



A FILM BY ANJA SALOMONOWITZ

THE 727 DAYS WITHOUT KARAMO



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SYNOPSIS

In *THE 727 DAYS WITHOUT KARAMO*, produced by AMOUR FOU Vienna, couples, whose love is put to a special test, give us insight into their lives. One partner of each couple is not originally from Europe and the lovers find themselves confronted with immigration law and its impact. Director Anja Salomonowitz depicts a story, which many couples experience, in which the snapshot moments of scene after scene form a continuous narrative, similar to a relay race. A sudden deportation could break them apart at any time.

Those whose relationship can withstand enormous psychic and (also) financial burden hope for a lasting life together or for a reunion. As with Susanne, who has waited 727 days for Karamo, her husband and the father to her children, to be allowed to return. The personal insights are marked by hope, government intervention into private life, the dream of great love, and sobering reality. These couples go beyond lingual, territorial and social boundaries – with hope that their relationship can overcome the battle with immigration law regulations.

Anja Salomonowitz combines very different facets into an exciting, very moving and strongly expressive documentary mosaic. A compelling, filmic plea for love without borders.

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ORIGINAL QUOTES FROM THE FILM

with comments by Angela Magenheimer (www.ehe-ohne-grenzen.at/)

The Getting To Know Eachother

BY SUSANNA BUCHACHER

“It was a foggy November day. I had to go to the chemist. It was almost closing time. Suddenly he stood before me and looked at me. He said he saw lots of stress and such dark rings around my eyes. He asked me if I was alright.

I was so moved that someone could be so concerned about how I was feeling. We talked for a while and he gave me his telephone number. He said he would wait for three days. He didn't know where this sudden impulse came from. I really waited three days and didn't return his call until the evening of the third day.”

The red thread that runs through the stories is such: When you meet someone you usually don't ask: What is your resident permit status? The relationship begins. But soon the couples are kicked down from their rosy relationship cloud: oops, my partner doesn't have a secure residency permit. We probably have to get married. Doesn't it work any other way? No. Okay, marriage is great. Why not? We'll just go to the registry office and the issue is solved.

The Wedding

BY MARIO HÖLLER & JOHN FREDY PULIDO MURCIA HÖLLER

“In the morning we first got ourselves ready. We got up and ironed our clothes: white shirt, blazer, tie. We also cleaned our shoes.”

“We also bought shoes because I'd only brought one pair with me from Colombia. His name and the date, so the date of matrimony, are engraved on my ring.”

“Mario is written on his, and John on mine.”

The second blow follows: Getting married isn't that easy. We have to muster together all kinds of documents, and have them certified. We pay for administrative fees and the authorities constantly require something else from us. Then the marriage. Collective relief spreads. Wedding euphoria. Success. The majority of people now believe that all is well.

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The German Course

BY JOHN FREDY PULIDO MURCIA HÖLLER

- “My first German course was in Baden near Vienna. It was awful.”
- “My second German course was in Vienna at the “Deutsch Akademie” (“German Academy”) on the Opernring.”
- “My third German course was in Vienna at the “Orient Gesellschaft” (“Orient Society”).”
- “My fourth German course was a preparation course run by the University of Vienna.”
- “My fifth German course was at the “Deutschinstitut” (“German Institute”).”

In order to be allowed to settle down in Austria, people need to have already successfully passed a German examination in the Third World. For the couples this means: lots of money, strong nerves, and long waiting times for exam appointments. Often people have to cover distances of several hundred kilometres to get to the exam location, the pressure not to botch the exam is tremendous. And many people fall at the hurdle. People who were not taught literacy in Latin letters often have to first learn English, because an appropriate German course is not available. Perverse right? And many couples fail at this obstacle and then there's no residency permit. If you don't pass the follow up Exams you have to leave Austria as well.

The Residence Permit

BY JAMBAL OYUNCHIMEG

“Waiting for a visa is driving me insane. We're married and I still have to wait. I need a so-called “residency permit”. For as long as I don't have this card I'm not allowed to work. I don't know how to occupy myself. I'm bored. Going out into the street doesn't bring any joy anymore. I don't have a job and I'm refused work.”

