

Vitascope

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Das Vermächtnis eines Patrons - Warum Rudolf Geigy nach Afrika aufbrach

(The Legacy of a Driven Man - Why Rudolf Geigy set out for Africa)

When the Swiss zoologist Rudolf Geigy sometimes spent the night in the African bush, he was struck by an oppressive desire for Western culture. In such cases he took his gramophone out of the Land Rover, put on Mozart's «A Little Night Music» and soon the familiar sounds of the Salzburg music genius drowned out the scream of a bush baby or the dull drums in a distant village.

The film

The film reflects this relationship between Switzerland and Africa, and sheds light on the life and work of the headstrong founder of the Swiss Tropical Institute, Rudolf Geigy. Thanks to rich archive collections and the memories of contemporary witnesses, the film gives an insight into the mood of optimism at that time. On the basis of Geigy's dazzling personality, central themes of Swiss post-war history can be highlighted: Geigy was a leading ecologist, committed to development aid in Africa and to the advancement of science. Both his first student and later director Thierry Freyvogel, as well as the next-generation director Marcel Tanner, talk about their beginnings and their impressions of old-school patrons. Rudolf Geigy's moods are also famous. Sometimes very generous - money played no part in this family - sometimes very mean, he was not always an easy man to be around. Cheerfully exuberant with outsiders, at home his children and his wife were afraid of his unpredictable outbursts. He also saw it as his right to be unfaithful, and embarked on numerous adventures of the heart. In the film, contemporary witnesses and his son speak about all this. Paradoxically, it was Rudolf Geigy's cultural background that enabled him to have develop his fascination for Africa. Geigy was the son of a rich Basel industrial family, aristocracy which until the 1960s occupied important positions in the city's politics and economy. And it was from this aristocracy – Basel's 'Dough' they were often called – that a stream of famous explorers emerged. Geigy, born in 1902, was fascinated by many of these explorers and their expeditions, and decided to become a zoologist.

The foundation of the Swiss Tropical Institute

In World War II, Rudolf Geigy and Alfred Gigon, Professor of Internal Medicine at the University of Basel, suggested setting up a tropical institute in Switzerland. This was partly in response to an initiative of the federal government trying to stave off huge unemployment after the Second World War, but it also usefully coincided with the mood of the time – African governments were then very open to all things Swiss because Switzerland had never held colonies in Africa. So, in 1944, the Tropical Institute began its activities: with teaching, research and a clinic for people returning to the tropics. Geigy and his students soon moved to the African bush, exploring sleeping sickness, malaria and African relapsing fever. And they founded scientific institutions in Tanzania and Côte d'Ivoire

Topics

The family: influence and decline

The family of Rudolf Geigy belonged to the economically, socially and politically dominant group of the urban bourgeoisie in Basel: Rudolf Geigy was the youngest of three siblings and the only son of an entrepreneur and industrialist family belonging to a layer of Basel's 'high finance' society stretching back many generations. He grew up in middle-class circumstances, which in some aspects call to mind the lifestyle of the English landowner. His family's company and history connected Geigy directly with the upswing of the Basel's famous colour chemistry industry. Geigy's father Johann Rudolf Geigy-Schlumberger (1862-1933) led the family business according to the typical patriarchal principles of the old bourgeoisie. However, he had enough entrepreneurial and human vision to recognize that his only son wasn't ready yet for the role economic manager then becoming popular. Instead, promoted his above-average scientific talent. But Rudolf Geigy not only experienced the boom of the pharmaceutical industry in the 1940s. As a board member of the Geigy Company, he witnessed the decline of all three pharmaceutical companies, which were all gradually absorbed into today's Novartis. The direct influence of the long-established Basel city bourgeoisie on cantonal politics had already suffered a decisive setback during the wars, but especially after the Second World War. By contrast, the social and cultural weight of these families in urban society remained largely unbroken until the 1960s. Rudolf Geigy occupied a dominant position in his family environment, as shown clearly in his academic career after 1930 and the way he influenced public affairs. At the age of 92 he ended his life via Exit together with his wife, which led to great discussions in the press.

