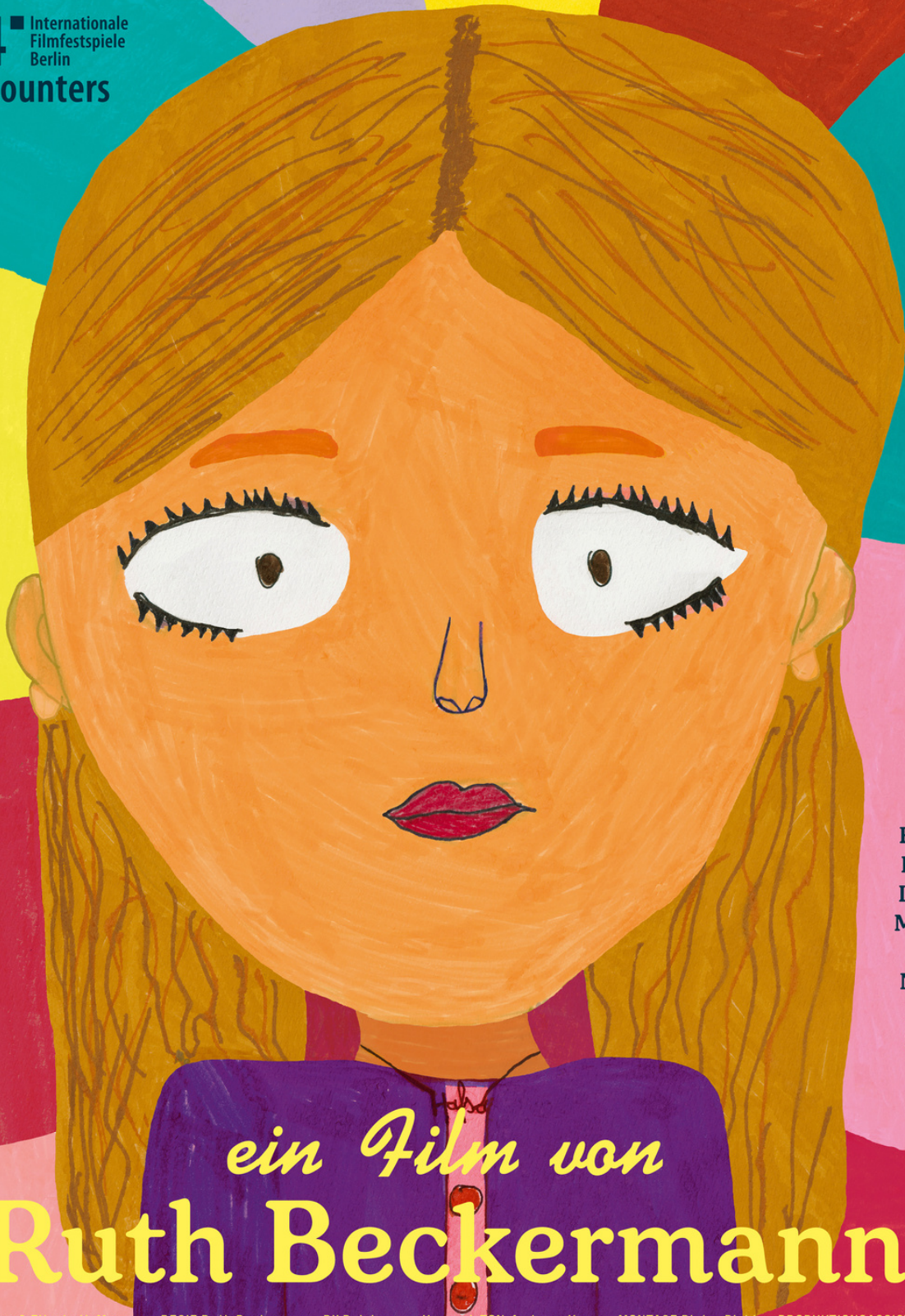


Favoriten



74^{te} Internationale
Filmfestspiele
Berlin
Encounters

mit
Ilkay
Idiskut



und
Alper, Amina,
Arian, Beid,
Dani, Danilo,
David, Davut,
Eda, Egemen,
Elif, Enes,
Fatima, Furkan,
Hafsa, Ibrahim,
Liemar, Majeda,
Manessa, Melisa,
Mohammed,
Natalia, Nerjiss,
Rebeca, Selen,
Selin, Teodora,
Valentin

