

From Trübsee to the World of Film

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ENGELBERG Fifteen years ago, as a young student, he emigrated and now Florian Halbedl is coming back home to produce his next film.

Florian Halbedl is visibly impressed by Eugen Hess, his ancestor from his mother's side.

"The people in Engelberg called him 'Sager Geni' (he was a carpenter), he was a pioneer, he was the one to bring electricity to the valley for the first time, the Eugenisee is named after him, and he built the first hotel on Trübsee."

A lot of information of his ancestor, Florian Halbedl got out of a book, which he found in Engelberg. When he tells the story, despite his near perfect Swiss German, one does notice an English accent as he struggles for dialect words. This is what someone sounds like who emigrated to Canada with his family when he was a 15-year old teenager. Halbedl grew up on Trübsee where his parents ran the hotel until the year 2000 when the family moved to Canada. Until the second year of his Gymnasium (eighth grade in North America) he attended middle school in the monastery.

The Swiss living abroad, however, did not return to Engelberg for two weeks to trace the history of his ancestors. Florian Halbedl is a film producer/director setting up his next project. In October, he wants to shoot his next short film "Limina" in Switzerland.

With Children, Boundaries are Fluid

Picture a small, romantic village in Switzerland. In that village lives eight-year old Alessandra who likes to wear dresses and pigtails. He is a magical boy whose gender is fluid. In his own way, Alessandra takes part in a woman's mourning process, or he helps an old man who is waiting for a love letter from a long-lost love. The film is about the subject of Transgender people whose gender roles do not coincide with the physical gender assigned to them at birth. "With 'Limina' we want to show that it's important to let children be children," says the 30-year old Florian Halbedl, who came out as bisexual when he was 21-years old.

For the last five years he has been married to his partner Joshua M. Ferguson, who is transgender. Together they created the production company "Turbid Lake Pictures" (direct translation is Trübsee Pictures). "When I was young, I often played with my doll named Petra. My parents never had a problem with it but there are many people who would say that boys shouldn't play

with dolls." However, just because a child plays with an item that does not 'match' their gender, that doesn't mean a child is transsexual or transgender or would one day become trans. "It's simply part of the magic and adventure of children, who see the world very differently. Gender boundaries in children can be fluid and we should let them explore."

The Norms of Society

Bullying was the subject of their first short film "Whispers of Life" which Florian and Joshua played at 21 film festivals around the world and which won them multiple awards. That film was about a boy who, even though was never labeled as homosexual or transsexual, is 'different' and under so much pressure from his village that he is contemplating suicide. Naturally, the subject matter of their first films is a reflection of Florian and Joshua's life. "My partner is biologically a man but he doesn't want to undergo gender reassignment surgery." He explains it this way: "Masculine and feminine are social genders. He is biologically a man, but that doesn't match his social gender in terms of what a man or a woman should be in the eyes of society. Of course that plays a role in our marriage."

Youth as Inspiration

Even though the subject of 'Transgender' is very prominent at the moment, especially in North America and in the UK, it is less so in Switzerland. Florian Halbedl wants to shoot the new short film "Limina," with a budget between 50,000 and 100,000 francs, in Switzerland even though it would be cheaper to shoot it in Vancouver. Post production will take place in Vancouver. "I want to combine my passion for my home and my passion for film." The little Swiss village, with the most likely location being Lavertezzo in Ticino, will represent any small magical place. "Engelberg and how I grew up was definitely an inspiration. In "Limina" everyone in the village knows the child, just like everyone in Engelberg knew us as 'the children from Trübsee.'" Florian Halbedl explains that he was never under pressure during his school time in Engelberg. The pressures only started during high school in Canada. Until he was 21-years old, he dated women. "I didn't really realize it back then." He says he always knew that he was attracted to people in general. It was always about the person and not the social or biological gender of a person. He remembers being a student in Engelberg and reading an article in the local newspapers about someone in the village coming out as gay, which was then discussed in the village. "That was the

first time I was 'exposed' to it. I had a girlfriend in Kindergarten but there was also a boy to whom I said 'if you were a girl, I would have a crush on you.'" He explains that those are things one only remembers or realizes later on. "When I saw that newspaper article, I knew that there were other people, and that it was okay."

Support from Dominique Gisin

The two weeks Florian and Joshua have spent in Engelberg were used to research Ticino and financing options for the project. The Ticino Film Commission is already on board to financially and logistically support the project. Florian also presented the project to Culture Obwalden who expressed interest in the project as well as Culture Nidwalden. On top of that they have a crowdfunding campaign on the internet. That campaign, as was the case with their previous project, is supported by Olympic gold medalist Dominique Gisin. Since fourth grade, they were classmates and to this day they remain in touch. "During our meeting we realized how connected and similar we actually are." What Dominique had to go through after her accidents to get back to the top when many people encouraged her to do something else is similar to the arts. "People always said I was dreaming, and asked why I don't do something with my medical science background."

Engelberg is his Home

Florian Halbedl got into film while studying medical sciences and biology at university in Ontario. "I made a film about owl pellets," he laughs. That's when he realized that film was more important to him. "I remembered how we reenacted scenes from films with other children of the hotel's guests on Trübsee in the snow and how we would make trips to Luzern to visit the cinema." That's why he changed his majors to medical sciences and film studies, which he successfully completed.

With their production company Florian and Joshua are at the beginning of their careers. His bread and butter he earns by working as an assistant directors on Hollywood productions including *Godzilla*, *Percy Jackson* or most recently the television show *Fear the Walking Dead*, the companion series of the original.

In Engelberg today, he realizes that other than the new vacation homes, not much has changed. "It's especially nice to meet people who are still here. When they remember me, they haven't seen me since I was a young boy. Engelberg has in a way always remained my home."