

Michael Schneider



Opera Arias and an “Oscar” for the Home Secretary

As peace worker from the Wendland via Zurich and Berlin to Nepal—Memorial work as an element of nonviolent resistance

55

Michael Schneider, born in 1985, grew up in the North German Wendland and got involved in the nonviolent resistance movement against nuclear energy at an early age. After graduating in environmental studies, he worked with the Swiss Centre for Asylum Seekers and later with Sea-Watch, the Berlin-based rescue initiative for shipwrecked refugees. Between these two assignments, he attended KURVE Wustrow’s training for a peace and movement worker. This involved a practical session in Nepal, and in this country he is now deployed as peace worker at Nagarik Aawaz, a local partner organisation of KURVE Wustrow.

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Photo: Michael Schneider/Sea-Watch

“Nonviolent resistance against the transport of nuclear waste to Gorleben has been a crucial part of my upbringing”, says Michael Schneider from Lomitz in the Wendland. His parents were activists in the anti-nuclear movement, and there were many discussions at home about the significance and potential impact of nonviolent action. International peacebuilding played an important part, too. Michael’s father was once a coordinator for the German Development Service (DED) in Tanzania. His Swiss mother worked in the water supply sector in Nepal for a while. The latter country appeared particularly interesting to Michael, and he is very happy to be deployed there now on behalf of KURVE Wustrow.

First, though, he did an apprenticeship in forestry in Switzerland, followed by environmental studies. In 2013, he took up employment with the “Zentrum für Asylsuchende” (Centre for Asylum Seekers) in Winterthur near Zurich. “It seemed very rewarding to me to work for a refugee support organisation”, says Michael. In 2015, when more and more refugees came to Europe because of the war in Syria, his work load increased tremendously, as he remembers: “At the same time, we had an increasingly intensive debate within our organisation about the most adequate methods to offer the best support to refugees and

asylum seekers and foster their integration into the society of their host country. Our principal focus lay on nonviolent action which, however, was also supposed to have maximum impact.”

In this context, one activity was especially spectacular: The Swiss opera singer Christoph Homberger founded a choir of refugees and Swiss citizens in order to aid integration and organise public performances to enhance awareness for refugee-related issues. Up to 80 people met once a week to rehearse opera arias as well as Swiss folksongs. Michael joined the singers enthusiastically and coordinated their meetings as well as the choir’s public relations efforts.

In the spring of 2016, there was a grand performance inside the Central Railway Station as well as in front of the Opera House in Zurich. “The response was overwhelming”, Michael recalls with satisfaction. “More than a thousand people came along and cheered us. Even the local transport authorities gave us their support. They provided three tramcars free of charge just for us so that the participating refugees could get to Zurich from their lodgings and later back home again.”

To enhance his knowledge about peacebuilding, Michael eventually attended KURVE Wustrow’s trainings to become an advisor for non-

violent conflict transformation and social movements. "I deliberately chose KURVE Wustrow because their seminars and training courses focus much stronger on nonviolent action than the programmes of other like-minded organisations", he stresses. "The variety of methods that I was made familiar with proved very useful in my subsequent assignment with Sea-Watch in Berlin."

Michael is particularly pleased with one event he helped to coordinate: In February 2019, the film "Lifeboat" about the rescue of refugees in the Mediterranean was nominated for an Oscar in the category "Best documentary short subject". On the night of the Academy Awards ceremony, Sea-Watch showed this film on a big screen in front of the Home Office in Berlin. A special cinema seat was put up for the German Home Secretary Horst Seehofer who, in absentia, was awarded an "Oscar for hindering the rescue of refugees". Michael gave a satirical laudatory speech.

"We got a tremendous response in the media", he recalls. "We could thus increase the public visibility of Sea-Watch and our rescue efforts, even though there weren't many people around on that cold February night and 'Lifeboat' didn't get an Oscar in the end." The organisers made a point of avoiding confrontation. Initially, they had planned to project the film directly on the

walls of the Home Office building through the surrounding fence, but this was given up when the police ordered them to stop the attempt.

"We have often asked ourselves whether we can really have an impact with our nonviolent methods. For me, there is no doubt about that", Michael emphasises. "Especially when dealing with issues that raise a lot of public emotions, it is important to be perceived as definitely nonviolent, otherwise you will give ammunition to your opponents and be classed as a criminal. Thanks to our nonviolent action, we could enhance our networking and win further target groups for raising public awareness. Had we been violent, we would have never got such broad support", Michael is convinced.

For example, the idea of the "Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland" (German Protestant Church) to send their own rescue boat to the Mediterranean had been influenced by contacts to Sea-Watch. Another success, as Michael points out, is the growing support for the international association "Seebrücke" (Sea Bridge) resulting in more and more cities and communities embracing the appeal to "Create Safe Harbours". By now, more than 220 German cities and counties describe themselves as such "Safe Harbours" with a commitment to offer protection and shelter to

refugees saved from the waters of the Mediterranean.

Eventually, however, Michael wanted to be involved in international peacebuilding as well. He felt attracted to Nepal where he had done his practical sessions during his trainings at KURVE Wustrow. Already at that time, he could make use of what he had learnt: For his then partner organisation, he conducted seminars on conflict analysis and worked as a trainer in the Master Degree Course "Peace and Conflict Studies" at the University of Katmandu.

Within the project "Youth for Change" of Nagarik Aawaz, Michael now contributes to setting up a "Peace Building, Learning and Memorial Centre". He considers it most important for post-conflict societies to promote the preservation of the collective memory in order to learn from the mistakes of the past. And he finds it vital, in this context, to involve young people whose views, concerns and needs might be crucial for a peaceful future. "For me, memorial work is an element of nonviolent resistance", says Michael. "It's nonviolent resistance against forgetting."

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