ein Film von
Ruth Beckermann

BUCH Ruth Beckermann & Elisabeth Menasse REGIE Ruth Beckermann BILD Johannes Hammel TON Andreas Hamza MONTAGE Dieter Pichler PRODUKTIONSASSISTENZ Jana Waldhör
PRODUKTION Ruth Beckermann Filmproduktion 2024 MIT Kindern der Schule Bernhardstalgasse MIT UNTERSTÜTZUNG VON Österreichischem Filminstitut,
Filmfonds Wien, ORF Film/Fernseh-Abkommen und FISA INFOS AUF www.ruthbeckermann.com

RUTH
BECKERMANN

österreichisches
Film Institut

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WIEN

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filmstandort
austria

ORF Film/Fernseh-
Abkommen

AUTLOOK
FILMSALES

Ruth Beckermann Filmproduktion presents:

FAVORITEN

Austria, 2024, 118 min.

A film by
Ruth Beckermann

PRESS NOTES

World premiere
Berlinale 2024
Encounters

Press materials can be downloaded [HERE](#).

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Short synopsis

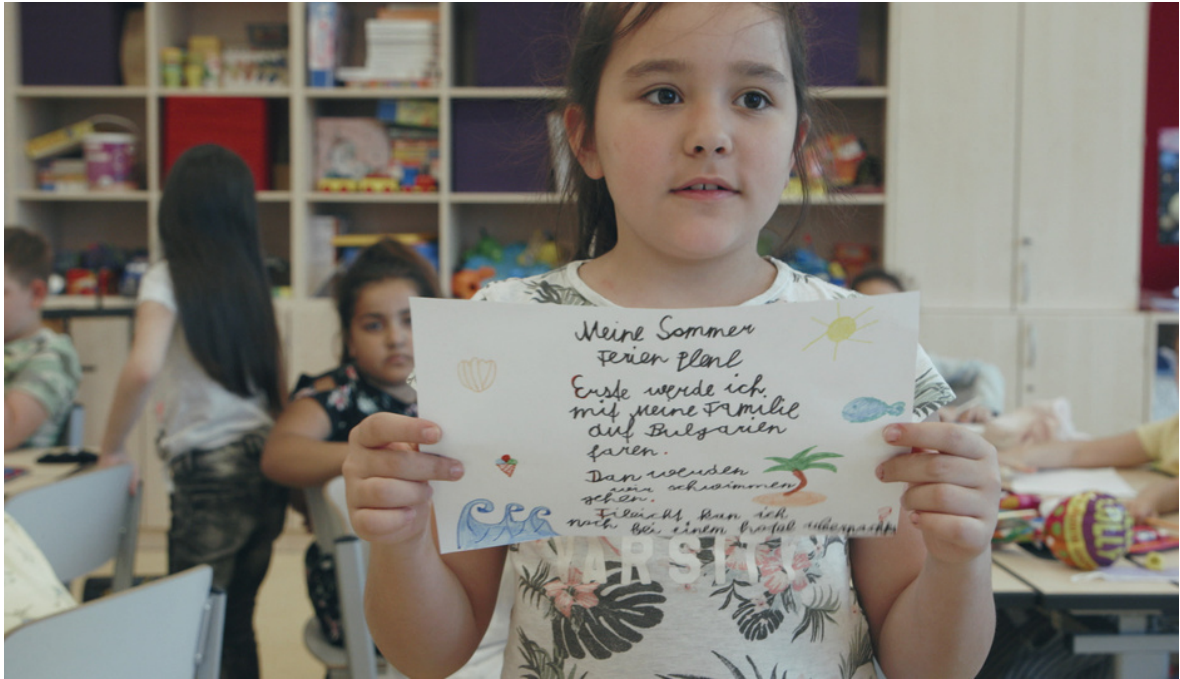
For her latest documentary **Favoriten**, Ruth Beckermann spent three years following a class of pupils, from the ages of seven to ten, and their devoted teacher at a large, 'at risk' primary school in an ethnically diverse, traditionally working-class district in Vienna. We get to know the children as individuals as we experience their daily adventures, struggles, defeats and victories in this microcosm of contemporary western European society: a society struggling with issues of identity and migration. But above all, **Favoriten** is an ode to childhood and education that builds on Beckermann's trademark style of asking probing, important questions in an observational way, inviting the audience to navigate their own way through complex topics.

