

Vadim: German documentary chronicles a family destroyed by immigration authorities

By Bernd Reinhardt
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Directed by Carsten Rau and Hauke Wendler

The German ARD television channel recently aired the excellent, award-winning documentary *Vadim*, directed by Carsten Rau and Hauke Wendler.

Having lost his family and home, and realising there was no place for him on this planet, 23-year-old Vadim K. committed suicide in Hamburg in 2010.

Following the collapse of the USSR, his parents fled Latvia together with five-year-old Vadim and his younger brother to build a new life in Germany. As long as Latvia was part of the Soviet Union, the father worked as a police inspector in Riga and the mother in a defense plant.

In 1987, the Latvian people took to the streets. But the movement that arose to supposedly settle the score with Stalinism was dominated by nationalist forces calling for the independence of Latvia and the withdrawal of the “Russian occupation forces”. Vadim’s parents, who were members of the Russian-speaking section of the population, found themselves suddenly under attack. After Latvia’s independence in 1991, the father was thrown out of work.

In 1992, the family placed its hopes in a request for political asylum in Hamburg. As part of the application, the father stated that he had been impressed with Germany’s genuine democracy, its multi-party system, and wanted to create a decent life for his family, find work and raise his children there.

The family’s first stop was a barracks ship for asylum seekers. The family of four was then assigned accommodation in one small room. In 1995, their asylum application was rejected. All members of the family were assigned a provisional “tolerated” residence status, because the German authorities were unable to deport them back to Latvia. The new Latvian

state was unwilling to recognise any “Russians” as Latvian citizens. They were stateless.

In 1998, Germany and Latvia negotiated a repatriation agreement. According to their legal advisor, the family was then faced with being deported at any time. The uncertainty lasted until 2005. Shortly after Vadim turned 18, the police appeared in their room in the middle of the night. In total despair, Vadim’s mother slashed her wrist and was taken into psychiatric care, and the father was confined to a prison for deportees.

Vadim was driven to Frankfurt and put on an airplane. Soon he was in his “hometown” of Riga. He had €10 [US\$13.00] in his pocket and understood not a word of Latvian and hardly any Russian. The German embassy refused to help him because he was not a German. Vadim finally found accommodation in a shelter for the homeless. He applied for Latvian citizenship. As with 450,000 other “Russians”, his application was rejected.

He illegally returned to Germany, and later tried to gain a foothold in France and Switzerland, but to no avail. He was deported from Belgium in 2006. He found work in Riga working as an unskilled labourer for a Russian firm. Russian investors were obviously welcome in Latvia.

Then the crisis of 2008 struck and a part of the workforce was sacked. When would it be his turn? He made his way to Germany again. His parents no longer faced deportation. Both had become so mentally ill that they required constant psychiatric treatment. His home city of Hamburg, from which Vadim had been so brutally expelled, became his last stop.

Rau and Wendler give people who knew Vadim the chance to speak: his parents, friends, teachers, a social worker, a lawyer, the family’s legal counsellor,

Vadim's first love and others. The result is both a sensitive and harrowing chronicle of how a family, including two children, is systematically destroyed over a period of nearly twenty years by brutal laws that deny people a normal life.

Vadim begins with great hope and euphoric expectations. The parents are soon thinking about kindergarten places and the type of school their children will be attending. They will not allow their boys to grow up isolated from German children. Vadim even becomes an altar boy in their church.

The children learn to play musical instruments. Vadim is an open, well-balanced boy with many friends.

But the parents begin to fear that people in the neighbourhood have discovered they are asylum seekers and not ethnic German emigrants. They sense they are increasingly arousing the attention of the authorities. They are *not allowed* to work. The ban on employment particularly distresses the father more and more.

The mother says that going to the immigration office means getting up between 4 and 5 o'clock in the morning. She has to take the children with her. A long queue forms in front of the building. The entrance opens and all the people suddenly run to grab a ticket. Anyone missing out has to come back the next day. There is a lot of jostling and it comes to blows. Security officials push and shove people back.

The family still has hopes of attaining a German passport. The mother is so glad that Vadim can attend a *Gymnasium* (secondary school for the academically gifted). He begins to play the bassoon, in addition to the piano. But a former social worker reports that the mother has begun to suffer from severe depression and psychosis. Despite his obvious talent, Vadim has to leave the *Gymnasium* in 2001, and he drops back into a *Hauptschule* (for the less academically gifted) within half a year.

In the end, the German authorities even refuse to allow Vadim to finish his 10th grade class at school. He is deported three months before the end of the school year.

All the waiting and the constant anxiety finally break the family. There are more and more disputes within the family. The children blame the father for their situation. The mother has the feeling the children are

contemptuous of her. After Vadim's death, they torture her with allegations of having failed the family.

Ralph Bornhöft, head of the Hamburg immigration authorities, is only willing to speak over the phone. He refers to the years-long cooperation between his office and the politicians. Politicians "babble on" and take the easy way out. "We have to implement (...) what they come up with. We have to do the dirty work".

Bornhöft explicitly cites the Greens, who used to portray themselves as the protectors of refugees and asylum seekers. As soon as they come into government, they also refuse to change any of these laws. The film could well have mentioned that he himself is a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). Bornhöft embodies the organic connection between right-wing politics and bureaucratic callousness.

Some 87,000 people are "tolerated" by refugee law to live in Germany with short-term residence permits. About 60 percent of them have been in the country for more than six years.

The repatriation agreement between Germany and Latvia was reached under the SPD-Green Party coalition government in 1998, and bears, among others, the signature of the then minister of the interior, Otto Schily (SPD).

Vadim is available for viewing in German on the ARD's Mediathek web page.

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