

BREATHING LIFE INTO STONE

A Documentary by Katinka Zeuner

DOK LEIPZIG
GERMAN
COMPETITION
2018

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LOGLINE

Working together with those in mourning, stonemason Michael Spengler translates life stories into stone. The headstones take shape step by step. And, in the people themselves, a new connection to the deceased—and to life itself—develops.

SYNOPSIS

A circus wagon and a shipping container serve as stonemason Michael Spengler's workshop. It is here that he receives people in mourning. Together they design headstones that tell of the deceased. Mr. and Mrs. Neustadt have lost their two-year-old son. Through their dialogue with Michael they find the words to express their emotions, words that become form and substance—their child's breath is to be represented in a fragile limestone. Hardburg Stolle is a woman of few words, through Michael's guidance she dauntlessly swings the hammer that splits a boulder and feels a sense of strength that had been long buried. The Jacob family searches for the essence of their grandfather's life: lover of nature, bon vivant, patriarch. What should an object that encapsulates him look like? Michael approaches the material and the people with great sensitivity and accompanies each family on a process that often takes months, one decision at a time. The film tells the story of this difficult and intimate process and shows how working on the stone makes death concrete in the truest sense of the word. As the stone takes on its form, the families discover a new relationship with the deceased—and to life.



THE PROTAGONISTS

In a blue-striped hoodie and wearing a faded flat cap, Stonemason **MICHAEL SPENGLER** seems boyish in spite of his 55 years. He loves the people that come to him, as “grieving makes people pleasant, open, and honest.” He feels at home with these people, more so than in the outside world, which to him often seems full of strained drama. Michael Spengler earnestly and painstakingly devotes himself to each new gravestone and its challenges, be it connecting a granite boulder with sculpted sandstone or the representing in stone the noisy breathing of a sick child. He draws strength from helping people back into life. Only here, surrounded by death, has he come to really appreciate each individual moment of life.

ANNE UND ULI NEUSTADT’s son Josef was only two years old when he died. Guided by their feelings and impulses, Josef’s parents move through the process of shaping a denkwerk for their son. The stone should tell of Josef’s strained breathing. But how deep must a funnel be to represent breath? How many tool marks should remain in order to represent how heavy his breathing was? Gingerly the parents approach each detail; they act without urgency, they need to take this time. Their daughter Klara designs the symbols for Josef’s date of birth and date of death: a star and a bird. While the stone takes on its form, a baby grows in Anne Neustadt’s belly. When Jette is six weeks old, they all set up the stone with combined strength. It is as if Josef has moved into a new home.



RUTH JACOB's father had a long and fulfilling life, and she and her children want the gravestone to do justice to his many sides. A bright granite boulder from their village in Italy is the starting point. Michael Spengler encourages the family to tell things about the deceased and asks playfully: "If your father had been a tree, what kind of tree would he have been? Which metal? Which color?" Different perspectives on the deceased come to light. Something needs to be added to the granite boulder—but what material, what form, what statement? It is a tough struggle, a fight between doing justice to the father and still being satisfied with the result themselves. And just as Ruth Jacob thinks that they have succeeded, Michael raises the question of the font to be used for the lettering. Engraving her father's death into the stone is another difficult step.

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At the age of seventeen, **HARDBURG STOLLE**'s husband fled the German Democratic Republic (GDR), an act that shaped the rest of his life. East-West, two worlds—two lives and the absolute conviction of his decision, all this is to be represented in the stone. Michael develops a model: a split boulder, both sides separated and yet also connected by a brick path. At first, when splitting the boulder, Hardburg Stolle taps gently on the wedges. Then she swings the hammer dauntlessly. The sound of the iron tools rings out. Hardburg Stolle beams, clearly enjoying that she is making a *denkwerk* for her husband with her own energy. When Michael sets up the stone she vacillates between a sense of pride and sorrow.





INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR KATINKA ZEUNER

by Bettina Hohorst

„Breathing Life Into Stone“ tells of people who are making a headstone for a loved one. How did you, right in the middle of your life, come to be dealing with such a subject?

We aren't only confronted with death at the end of our lives, but also in the middle of it. My mother died six years ago. Her death burst right into the middle of my life and I had to find a way of dealing with the loss. At that time I made a denkwerk for my mother with Michael Spengler. I was deeply moved by the process that I experienced there and impressed by his work. When the headstone was finished, I asked him whether I could do a film about him.

Is this a film about death?

The film is called "Breathing Life Into Stone" and it is in fact a film about life. It's a film about how one can shape a farewell to a loved one and it's about getting back into life, albeit a life that has changed. It is a spirited and powerful film. That was important to me, and I think it comes across that way quite well.



Bidding farewell to loved ones is a very intimate situation. How did you find the protagonists?