Synopsis

For her latest documentary **Favoriten**, Ruth Beckermann spent three years following a class of primary school pupils, from the ages of seven to ten, and their devoted teacher at a large, 'at risk' primary school in Vienna's ethnically diverse, traditionally working-class district Favoriten. More than sixty percent of pupils in Viennese primary schools do not have German as their first language, and the system faces an acute shortage of teachers. Though clearly present in the film, **Favoriten** does not address issues such as these head-on. Instead, we get to know the children as individuals as they learn, grow and develop through the period leading up to their final year of primary school. As we get to know these 'favourites', we experience with them this critical time that will have such a decisive impact on their futures.

Favoriten achieves this by filming from the children's eye level – Johannes Hammel's camerawork delivering beautiful portraits, both in and out of the classroom – as well as by making Beid, Hafsa, Melissa, Manessa, Mohammad and their classmates co-authors of the film in a very real sense, handing cameras to them and incorporating the footage shot by the pupils themselves. We experience the daily adventures, struggles, defeats and victories of childhood in this microcosm of contemporary western European society: a society struggling with issues of identity and migration, which **Favoriten** addresses directly through discussions of religion, refugees or whether women should be allowed to wear a bikini.

Above all, **Favoriten** is an ode to childhood and education that builds on Beckermann's trademark style of asking probing, important questions in an observational way, inviting the audience to navigate their own way through complex topics.



About the director

Ruth Beckermann

Filmmaker and author Ruth Beckermann is based in Vienna. Her films include **The Paper Bridge**, **East of War** and **American Passages**. In 2014 her film **Those Who Go Those Who Stay** received the big documentary film prize at the Diagonale in Graz.

Two years later **The Dreamed Ones** was also honored there as best feature film. **The Waldheim Waltz** received several awards, including the Glashütte Original – Documentary Award for best documentary film at the Berlinale 2018, as well as an Oscar nomination. In 2019, Ruth Beckermann created the installation **Joyful Joyce** for the Salzburg Festival. Her film **MUTZENBACHER** was part Berlinale's Encounters Competition in 2022, where it won the award for best film.



Filmography

MUTZENBACHER, 2022, 100 min, Color

JOYFUL JOYCE, 2019, multi-channel video installation for the Salzburg Festival

THE WALDHEIM WALTZ, 2018, 93 min, Color and Black/White

THE DREAMED ONES, 2016, 89 min, DCP, Color, Feature Film

THE MISSING IMAGE, 2015, multi-channel video installation from Albertinaplatz in Vienna

THOSE WHO GO THOSE WHO STAY, 2013, 75 min, HDV/DCP, Color

JACKSON/MARKER 4AM, 2012, 3.35 min, HDcam, Color

AMERICAN PASSAGES, 2011, 120 min, DV/35mm, Color

MOZART ENIGMA, 2006, 1 min, DV/35mm, Color

ZORROS BAR MIZWA, 2006, 90 min, DV/35mm, Color

HOMEMAD(E), 2001, 85 min, DV/35mm, Color

A FLEETING PASSAGE TO THE ORIENT, 1999, 82 min

EAST OF WAR, 1996, 117 min

TOWARDS JERUSALEM, 1991, 87 min

PAPER BRIDGE, 1987, 95 min, Color and Black/White

RETURN TO VIENNA, 1984, 95 min, Color and Black/White

THE STEEL HAMMER OUT THERE ON THE GRASS, 1981, 40 min, Color

SUDDENLY, A STREIK, 1978, 24 min, Color

ARENA SQUATTED, 1977, 78 min, Black/White

Interview with Ruth Beckermann

The filming of *Favoriten* began in the fall of 2020. At that time, we had just experienced half a year of the pandemic, during which the education of school-age children had shifted to home. A new inequality in education had emerged. Was this the first reason for you to take an interest in public elementary school?

