West, but he was very critical of the Soviet type of communism. He thought that there was a possible kind of communism that could be liberating, but it didn't exist in the world at that time. It was a theoretical idea that people could exist without being exploited - and that there could be a more just society.

How would you describe the anti-authoritarian movement here in Germany at that time?

Part of it was founded on the Frankfurt School, which was a theoretical study of authoritarianism and anti-authoritarianism. They based their studies on Germany and Nazism. Most of the people from the Frankfurt School went to the United States because they were being oppressed by the Nazis, but they continued their studies there - which became theories of authoritarian structures in any society.

But the students in the 1960s, in Germany, who had to deal with the fact that their parents had supported Hitler, their thought was "we don't want this to ever happen again, so what can we do?" Essentially, what that translated into was: "we have to end the authoritarian structures - in the family, in schools and in the workplace, in the economy, everywhere"...So the anti-authoritarian movement was about breaking down authoritarian structures which they thought would prevent a new kind of fascism from ever developing again in Germany.

Do you think the protestors and students were ultimately successful?

Yes, I think they were. Of course, there are going to be neo-Nazis in Germany, and there are neo-Nazis in Denmark, and everywhere. It seems to be impossible to get rid of that kind of thinking. But I think Germany has made huge strides in trying to break down the kinds of structure that led to Nazism.

After you finished your bachelor's degree in the United States, you came to Europe and traveled around, eventually meeting Rudi in Berlin in 1964. What was your first impression of him?

It was at a cafe that had big tables so there were a lot of people sitting there, but he was the only one who had a huge stack of books in front of him, so I thought "okay, he's very studious." He was nice and friendly...he was just a really cool guy.

How would you describe the impact the student movement was making here on society in

the 60s as it was going on? Was it mocked, or appreciated?

A Prague demonstration in 1968Bildunterschrift: Großansicht des Bildes mit der Bildunterschrift:
Demonstrations were occurring around the world in 1968, like here in Prague

By the beginning of 1966, I think the press was clear that this was something growing fast, and there were more and more demonstrations, and each protest was bigger than the last one. They began to see it as something threatening them. The Springer Press in particular started to come out with really nasty articles against the students, and started denouncing them. At some point, in 1966, they started seeing Rudi as a spokesperson for this thing, and they started picking him out as the person they should really denounce and attack.

How did Rudi respond to the media attacks - did he experience them as a form of violence?

I think it made him angry, but I don't think he felt it was threatening. I did! But he didn't. He could certainly see that the society was polarizing though.

Then, at Christmas, in 1967, someone in a church actually attacked Rudi. The man had a cane and started beating Rudi with this cane, and some other people came and held Rudi, so he couldn't get away or fight back, so this man could just slaughter Rudi, basically - and this was inside a church! Outrageous.

Josef Bachmann attempted to kill Rudi on April 11, 1968. In recent years, there has been speculation that the former East German police, the Stasi, may have had a hand in the assassination attempt. Is that plausible, especially since Rudi grew up in the German Democratic Republic and fled to the West in 1961?

Rudi felt he was being watched by the Stasi. Certainly the Stasi had one of the most encompassing secret services in the world. They were everywhere...He felt betrayed by the GDR when he got his Abitur [high school diploma] and wasn't allowed to go to the university. After that, their behavior was what was to be expected.

I looked in the Stasi files myself, and saw in the latter 70s that they believed that Rudi was the head of a world-wide conspiracy to overthrow the GDR! [laughs] If that is what the Stasi thought, even though it was insane, then they were obviously afraid of him and had an interest in neutralizing him.

This December 24th marks the 30th anniversary of Rudi's death. Thinking back to those tumultuous political times in the decade before his death, and comparing that to the present, do you think a new movement is on the horizon?

History has certainly moved on. And the world is sitting in an economic crisis which is probably not going to be resolved any time soon. Considering that the resources are running out, there probably will have to be a different kind of economic system. I think at that time, in the 1960s, people weren't at all clear about the resource and climate problem. That came later, in the 70s.

Today, we are faced with this very huge crisis that requires a different kind of economic system, but no one has any kind of idea how to solve it. Maybe a lot of people think there is some easy, technological way of solving the problem; but probably, it's that no one really has an idea how things could be organized in an alternative way.

P.S.

* Interview: Louisa Schaefer. Editor: Jennifer Abramsohn. From DW-World.De:
<http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,5031510,00.html?maca=en-sascul-992-rdf>