I found most of the protagonists through Michael Spengler. He asked some of his customers if I could contact them. Then I wrote to them about who I was and what I intended to do. Most of them immediately agreed that I could be there. And then we were just there, with a very small team, always just two of us: me as director and cinematographer, and a sound engineer. We quickly developed a very easygoing and familiar relationship with everyone. They didn't feel bothered and after a while didn't even notice the camera's presence. I think one of the things that made this possible was that I had told everyone that I had gone through the same process with Michael Spengler as well. This laid the basis for their trust towards me.

Yes, one gets the feeling that the people act very naturally, it's really as if you weren't there.

Of course Michael Spengler only asked certain people. And all of these were people who – perhaps by chance – have a certain sense of mission. Not in the sense that they necessarily want to be in the spotlight, but rather that they believe that people in mourning should become visible. The Neustadt family are definitely like this, they purposefully tell their story to the outside world. They have a blog in which they tell of their life and the experiences they had with their son. The others in the film didn't necessarily have this same explicit intention, but they were happy that their deceased would get some special attention through the film and that some part of them would be recorded and would go out into the world.

Did your protagonists surprise you?

Yes, Hardburg Stolle surprised me. It was impressive to see what was released through the fact that she helped split the stone herself. I really wasn't expecting that after meeting her for the first time. She came to Michael Spengler just two months after the death of her husband, meaning that she was still experiencing very acute sorrow. And two months later, together with Michael Spengler, she split this stone in two. I could really feel a very strong change in her. She was just totally happy on that day.

The film consists of a long observational scenes. The camera is never intrusive. How did such a shoot take place? How did you manage to capture the situation like this?

There were only ever two of us on the set so that we would disturb people as little as possible. We never intervened during the meetings with the deceased's loved ones. Those were very fragile situations and it was important not to be intrusive. The people were always absorbed in what they were going through. And we were just there. We accompanied everything with a lot of calmness.

This unobtrusiveness also says something about the film. It too isn't obtrusive, it doesn't tell me what I should think. It gives me a lot of space to determine that for myself. Was that part of the concept from the beginning?

At the very beginning I went in with the feeling that "Not everything that results from the death of a loved one is terrible. That's what I want to show." And then I said this to an acquaintance who had lost her father, and she said to me: "Well for me there's nothing positive about it." And I think that really opened my eyes early on in the process. I realized that that's exactly what I don't want to do—I don't want to tell anyone how they should feel in such a situation. And this led to the film being so closely oriented towards the families' experiences and not towards any statement that I would be trying to make. I just wanted to show the individual processes that people go through. And the families are very different, they deal with their situation in very different ways. It's also not at all the same thing to lose one's grandfather as it is to lose one's infant child. My goal was to show the space



that Michael Spengler creates. A space in which people can devote themselves to their sorrow and to the deceased, something that isn't always possible in the world outside. They are in a situation that is completely exceptional, and yet still have to function in their day-to-day lives. But in this place different rules apply. My desire to show this was the starting-point in making this film.

In the film, Michael Spengler almost becomes a kind of moderator. Was he always envisaged to take on such a role, or was the film originally envisaged to also be more about him?

Originally I had the idea of making the film more a portrait about him, because he is a very fascinating person in his own right. But I quickly realized that my focus was on the space that he created through his work and his personality. And it was clear that if the focus were on his work, then the loved ones of the deceased should be the central figures—anything else wouldn't match up with his approach. Michael Spengler himself says that he is a translator. He translates life stories into stone. In many situations he is also a moderator or mediator. A colleague once said to me that he is kind of like a midwife. In any case he is a companion throughout the process. He doesn't see himself in the role of an artist who creates something from within himself. He brings his skills to the table, makes them available. He says that what he is best at is taking something found and turning it into something. And that's what he does. He hears entire life stories and translates these into form and material, all the while including the next-of-kin in the process.

I very much like the scenes in which he is hewing the rock, because I think that the development of the people becomes apparent in the changes in the stones.

Yes, there is a certain parallel between the process that the people go through and the headstone's taking shape. At first it's a giant block, a hard block that's very difficult to deal with. But if you approach it in the right way, if you take the time and really allow yourself to engage with its texture and character, then you can form and shape it and put something of yourself into it. And in this way you can counter that feeling of helplessness. Michael once said that if you approach a stone with a sense of urgency then it takes its revenge by "falling on your foot." In a way, this also applies to the process of mourning as well.

You yourself made a headstone for your mother and you say that the film is like making another stone to you. What do you mean by that?

Back then I made the headstone for my mother, but of course I also made it for me. And that's a really central aspect in this whole process. People make headstones for the deceased, but they go through the process for themselves. When my mother's headstone was set up, a certain stage of mourning was over, but dealing with the loss was not. My decision to make the film was also a decision to continue engaging with this topic intensively and over a long period of time. And the film offered me a creative framework in which to do this. Perhaps this framework is what makes it similar to the process with the stone. You develop something you can touch... you can't touch a film quite in the same way as a headstone, of course, but they both have to be shaped creatively. And this process of shaping and forming gives you the opportunity to occupy yourself with the themes of mourning, death, and farewell.