Unfortunately now comes step 3: The application process. The third blow: We have to apply for a residency permit. Marriage alone isn't enough. Or: the registry office is creating more hurdles for us. Is there a registry office that will let us get married anyway? This is a conflict-ridden time for many couples because it is such a strain waiting around without a sure outcome. “You as an Austrian know your way around. . .” many spouses think. Question upon question: Where do we apply? Prepare. What do I need to bring, which documents do I need? Collective tremors. They come in waves. The residency permit application travels from the ministry of the exterior to the ministry of the interior to the immigration authorities – which verify the marriages. S/he is in their home country, applying for a visa. S/he then needs an extra application for entry, an entry via. If s/he is unlucky and happens to land a sullen employee at the embassy, half a year can go by before s/he is granted the entry visa. By then the Austrian residency permit has elapsed.



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The Decision

“On Monday we went to the bureau very nervously. We had to spend the best part of two hours in a waiting room. It was totally nerve-racking.”

“Yes, also because I had to take my family with me.”

“Above all, because it would decide our entire future. After months of waiting we had to survive the last weekend too, even though we knew that the decision was already made, and then there came the waiting room on top of everything. When we were finally called up we asked what the decision was. To this she replied: positive, of course.”

BY JOHANNA BAUER & DANIEL INYINBOR

The Surveillance

“There’s a man outside and he says he’s from the criminal police. So I opened up for him, he is, after all, a policeman. As he came in I asked him what the issue was. He just said there was a matter in which I was involved. Upon my enquiry, why I was involved, he said it was to do with my spouse and the residence permit. They would make these checks. I understand. Okay, a check to see if it’s a marriage of convenience. I’m a little surprised. Of course, we are aware that such checks exist. But at my house? I show him rooms one, two, three and the couch. Then the man appears to actually be taking a look around. He goes into the kitchen, whatever reason he has to look in there, he looks at the washing and what sort of washing it is. Every item, every pair of boxer shorts is examined closely. Then he looks over at me on the couch and asks me a question that also really surprises me. He asks me where my husband is. So I think to myself: they’re really not very well informed. Where could someone, who works as a cook, be at 11 a.m.?”

BY DENISE HERRERA PENA & MAICOL HERRERA PENA

A binational couple has to adjust to the fact that their relationship life / everyday life is being completely x-rayed by the immigration authorities. Neighbours are interviewed. The immigration authorities like to come and do morning checks to see if both halves of a double bed are warm, to see whether the couple truly share a bed. As far as possible one has to know the story of all the scars on the other person’s body, otherwise you are under suspicion. Parents-in-law’s birthdays and of course middle names have to be a given. Even sharing children doesn’t weaken the suspicion of a fake marriage. Confrontational interviews with the immigration authorities – a degrading affair.

The Extention

BY DENISE HERRERA PENA & MAICOL HERRERA PENA

“There’s always something else they want. With every application for extension there’s something new. There’s the credit check, the tax return, as I was self-employed. You need something from social security, the revenue office, everywhere. You then go in, thinking you have everything with you and they say this and this and this still have to be filed. Thus, the application process is drawn out. But Migal has an expired card. The other day he ran into a police check with his expired card and got into big trouble. He was at the police station for a long time. And he’s not allowed to travel.”

“Although it’s important for me to travel because Vienna isn’t a fashion city. Yes, its important for your networking to be able to present your designs in designer shows in other cities.”

Anyone who believes the goal has been reached with the receipt of the first residence permit is tremendously mistaken. The obstacles for permit extensions are the same as those for the initial application. The loss of a job or the birth of a child and the associated financial losses could mean the continued detention of the third-world citizen. Up until receipt of the permanent residence permit, after five years and a positive German exam, immigration law continues to sit on the living room couch and has to be considered with regard to all daily decisions.