Natural conservation

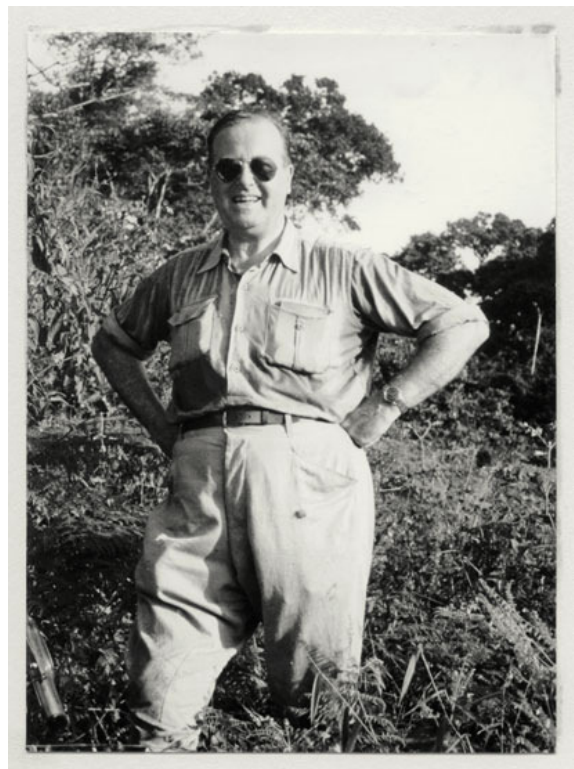
A film about Rudolf Geigy and his time is a film about the conservation movement in Switzerland. For Geigy, exploration of African lands and conservation in Switzerland and in many countries of the world were two sides of the same coin. The more he watched Africa's nature slowly disappear, the more he valued its protection. Geigy was for many years president of the board of directors of the zoological garden in Basel. He was significantly engaged in the expansion and redesign of the garden. Quite often he also put his hand into his own pocket. Under his reign he had introduced modern concepts of animal husbandry and promoted bird observatory. Geigy acquired an island (Cousin Island) in the Seychelles and built a unique ornithological research station there. And he supported the Swiss Ornithological Institute in Sempach all his life. Geigy already belonged as a student to the founding members of the Friends of the Birds established in Sempach 1924 and acquired during this time a larger piece of land in the shore zone of the lake. He used this private property - in addition to regular trips to the Petite Camargue in the Alsace Rhine meadows - for teaching expeditions as part of his lecturing at the University of Basel.

Development Assistance

Switzerland was a major player in development aid in the 1960s. Many independent African governments wanted to break away from the former colonial rulers. And there were not much more suitable partners like Switzerland, which bore no blame for colonialism. Most of the development initiatives of the first years were private. With the Tropical Institute and J. R. Geigy Ltd founded by his grandfather, Rudolf Geigy was in an ideal position to be involved in this field. In 1960 he founded the "Basel Foundation for the Support of Developing Countries", an initiative of six Basel chemical companies. The Foundation, together with the Tanzanian Government, intended to strengthen the health sector of the East African country. At that time, development aid was mainly technical assistance. An important role was played by the DDT developed by J. R. Geigy AG. By the establishment of local institutions and the training of local health experts they helped to achieve development and a research partnership, which still continues today.

Science

"Bwana Ngiri" (Mr. Warthog). Geigy's nickname, which was circulating among the Tanzanian population, was no coincidence. Already in 1949 Geigy travelled to remote areas of the East African country. He was searching for warthogs, which he was convinced were effectively a reservoir for ticks carrying African relapse fever. The developmental physiologist Geigy tried all his life to combine research work in the laboratories in Basel with field research in Africa. In 1957, the Tropical Institute settled with a field laboratory in Ifakara in Tanzania. It was built at the invitation of the local Capuchin Mission in their own St. Francis Hospital. With the triangle of teaching, research laboratory and hospital, the Ifakara Health Institute, like its counterpart, the "Swiss Scientific Centre for Research" in Côte d'Ivoire, has become one of the most renowned research institutes in sub-Saharan Africa.



Rudolf Geigy in the bush of Tanzania