One of the functions of a gravestone like this is saying farewell to someone. Is the film a farewell to sorrow?

Of course my sorrow has become something quite different six years later. But my sorrow at losing my mother will accompany me my whole life. The way in which it is part of my life is changing all the time. Completing this film was a new step for me and I'm curious to see how things will go from here. On the one hand I have a feeling of "that's enough about this." But on the other hand it's not up to you, people that are close to you die, so the question remains. It's a part of life.



BIO- AND FILMOGRAPHIES

DIRECTOR

KATINKA ZEUNER was born in 1978 in Berlin. She studied Cinematography and Documentary Film Directing at the filmArche Berlin from 2006 to 2009. Since then she has been making documentary films as a director and cinematographer. The films in which she is involved tell of people who voluntarily or out of necessity follow their own path beyond social conventions—be it the maker of headstone who helps people through their grief, the Jewish lesbian artists and their Happy Hippy Jew Bus, queer techno DJs in the Berlin party scene, the man who hears voices and turns them into theater or the group of German Jewish children that fled to Palestine in 1939 and later set up a flourishing kibbutz there. Her films exhibit a great closeness to the protagonists and invite the audience to encounter unfamiliar situations. Before becoming a filmmaker, Katinka Zeuner completed a degree in Political Science. Dealing with various social power structures deeply influenced her view of the world and her approach to documentary filmmaking. She participates in ESoDoc 2014 with her project „Breathing Life Into Stone“. Katinka Zeuner is a member of AGDOK (German Documentary Association).



FILMOGRAPHY AS DIRECTOR AND CINEMATOGRAPHER (SELECTION)

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| 2018 | Breathing Life Into Stone
77 min, Documentary
D & C: Katinka Zeuner,
www.dersteinzumleben-film.de |
| 2018 | The Freedom Last But One
65 min, Documentary
D: Stefan Auch, C: Katinka Zeuner
www.dievorletztefreiheit.com |
| 2018 | All my neighbours
45 min, experimental Documentary
D: Bettina Hohorst, C: Katinka Zeuner |
| 2013 | Sounds Queer
60 min, Documentary
D: Dan Bahl, C: Katinka Zeuner
www.soundsqueer.de |
| 2012 | Jalda And Anna - First Generation After
75 min, Documentary
D & C: Katinka Zeuner, William Dieterle Sonderpreis 2013
www.jalda-und-anna.de |
| 2009 | It Was A Different Life
38 min, Documentary
D: Jan Puchstein & Katinka Zeuner, C: Katinka Zeuner |



EDITOR

ANNA PESAVENTO was born in 1982 and has called Berlin home since 2002. She developed a fascination for non-fiction genres in her studies and during a one-year stay in Vancouver. Since then Anna Pesavento has directed and worked on several documentary film projects as editor and cinematographer. Her work in film encompasses both classical documentary forms as well as experimental ones. She is also freelance cinematographer of numerous commercial artist portraits, image productions, and concert films.

FILMOGRAPHY (SELECTION)

2013 **Conversation With My Mother**

9 min, Experimental Film

D: Daniela Mezzapesa, C & E: Anna Pesavento

2012 **Casa Luz**

64 min, Documentary

D: Navina Khatib & Alexandra Weltz, e: Anna Pesavento

www.parkafilm.cc/portfolio/casaluz

2009 **B.i.N. - Berlin in November**

93 min, Documentary

D: Victor Schefe, C & E: Anna Pesavento

www.berlin-im-november.de



WITH

Michael Spengler

Anne Neustadt

Uli Neustadt

Klara Neustadt

Jette Neustadt

Josef Konrad Neustadt 2013 - 2015

Ruth Jacob

Matthias Jacob

Johannes Jacob

Dietrich Jacob 1922 - 2015

Hardburg Stolle

Arion Juritza

Annett Mansfeld

Cliewe Juritza 1966 - 2016

Ute Kirchmann

Matthias Heinz

Christine J. Schmidt

TEAM

Director, Cinematographer, Producer

Editor

Sound Recording

Second Camera

Sounddesign

Color Correction

Design

Translation

Subtitles

Katinka Zeuner

Anna Pesavento

Birte Gerstenkorn

Joel Vogel

Martin Nevoigt

Oliver Eberhard

Anna Pesavento

Brooke Trezise

Sebastian Bodirsky

Mo Aufderhaar

Jonas Klein

Markus Fiebig

Lissi Dobler



FORMAT INFORMATION

77 min

1:1,78

Color, Stereo

DCP 25

OV german, UT english

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