The Money

BY ANNA FEMI-MEBAREK

“I work as a textile restorer. I have 4 children: three from my first marriage and a fourth one after getting to know my husband in 2004. Now I’m forced to earn the entire family income because my husband is enrolled in a German course and has to fulfil the integration agreement and can’t receive any job seeker’s allowance yet because of this. This means I have to earn around 1200 euro for the both of us. Then another 122 euro per child. I have four children so that’s around 500 euro altogether. Together that’s already 1700 euro. Then I have to add the rent to that, which in my case, because I have a large family, is 830 euro. This brings me to roughly 2500 euro, minus 250 euro in free lodging. So this means: I as a mother of four must work 50 hours a week to be able to reach an income of 2200 euro. What the state demands of me here, so as to pursue my marriage, is an impossible thing ffresior me. Yes, that’s my reality.”

So there are lots of little hurdles and pitfalls. If one doesn’t pre-empt them, it throws one back by 2 or 3 months. And the Austrians? They have to earn money! Most of them need to net around 1500 euro, which has to be earned first.

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BY SUSANNE CEESAY

The Involuntary Separation

“Today is the 23rd of November 2011. The last time I saw my husband was on the 26th of November 2009.
That’s two times 365. 600, 720, 730 minus 3: 727. I haven’t seen my husband for 727 days .”

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The 727 Days Without Karamo a Essay by Karin Schiefer

The first shot brings the essence into focus. In the bright, early autumn a couple are spending the afternoon together. Both are dressed in glowing yellow, the woman is waiting a little bored on a bench while her husband, in overalls and an aviator hat, navigates a bizarre flying object up and down and passed obstacles with a humming remote control. One imagines oneself as a spectator in a realm of fiction at the beginning of a story, which has committed to a witty, somewhat absurdly comical tone. This first image is, however, simply one of Anja Salomonowitz's typical documentary art gags. Interlocking form and content together subtly. What one hears in the 90 minutes that follow is indeed unbelievable, incredible and sometimes absurd. But as unreal as some of the descriptions of the protagonists may sound, none of it is made up.

The film draws on the experiences of Austrians who have fallen in love with somebody whose passport was issued in a country outside of the EU's borders. They try to legalise their relationship in the form of a marriage and meet head on with the authorities: Emotions meet regulations, the heart collides with the law, difficulties take their course.

Documentary story-telling is always a dual process: on the one hand her story-telling style aims to address relevant socio-political conditions and raise awareness of intolerable situations and, on the other hand, to expand and vary and create anew the view on a theme with unusual narrative strategies. In THE 727 DAYS WITHOUT KARAMO the filmmaker has further refined her „Kuzr davor ist es passiert“ („It Happend Junst Before“) basic concept for telling a documentary story differently. The material drawn from reality, and its emotional potential, are thereby placed in constant tension with each other.

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The filmmaker used the project's long financing phase to have conversations with innumerable binational couples. What crystallised from this was less the colourful spectrum of different romantic scenarios, but rather the parallels and commonalities that formed constellations through couple relationships of differing income categories, age groups and geography: Getting to know one another, the desire to get married, the setbacks that arise and often, ultimately, the failure of a gruelling administrative procedure. As if the greatest common denominator of these individual stories were an almost inevitable basic pattern within the existing legal requirements.

In *THE 727 DAYS WITHOUT KARAMO* the protagonist's individual stories grow together into a superior love story, told collectively. No story is told to its end, each of the 20 couples interviewed in front of the camera deliver only a splinter of an overall picture that is full of fragments, and also refers to the fragmentation of their lives. Anja Salomonowitz lets the camera tell the story, in on and off-screen scenes, sometimes in conversations, sometimes in whispered voices, sometimes she films the people at home, sometimes at work. Their gestures and actions have nothing to do with the content of what is being said. Whether the camera image is set to on or off can vary within a statement. Every portrait follows a principle of refractions and fragmentation. The fault line is the common thread in a composition for a choir with soloists.

