

Heinz Sielmann: Oral History Transcription

Name of interviewee:

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1. Early interest in wildlife and filmmaking

HS: Well, I must say I've made a child's dream reality. A child's dream to be in nature, with animals all over the world, and to show what I like, I love so much, to millions, millions of people, of television, something we didn't dream of when I was a child, that television would be a reality.

Int: This morning I am honoured to be with my friend Professor Heinz Sielmann, the internationally famous and acclaimed wildlife filmmaker in his lovely house in a suburb of Munich. Were you actually born in Munich Heinz, or were you born somewhere else in Germany, in the countryside perhaps?

HS: Well, I was born in Western Germany in quite a busy industrial area, my father Doctor Paul Sielmann, was a chemist in a big factory, my mother Swiss-French, we stood there seven years and I was saved by my interest for wildlife, was a great opportunity that my father decided to go to East Prussia, to the north eastern part of Germany, very rich with wildlife, beautiful landscapes and I was from, right at, in the beginning interested in animal watching.

Int: Where did you start to study wildlife seriously? Was it in your garden?

HS: The garden of my first home, in Königsberg, in East Prussia was not yet a very cultivated garden, there a great meadow with lots of flowers, where the plants could work as they did like, and by that, there were many, many species of butterflies, and I was interested, first of all, with the butterflies but also on spiders and on locusts and then I had the terrarium, where I could keep different species and there I had also lizards and not [non] poisonous snakes. And one day at my excursions in this remote places in surrounding of Königsberg, I saw a snake which I've never seen before, I thought this as a very, very harmless creature, and when I got them for my avery, for my terrarium, I got a bite on my hand, and when I regarded my snake very close I got frightened, because it was not a harmless snake, it was a kreuzotter [*Vipera Berus*], that means the only wild poisonous snake in my home country.

Int: What we call the adder, or viper in Britain.

HS: The adder, I took a band from my shoe and did stop the blood, which came out of the bite, and with my bicycle I went home as soon as I could and there was great excitement for my mother, my boy Heinz is touched, bite by kreuzotter, the doctor came, I got my first whiskey and nothing that did happen, and this accident couldn't lessen my fascination for lizards, for snakes, for all these creatures, but I did say 'Heinz, never touch a snake again which you not properly know'.

Then I started to get in love with birds and it was Professor Köhler, Director of the Zoological Museum and Institute, who in spring is most active, like the time in bird life. He took 20/30 people every morning on Sunday, Sundays, in different landscapes to watch different birds.

Int: And that was around Königsberg?

HS: Very close, round about, to find different landscapes.

Int: He was at Königsberg University?

HS: He was the head, the Director of the Zoological Museum and the Institute, and I've got great love with what we did call 'the snipe family'. There's the lapwing, they are the snipes, and the curlew with the beautiful, dweeeet, dweet, dweet call, and I got in very good touch, connection with the famous Professor and I did feel that I was in great love with these snipe birds, and told me "Heinz we don't know very much yet from the private lives of these birds and I will give you some information you should build hides. Where you get well covered and your mother should buy you a photographic camera that you can not only observe what is happening in the life, the nesting place of these birds, but that you take documentations with the slide camera."

Int: What were the first photographs you took and whom did you show them?

HS: I was quite a capable pupil and got good photos and by these observations, my father don't watch it you see, because he didn't like it, because I had to concentrate on my [school work] and the results of my school work were very bad.

Int: Was the part of East Prussia where you lived with your parents rich in wildlife?

HS: Yes, because I was so deeply impressed when this lousy, very cold East Prussian winter was over, when the buttons opened, when the first green came about, and the birds came back and started their beautiful songs and there, as I said, I was really deeply impressed and I decided by myself to become a pastor, and does —, for become a pastor it was must that I did take school with Greek, the Greek language, only by having had the Greek lecture there was a chance of study at university, the position of pastor.

Int: Was there anyone in particular who influenced you to make this change of vocation from a clergyman to an ecological researcher and film maker?