RUTH BECKERMANN: No. My motivation was that I wanted to make a film about an elementary school class. It's an idea I had been carrying with me since long before the pandemic. I wanted it to be a long-term study to observe the development of the children throughout their entire elementary school years.

What does public elementary school fundamentally represent for you? Do you see it as a stepping stone toward equal opportunities?

RUTH BECKERMANN: I believe kindergarten and elementary school form an incredibly important foundation. I have always held the view that everything you can “stuff” into a child up to the age of six works because children are incredibly receptive from as early as three years old. In some countries, children even start preschool at three or four years old. We don't have that here. The public elementary school, still called “Volksschule” in Austria, is very, very important and is unfortunately neglected in this country. Children are very smart. It breaks your heart to see how opportunities are missed. Children could be supported differently, like for example in the UK, where children attend preschool from the age of three or four, and they can all read once they enter school at six, with good language skills. The German language should be as natural a tool as our hands.

Why did you decide to film in Vienna's largest elementary school?

RUTH BECKERMANN: We visited several elementary schools in different districts in Vienna, and we were interested in schools where the children's backgrounds are more diverse. In this school in Favoriten, where we eventually filmed, we were warmly welcomed by the principal. At that point, I wasn't even aware it was the largest elementary school in Vienna. For such a project, it's crucial to work in a school where you are welcome. I found this school particularly interesting because it is attended almost exclusively by children who come from a family with a migration background. None of the children's parents speak perfect German. That's the point we're actually addressing. We observed some teachers at this school, three were shortlisted, and one teacher had an integration class, which would have expanded our approach to include the aspect of disability. That would have been too many themes. After observing classes for several hours, I chose Ilkay Ildis because she is a dynamic, dedicated teacher.

Did your choice of Ilkay also stem from the fact that she is a young teacher, born in Vienna within a Turkish family, representing successful integration and serving as a role model for many of her students?

RUTH BECKERMANN: Ilkay was born in Vienna, grew up in a downtown district, and was the only student with a migration background in her class. She naturally learned German very well, which is a basic requirement for an integrated life in Vienna and, especially, for a good education and any

career there. She strives to provide the children in her class with high-quality schooling while also understanding the various backgrounds from which the children come. She can speak Turkish with the mothers of the Turkish children. She is in contact with parents via WhatsApp at almost any time of day or night. What she accomplishes is much more than teaching children.

There have been films about elementary school classes that focus on an extraordinary teacher. Often, these teachers are on the verge of retirement or the school is about to close. You also have an outstanding teacher as a protagonist, but your focus is clearly on the class and the everyday life of an elementary school class in a European metropolis?

RUTH BECKERMANN: Ilkay is an example of what this everyday life could look like. She represents the next generation, and the reality in my film is contemporary. I am particularly interested in the future. These children are the future of our society. Ilkay's class stands for many elementary school classes in cities like Vienna or Berlin.

Everything they discuss together in the class also applies to the problems in our society. What's great about the teacher is that she engages in these discussions. She doesn't dismiss anything but starts a conversation. She also has no fear of making physical contact with the children. She's truly unusual. The discussions in the class are incredibly fascinating. They cover questions like: Can girls go swimming? Or: can girls wear a bikini? It involves refugee issues; it involves the war in Ukraine. Children are very alert and open individuals, and sometimes their interpretations are a bit twisted, but they pick up on a lot. Ilkay strongly reacts with her opinions as well. For example, if a child says, "A Christian shouldn't come to pray in a mosque," she responds and asks, "Why do you say that? Are you the boss of the mosque?" She also engages in conflicts with the children but always maintains full respect for them.

What stood out to us in this class was the high social competence of the children. Of course, there are conflicts, as in any class, but we had the impression – we got to know and repeatedly met all the parents – that, for the most part, the parents care a lot about their children and want the best for them. The best often meaning consumption and material goods. There are different values than those of citizens in the educated middle class. The parents contribute what they can. But for what they can't provide, schools or communities should offer assistance with appropriate programs. That's totally missing. Ilkay steps in where the school system fails. That's what came out of this film for me. We were often shocked that she was alone in the class without assistance. That in an all-day school, there is hardly any German language support. That the largest elementary school in Vienna doesn't have a permanent offering of social workers or school psychologists.