This creates distance and safeguards the affected and the viewer alike from too much emotion. Anja Salomonowitz denies both sides a cinema of pity. Above all, *THE 727 DAYS WITHOUT KARAMO* wants to tell the story of people fighting for another person and defending their right to choose their partner freely. Therefore the filmmaker (as in her previous films) has chosen a dominant colour in her shots: yellow. For courage and the fighting spirit and contempt.



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Excerpts of an interview between Anja Salomonowitz and Karin Schiefer

You have chosen a finely branched approach to give rise to the experiences of numerous couples in an ultimately mosaic-like picture of a basic experience and legal situation. You have your concept: to tell documentary stories differently and have further refined the principle of refraction and fragmentation here. With what assumptions have you approached the work for this film?

My premise was that there exists this basic, common experience and unfortunately this was confirmed to me intensively during my research interviews. I was interested in the subject of these couples because love and free will have so clearly collided with the law. Because the system directly and mercilessly engages in private life and transforms it. Daily life changes, and sadly often too the course of the love story.

How can the injustice of this situation be depicted without making the people portrayed and affected appear responsible? Or have to lead through the film? Carry the film on their shoulders? How can one separate the common, enforced experience from the people? By having the story told collectively.

I was searching for a documentary strategy to epitomise the simultaneousness and maintain the individuality at the same time. I did not want a simple figure to carry or be carried through the film, but rather to gather a different kind a strength and power through the collective. So that, like a snowball rolling through the snow, they would become bigger and stronger with every new person and history encountered on the way. The force of mass can scare; the force of the regulations and laws to be satisfied, just as much so. It is told soberly and built up simply because the authoritative madness speaks for itself, so much so that this snowball could perhaps crash through a windowpane.

You shot with many people, and many more must have been the number of cases and fates among your research. Over what period of time did you conduct your research and how did you approach these people and stories?

The story of this film started long ago for me. This film was namely continuously accepted and rejected by the funding bodies in turn and one has to receive multiple go-aheads at the same time in order to be able to realise the film. So there was always money made available but not enough to really shoot with. For years we held numerous rounds of "castings", which means conducting long research interviews with affected people.

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We approached them and, if they were agreeable, we let them tell their story for about 20 minutes while we filmed with a video camera. All in all we filmed at least 150 couples. It was striking that the stories touched on many of the same points and were similar, completely irrespective of the setting, profession or financial possibility the people had. For example, all of them believed that they should get married quickly, that that would make things better, and then realised what a horror it is to get all the documents in order — and it is after the wedding that the problems really start. Individual love stories are therefore standardised by the legal situation at critical points.

I have divided this one story into its single elements (getting to know each other/marriage/ problems arise/ ...to splitting up — which sadly I have heard about often, because the pressure is just too strong) and filmed every segment with a new couple. Here what is also important to me is that the people happen to be in the exact situation they are showing of themselves, so the couple that gets married actually got married (it was their real wedding) and they do not know what is in store for them later on. It was also important to me that one still felt the differences between the people, that they were portrayed sensitively, that the commonalities in the system were shown but also the individual differences of those concerned.

The voices, which have their say in THE 727 DAYS WITHOUT KARAMO, are primarily those of bi-national couples fighting (not always successfully) to legalise their relationship and be allowed to live together under one roof. In between there is, every now and then, the off-screen voice of Angela Magenheimer from the union Ehe ohne Grenzen (Marriage Without Borders), who explains legal terms from immigration law and the regulations and procedures of the authorities. Why do you choose to tell the story of the government side, not through people but only through their actions?

What the regulatory requirements mean to people's lives and what they specifically bring about, without justification from individual officials, is what is narrated. The common thread that runs through the film is immigration law itself. The rules that befall people are accounted for in the order of their occurrence and the affected people are living examples of what triggers these rules.

I was adamant not to have public officials in my film because it's about the legislati-



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on executed by them and what this activates – of which they may know nothing about. It is also not about accusing an individual official. It is a system that protects itself well through its „ap-paratus“, which opposes and is also non-transparent. It is a battle like David against Goliath. I want to strengthen the side of the couple and show their point of view. They should have their say – and not be interrupted.