HS: I started never the less inspired by Professor Köhler, building hides, mother did buy me a good, very good photo camera, father had not to know it and —.

Int: Your father wasn't keen on you changing career?

HS: He told me, "the distraction was too big", and the, my efforts in school was getting less and less impressive, very bad, I was a very bad pupil, and Professor Köhler did something very important. There were in winter time, five/six special lectures, but in the council of the friends of the museum, very well was visited and Professor Köhler took the risk to invite Heinz Sielmann to take over one of these lectures. And I must say I had very good photo's and very interesting observation's and got in the newspaper excellent reviews and even the teacher did read it and were deeply impressed, because they did read the pupil of [the school] is, as the professor says "a very capable boy", and this more or less was the reason that I made school. And by this wonderful result, my father was so impressed that he did buy me film camera, and I took this film camera and all these experiences I had the last two/three years observing the snipe birds, from my hides, with my still cameras. All these experiences I did need for my very first film (1), and with this film I was the great lecture hall of the Zoological Museum invited to present my first film to the audience and again a wonderful article in the newspaper and even my father did agree that I started with, in the university, with the study of Biology.

Well there was one person, I must say, he became something like a goal for my life, it was the first master Horst Siewert and he took two important films one on the great bustard (2), with its fabulous display and one film about the life of the moose (3). And I met Dr Horst Siewert when he took this moose film (3), and he was highly interested to hear of my research on the snipe birds, and we decided once to make one film even together (4).

Int: I suppose military service put an end to those plans for the time being?

HS: Of course, and my father did say, well boy, if you can choice the weapon be, become a wireless operator, then you are far off the fire, far off the front, so it happened and I was a very good wireless operator. And this went on until 1942 and then the situation at the front became worse and worse and these wireless operators became a very short experience in infantry business and I did belong to this group of people who had to go to Stalingrad, to this awful front part in Russia. Then something unbelievable did happen, Professor Doctor Erwin Stresemann, part of the Museum of Zoology, who had been watching my film, my growing career, he did write to me a letter, Horst Siewert had gone, has died, on the beautiful island of Crete. He did ask whether I would be willing to take over, to go to Crete, to fulfil his last work, to take a movie on Crete and to finish collection of special Crete Mediterranean birds for the natural history museum of

Berlin, it was for me like a page of a fairytale book. I certainly did agree that instead of going into hell like Stalingrad, the front part in Russia, I got the opportunity to go to this beautiful, this marvellous island of Crete, in the heart of the Mediterranean, watching birds, collecting birds and making a movie (5).

Int: So you were actually able to film wildlife in Crete for what remained of the war?

HS: The head of the military business, of course the General, he was a great lover of birds and Stresemann has been before on Crete, and so he had the best elation, this was convincing, when Stresemann told the general "you have the influence to take over, Stresemann, Siewert, who is now on the back on the defence weapon at the border of Berlin, take him to Crete and he will do his job either in Berlin, or in Crete, if necessary" and this were the reasons Siewert got this outstanding job and that I took over.

Int: And what year was that?

HS: That was exactly 1943.

2. Heinz's films

Int: Can you tell me what happened when the war ended? What happened to your film?

HS: Then the British took me not direct to Europe but in captivity, in E..., in Egypt and took my film and my collection to London and one day there comes the news, we need this boy in London, and so unbelievable, I had to take my baggage and then I went to Cairo, stood there a few days. Then on a flying fortress packed with happy, happy soldiers, who had to go home, I was taken to London airport and I came into a special camp, there were countrymen, one was painting the bishop, the other ones were working in museums, and I was taken everyday to Warner Street, the famous film street of London, and could work on my Crete film material and I had to visit the Natural History Museum, where my skinned birds had arrived.

Int: Did you, by the way, skin the birds yourself?

HS: Certainly, certainly.

Int: It's quite an art that.

HS: Yes, but I had to learn at the Zoological Museum Königsberg.

Int: I see. How long did you stay in London?

HS: I got in touch with Stresemann, he was lucky, in the museum he was well protected from the awful bombing on Berlin and he got the letter saying 'Heinz stay in London', and I got information saying both my parents had died in Königsberg.