What intrigued you in the initial phase of filming? How basic knowledge is conveyed for further education under these challenging language conditions? Or rather the social relationships? In which direction did your curiosity lead you?

RUTH BECKERMANN: My main focus was on the personalities of the children. Of course, in a class with 25 children, you can't portray them all, but I think we succeeded in bringing out the personalities of five or six children. We were particularly interested in the topics that interested the children. One has to understand a bit about what they are learning. We filmed a lot of classes at the beginning, but we all know what a class looks like. We only hint at it in the film. Too much classroom footage is unbearable. It was quite exhausting to sit in there. As adults, you immediately feel like you're back in school. Often, I thought it was noon by nine o'clock and wondered how I ever

endured it and how these children endure it. On some days, they only had lunch at 2 PM. They had physical education once or twice a week. How can you sit in this room for so many hours? Both Elisabeth Menasse, my co-author, and I sat in a corner because our cameraman Johannes Hammel and the sound engineer Andreas Hamza were moving around the class. That means they already “disrupted” things, and I couldn’t be next to the cameraman, which is usually my point of contact. I couldn’t intervene much in the events. After one or two weeks of initial experiences, we discussed the film’s style with Johannes. Our idea was to be as close to the children as possible. He had to move between the rows to create the, in my opinion, very accomplished shots, the many close-ups, all captured with a handheld camera.

How long did it take for the children to stop noticing the camera?

RUTH BECKERMANN: I would say it was already after one day. At the beginning, the children were mainly interested in the microphone on the boom pole. They already knew about cameras. But that furry creature up there caught everyone’s interest. Andreas also explained to them exactly how the sound worked. The children quickly forgot about us but also liked us. They were very happy when we came; it was something special. What was great about Ilkay was that she quickly understood how we worked and collaborated. It was very helpful that she was also excited about this film. We always shot in blocks of three consecutive days. The first day was usually a bit challenging, and then it always got better. In between, we took breaks of a few weeks.

You gave the children a phone to create images for the film. Was this also in an attempt to engage in dialogue with them?

RUTH BECKERMANN: Because I was so inactive as a director during the shoot, I had to come up with something. I didn’t want to interview the children, but I wanted to hear something different from them than what they shared in the group. Additionally, I wanted to understand how the children approached handling a camera and interviewing each other in general. Melissa, the girl we see struggling with math but who really enjoyed filming, was particularly interesting. She found her own unique method with our small tripod. Some children also filmed at home and showed their families. We didn’t use those images; it would have felt too voyeuristic to me.

I love the shots where the girls talk about marriage. Some unexpected things come out. And you can already see at the beginning, when the children talk about their parents’ professions, that these parents are the maintainers of the system in the city: from construction workers and pizza makers to hospital cleaners and nurses, these are the people who do the work here. Many don’t even have Austrian citizenship and can’t vote. That’s something to consider when watching the film.

Austrian schools include religious education. How did you approach this aspect?

RUTH BECKERMANN: In Austria, we have the concordat, so religious education must be taught in schools, and I wanted to show this reality. What was interesting for us was that there wasn’t a single Catholic child in the class. All the children from former Yugoslavia were exempt from religious education, while almost all Muslim children attended religious education in school. We attended the Muslim religious education classes, which take place twice a week, and noticed how the children blossom there. They are in their own world, where they know their way and enjoy it. However, I would find cross-religious education or ethics classes more meaningful and integrative.

You accompanied the class for three school years. How did you manage to condense it into a film of under two hours?

RUTH BECKERMANN: We shot a lot, although I generally try to be economical in filming. In a school class, you never know who will say something or when something interesting will happen. Johannes did really strenuous and excellent work. I then spent a lot of time in the editing room with the editor, Dieter Pichler. The viewings Elisabeth and I had with Dieter inbetween shooting really helped in reducing the material. Actually, we were already quite satisfied with our three-and-a-half-hour version, but we kept leaving the film alone for a bit and then condensing it more and more.