What in the course of your research most affected or upset you that you want to draw awareness to in this film?

Families being torn apart. I met a woman who was insanely happy with her husband from Ghana. They met in a museum where she was working as a guard. She experienced real love for the first time and soon became pregnant with his child. He was deported shortly before the birth, despite the marriage, because he was still an asylum seeker. The baby turned around in the womb, the birth was a caesarean, the woman was alone. How can such a thing happen?

Mr Brichta, who telephones his Chinese wife Zou Youejing in the film, has a long history of suffering behind him. By the way, he stutters only since this period. After his wife was deported he went alone to the ORF on the Küniglberg. He smuggled himself in and told his story to an editor whose door happened to be open. He went on TV. He went to the newspapers, to the radio, to a lawyer. He tried to fight back. I thought that was incredibly brave and courageous of him.

These people have memorised paragraphs that are so complex one can't even understand them after several read-throughs. They have to get to know regulations you wouldn't believe existed. They can mimmick that strange beaurcraic German perfectly after so many letters. It is an irreversible shock to one's faith in the right of the law.

The association to painting has already been mentioned. In your films one always has the feeling your work has a strong underlying colour scheme. How does this come about?

So far I have given each film a colour. „Das wirst du nie verstehen“ („You Will Never Understand This“), a documentary about my three grandmothers, was all white, to keep the background neutral. In „Kurz davor ist es passiert“ („It Happened Just Before“), each episode has a colour respective to its location and the supporting dramaturgy. „Spanien“ was brown like a western, brown / red / gold to capture a sensual world, to reflect

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something religiously playful, to feel a sense of despair. For THE 727 DAYS WITHOUT KARAMO about the fight against immigration law, I was looking for a colour that is loud, brave, defiant. Sunny, strong, full of life. I didn't want to make a whining film, but a strong and resistant one, as I experience the people I interviewed. A colour that contrasts with the horrors that happen to them.

It had to work that the story be told on and on and the people hand the scene on to the next person, as in a relay race. For this concept to work in the look of the film, all had to be „equal“, so that the result was one “he” and one “she”, as it were. All of the characters should appear to be one, to support the political statement that this fight affects a lot of people similarly. It was also important that this colour appear in the rooms and on the people and to work with what was there. We did not want to change the individuality of the flats, we just wanted to reinforce what was already there. THE 727 DAYS WITHOUT KARAMO is kept mainly in yellow, because it was the colour was essentially already there.

The protagonists always tell their stories in whispers or on the phone, off-camera or in direct conversation. Having the voices varied and displaced is a key element in your documentary films. Why do you choose to give the voice a leading role?

It's literally a matter of speaking „with one voice“. It's important to lay the stories bare and to be able to divide who is telling what, so that the structure of the story is revealed. That is important, because I wanted to show how laws change a collective lifestyle and how personal stories are standardized. The only reason that can happen, is because there are those laws.

What is your conclusion?

The film typifies that this system affects many, many people. I also want to show how strong these people are to fight so courageously against this system. Everyone really enjoyed participating, as it was a big concern of theirs to describe their situation through their suffering. The 727 Days Without Karamo is a plea against this immigration law. A plea for free love.





Directors Statement – Anja Salomonowitz

To realise THE 727 DAYS WITHOUT KARAMO I looked for a documentary strategy that allowed both, to show similarities between the stories of the couples, but also to emphasize how unique each of it is.

I did not want to bare the burden of the theme on one person throughout the whole film. For me it was essential that the film gains its power through the strength of the collective experience. That the film, like a snowball that rolls through the snow, becomes with each person and history bigger and stronger. That one can sense the force of the mass. The force of the regulations and laws to be shown anyway. It was important that the story of the film was told in a simple and quite way, because the regulatory madness speaks for itself. I hope that this snowball then perhaps will be that strong that it can break a window.

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