So I stood until 1945 in London, working for the Natural History Museum as I told you at Warner Street and then the British did release me, which was a great privilege, to Hamburg.

Int: Were you soon able to resume film-making when you returned to Germany?

HS: Hamburg was the headquarter of the British, and I got a job translating English picture, films, into the German versions. Then of course I did, take me to new creation of the famous Institute for Education and Scientific Films and this was outstanding, this was the first institution where the British did film making allow and very important corporation, they had enough money from the time before and would like feature length documentary could be produced, because the situations, the landscaped were awful, there is many, many illegal hunting, in the landscapes and wood cutting, illegally, and they want to have the feature length documentary, the picture houses to promote, to protect nature. This was a wonderful offer.

Int: I believe it was about this time that you met your charming wife Inge.

HS: Yes, there was this institute, I told you already for film and picture, and in the same building there was the department of the NDR [Norddeutscher Rundfunk] of the German radio, for schools, school broadcasting. When I came from the wild, with my film material, there was the projection room, and did watch what the results of my films, there was a most charming young girl who always, close to the projector man, did watch my films and was deeply impressed. And so I took this opportunity to invite her to the courtship of the wonderful birds, it's not the capercaillie, the smaller species.

Int: Oh the kampfläufer, it's what we call the ruff.

HS: Wonderful, wonderful, and many other film material and I did invite her, Easter holiday, and a few weeks later we did marry.

Int: Wonderful. When you went to film the hamsters (6), I believe Konrad Lorenz gave you special instruction. What was it?

HS: After having seen my skills with film he told me "Heinz this is excellent documentation. Please come to my institute, which was formally started in Buldern, close to Munster, and come with a sack of sand." Why a sack of sand? Well he told me that Professor, the former Doctor Eibl Eibesfeldt is studying, after having observing the squirrels, now the hamster, that there is this beautiful, this colourful, big rodent, living underground and you should, with the concrete, build the home of the hamster, after having observed and documented the habitat the way of nest building in the wild. So we did completely new documentation of animal behaviour (6), that not any human eye has been seen before. And this was three, three years, I have the chance of work with the Lorenz Institute, which we created completely new documentations.

I gained the best possible contact with the very famous Sir Peter Scott, we met at the congress in Switzerland, in Basel, and he saw my black, my black and white woodpecker (7). I started by black and white, colour filming was not yet very common, and he was deeply impressed. And I got this beautiful invitation to London and was wonderful, the reaction was so good that it had to be repeated, my Woodpecker film (7) and when I went on at Lorenz's institute, as I told you, with different films, with squirrel, polecat and what so ever, then I came to Heathrow year by year with my films, people at the customs used to say 'hello Mr Woodpecker what are you bringing next?'

There came a great, great offer from the Royal Belgium Family, we were facing the big world exhibition and the Royal family was planning to leave the Belgium Congo, and wanted that big documentation. Modern cinemascope has been realised, and I did wish, an international team, operators from Belgium of course, from France, from England and from Germany, and I got the honour to be the, really the third general, general director and was a tough job. With cinemascope you couldn't use the long lenses, so we were filming 18 months in the Congo but even the head of the 20th Century Fox came to Belgium, watch the film, took the film and it was released (8). It became a great success.

You know the stork, he was feeling well when he is getting wet feet, and in wide meadow countries, Bergenhusen this little village, straw covered houses and 60 pairs of storks, it was unbelievable. And I went there right at the arrival of the storks to pick out the roofs which were very fitting for hide building and I must say I lived with storks for three months, I even did sleep on the roof sometimes with the storks, and this clapping and all this activity was really, really, also very, very impressive. And by this way of life with the storks I got unusual intimate shots of their private life (9). One of the most impressive were the fight of the better nesting places, the stork is going twice a year, 8000 kilometres to their hibernating places, same places, same time, same space again when they come back and they have the trend, to go to their youth nesting places but often they are already taken by other storks and then it can happen that they will be ferocious, fights. I succeeded in getting one fight where not two males were fighting for the nest but four storks, two pairs, two stork cocks and two stork hens and when the hot season did arrive I got beautiful the fact that the grown up young storks, are thirsty in the hot roofs and that the storks is drinking, bringing water, and instead of rocks, presenting refreshment, water (9).

