

The Making of

Priests of the Condemned

I had read in the newspaper about a leprosy station in Kathmandu, opened on the initiative of two Germans. I contacted them. Besides their personal involvement – their godchild Puskal (whom they later adopted) had been forced to leave his leprous father behind, in Nepal – I discovered an interesting socio-political aspect: Much earlier, in 1972, an effective cure for leprosy had been developed. This combination therapy had made the island of Malta completely leprosy-free. A worldwide launch of the medication, however, was prevented by the pharmaceutical lobby.

Since several years, the German leprosy station in Kathmandu successfully used this multi-drug therapy; and now, in 1991, the 80 year old German scientist decided to come to Nepal during our film shooting.

The film's budget of € 125,000 was financed with subsidies from both the Hamburg and NRW film boards, plus a contribution from the Protestant Church, and ARTE TV coproduction funds. It was my first film with Jan Betke as cameraman, whom I knew as a camera assistant from previous films. I did the sound recording myself. In addition, we had a driver and an interpreter.

Our six-week shoot began and ended in Kathmandu, where we had a good starting point, within the Sewa Kendra leprosy station. It was located near the Pashupati Temple, where many lepers lived off the alms they received from temple visitors. The film had two main topics: the two Germans' impressive humanitarian aid project, plus the cultural and religious context of a disease that, in Nepal, still causes rejection by family and society.

As soon as we left Kathmandu, we found ourselves in another century: with fields cultivated by hand, roads passable only by donkey cart, and villages without electricity and sewerage; the children having neither physician nor school; and finally their parents, appeasing their gods and demons with sacrificial offerings.

Our journey led us first to Pokhara, a mountain town with a leprosy hospital, right at the foot of the Himalayas. They had a workshop for prostheses made from such recycled material as PVC drain pipes. Many lepers have to undergo surgery – after trying to hide the disease, until it is too late to save their dying limbs. After an amputation, they are stigmatized as lepers, with nearly no prospect of returning to their village homes.

Thus, leprosy colonies have developed in remote areas, where the expelled are left to their own fate. Khokana on the Bagmati River was such a desolate place. We saw people vegetating like animals in stables, wrapped in rags, on straw sacks full of bugs. Having lost their fingers to leprosy, many were unable to even fend off the vermin. People in miserable condition.

Here we also met the now-blind father of German-adopted Puskal. He bitterly complained about never expecting to see his disappeared son again.

Jan Betke's respectful, empathic portrayal allowed the inhabitants of this horrific place to express dignity and personality, despite their physical disfigurement.

In subtropical Terai, on Nepal's southern border to India, we found a different way of dealing with discrimination. This leprosy village, established by lepers themselves, was organized as a self-help community. No longer accepting their illness as a "God-given" fate, the sick inhabitants were caring for their own needs. This emancipation from stigmatization was a real sign of hope for us.

Back in the Kathmandu Valley, we had a lucky and rare opportunity to document a procession that takes place only every twelve years. Thousands and thousands of pilgrims pulled and towed a swaying, house-high procession chariot through the roads. We were immediately swallowed up by the crowd and swept away – without our feet even touching the ground. Immediately following the prologue, the procession would later open our film.

In addition to my editor Romy Schumann's 80-minute film for theatrical release, Yola Grimm edited a 45-minute TV version, from further film footage. Entitled *Hell on Earth*, that film focused on Sewa Kendra, the German leprosy station, and was aired by public regional broadcaster WDR, for charity fundraising.

The feature-length film *Priests of the Condemned* was certified "Valuable" by the German Film Rating Commission. It had its premiere at the Hof International Film Festival. The English version was made available to Nepalese television, for free.

(Oliver Herbrich, 2016)