What we cut were meta-conversations, such as those between the parents' representatives and between Ilkay and the principal, which we had in the film for a long time. At some point, I thought: if the film doesn't make it clear what is lacking in this school system, then the film doesn't work. I wanted to concentrate on what was happening in the class and on the shots the children made of each other with their phones.

You mentioned a time of cheerfulness that you spent together. How do you look back on these filming experiences?

RUTH BECKERMANN: I co-wrote the script with Elisabeth Menasse, who, as the former director of the Vienna Zoom Children's Museum, has a lot of experience with children and schools and had a completely different perspective than I did. Elisabeth also worked on the film as assistant director, and we were always a team of four in the school during the shoots. It was not only a beautiful collaboration but also one of my most enjoyable projects, constantly feeling the energy of the children. Sometimes, we went out to eat with Ilkay, and she would tell us how she was doing. Everything was very harmonious.

Since there is no general secondary school in Austria, so 4th grade also entails a moment of bitter truth – the semester grades that determine the further academic future for 10-year-olds. It becomes clear that, despite the good educational guidance provided by Ilkay, miracles do not happen. Only a few move on to grammar school.

RUTH BECKERMANN: It's impossible for it to work. The teacher can be as good as she wants. The children don't fully understand what they are reading. I believe there's hardly a child in the class completely confident with German articles. They are in a class where no one really speaks German well. Even if they have to communicate with each other in German, it remains very simple or incorrect German, or they end up speaking Turkish or Serbo-Croatian with each other, even if they shouldn't. After school, they are with their families. German is only their language in school. Of this class, five children made it to grammar school; whether they will succeed remains to be seen. It's not that the parents don't want it. It's all a matter of language. You also notice that the children find English much easier because they hear it on YouTube and TikTok. Often, not even their mother tongue is perfect. There are children where each parent speaks a different language, and the parents don't communicate perfectly in one language with each other. If the classes were better mixed, let's say with half of the children with German as their mother tongue, then the others would learn it immediately. I don't understand why the classes aren't more mixed. It would mean taking the children by school bus to another district. It would lead to a rebellion among Austrian parents if their children – God forbid – were brought to Favoriten for elementary school. Everything here is very conservative and entrenched.

At the end - after a very emotional farewell to the teacher who is going on maternity leave - it is disconcerting that there is no teacher immediately available to take over the class, along with a proper handover period. Especially in a wealthy city such as Vienna.

RUTH BECKERMANN: It is really in a sorry state. The fact that there is no action taken here will come back to haunt our society because elementary school lays the foundations for the future. Some children are good at maths, but they don't understand the explanations. How are they supposed to find the correct answers? Right now, they are still lovely, charming children. When they hit puberty, it's uncertain how they will develop. In secondary schools, everyone without German as their mother tongue is thrown together again. Favoriten is a very interesting district that I have now come to know, with so many people from different countries with their own cuisine and languages. You can live there very well without knowing German, but you won't move into a different social stratum. Such missed opportunities are, in essence, a crime. It's squandering potential. After all, society needs skilled people.

Do you feel that the concept of public education is currently unravelling?

RUTH BECKERMANN: It is very interesting and very alarming. In my generation, everyone went to public schools except for the few who attended the 'Lycée Français'. Now, the gap is widening. Those who can and want, send their children to expensive private schools or denominational private schools. This leads to more and more segregation. People know much less about each other. This is very evident. It also has to do with the poor public schools. Not all of them are bad. But many are overcrowded, and there is a shortage of both teachers and other personnel to support them. Politicians don't care. Everyone comes up with some new ideas. There are tons of brochures from various initiatives lying around in schools. Firstly, this doesn't reach the parents of the children who need support, and secondly, it's always just a small group of people with good ideas. It doesn't change the basic concept. The entire school system needs a complete overhaul.

An appeal to those responsible for education?

RUTH BECKERMANN: They should spend a week in a classroom and not just visit when everything is cleaned up and everyone is singing for them, but really experience what's going on.

*Interview: Karin Schiefer | AUSTRIAN FILMS
January 2024*

Credits

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Elisabeth Menasse

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Ilkay Idiskut