The production of Galapagos (10), this beautiful area, these islands of Galapagos is wonderful for the big screen. I will never forget the premiere of Galapagos, the big cinema in Hamburg, press conference and I did say, to the people, the paper people, "gentlemen I make films for big screen, for education, for science", we have to give cinema what belongs to the cinema, this mighty pictures for showing, for entering the audience into nature and we have also to give for education, special versions'.

And I've been with National Geographic in Alaska, for the very sympathetic, and even for the most famous dragon islands, Komodo, in Indonesia, I never forget you see (11). We started in Bali, in beautiful island Bali, and National Geographic was financially it was very well outfitted, and we had a cook for the Asian kitchen, we had a cook for the European kitchen, everything was in you see and we stood there for 14 days. Unforgettable. These mighty, more than three metres long dragons.

Int: In a way maybe quite frightening because they have a bad reputation.

HS: Very bad reputation, if you are drunk and go to sleep then it can happen!

Int: And also I understand if you get bitten by one, actually, the bite is very poisonous to people—

HS: No, no.

Int: I thought that, I was told that the germs —



HS: But they eat meat, not vegetarian.

Int: That's right you could get poisoning.

HS: Mighty, mighty teeth but not poisonous.

I went with my camera from Florida, the sub-tropical Miami area, famous everglades, over the mountains, up to the tundra, I went west to the coastline of the Siberia to the Bering Sea and I went all over Canada and to the tundra, the arctic's, a tough job. They became in picture-house films, television films, educational films, scientific films (12).

Int: I would imagine that you were one of the first people to film the famous Kodiak bears who catch salmon (13).

HS: Yeah, wonderful

Int: In Alaska is it?

HS: Mighty, Kodiak, Alaska, in Alaska.

Int: I think you were possibly one of the first people who —

HS: And I went weeks and weeks with dog sledge, behind the polar bears, to the walrus, wonderful experience.

Int: Marvellous memories. In the 1970s you were still showing programmes of great success on German television, 'Expeditionen ins Tierreich', 'Expeditions into the Animal Kingdom' (14), I think is the memorable series of yours and I think you made it with Gunther Toberg, was he the director at the time, could you tell us something about the series and how it came to be made?

HS: Yes, oh yes. Well all together 165 productions (14), we did together, a great many, then I got over to satellites, eight productions at TL —

Int: Satellites is one of the commercial companies?

HS: — seven productions, and then you see exactly ten years ago I made my own foundation.

We have excellent material in schools you see for biological lessons, lectures, we have the films, we have the slides, we have microscopes but nothing works better than personal experience in nature, this belongs to modern biological information of the kids, which is very, very good with the help of our foundation.

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We started by presenting species, then I came with animal behaviour and now ecology. The earth, the creature, the human beings, I have to arrange. The life, the earth would be poor if we wouldn't have the spring full of bird songs, with blooming meadows and we depend on this earth, all has been created and we have not the right to chase species from this earth, because each creature of the smallest onto the biggest one, am in this wonderful ecology of nature.

Television has become very, very important for education and big, big audience, that we have to be a bit careful with the earth, for what we live and where we live. And all these ecological experts are the same opinion, we have to handle this earth a bit more careful.

Politicians, very difficult, they only do what is for the money, interesting, but nature, nature will give us clicks on the beak.

Int: Will give us a rude slap around the face, there will be disaster, I mean —

HS: Nature is to force us to be a bit timid, bit —

Int: If we cut down the forests on the mountains then the soil, the rain will bring the soil down, plants —

HS: Everywhere the same, too many people and too many changes in climate and food, there will be wars for water if we are not careful —

Int: We are getting that way now.

HS: —but nature will take care.

END

References

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