

Schengen – a text by Wolfgang Zurborn

The medium of photography offers the unique opportunity to react directly to our living space and to create views that give the depicted objects and places their own language. In the best case, the everyday sceneries are set into the picture in such a way that they tell complex stories about the coexistence of people, about their fears and longings from within themselves, without an ideological filter. "Seeing instead of wanting to mean" is also the motto for photographer Ruth Stoltenberg in her book and exhibition project Schengen.

In this small Luxembourgish town in the border triangle with the German Saarland and the French Lorraine, she combines very different levels of observation. On the one hand she has a very personal view of the region, since she grew up there in the 1960s and 70s, and on the other she is of course aware of the great symbolic charge of the place Schengen, as the cradle of European unity. In 1985, it was there that it was decided to abolish the borders within Europe. It is a great challenge for the photographer not to succumb to the weight of such a complex topic as Europe, which has become highly explosive especially in times of emerging populism and nationalism. Fortunately, she is not looking for motifs that illustrate politics while strikingly displaying the differences of national identities in the villages of the border triangle. Rather, she relies on her inner images, which are created by childhood memories and allows them to enter into a curious dialogue with the contemporary appearance of these places. Her gaze is full of empathy for the people who live there, but she also has enough distance to focus with a precise gaze on the absurdities of everyday life with a great sense of humour.

It is precisely the interweaving of a subjective, personally justified perspective with an analytical reflection of the political context that makes this photographic work so special. In the global context, many people find their own living space increasingly meaningless, and this alienation leads to frustrations that results in populist currents. Some of this desolation can certainly be felt in Ruth Stoltenberg's photographs, but this is by no means the central motif of the work. Rather, it is a matter of formulating an appreciation for what would normally fall through the grid of what can be used in the media. The banality of everyday life seems to be one of our last taboos, and that is why people feel increasingly alien in their own world and withdraw into their private spaces.

Public life hardly ever takes place in these places, which is why we hardly encounter people in the streets in Ruth Stoltenberg's photographs. However, the inhabitants of the places Schengen, Apach and Perl are indirectly present in all the pictures. The design of facades, house

entrances, front gardens, playgrounds, cemeteries and memorial sites makes their cultural, social and religious imprints visible. The imperfections of the architectural stagings and the sometimes absurd encounter of signs and symbols in the village space are photographed with such subtle irony and careful attention that a deep respect for the individual stories behind the things becomes perceptible. This love for detail is the antidote to an ideological distance from the real world. It creates identity and is thus of eminent importance in times of collective alienation.

Ruth Stoltenberg has developed her very own photographic imagery, which is characterized by visual virtuosity, narrow sections, and idiosyncratic perspectives, inspiring the viewer's imagination and at the same time invites him to take a closer look. The images are not suitable for affirming given clichés, but undermine them with a radically subjective balancing act between beauty and dreariness. The photographer does not want to teach or spread clear messages, but to express her own questions about the development of a region in the middle of Europe, which she has known since her childhood. The authenticity of these observations is not based on a neutral view of the things as they are demanded by influential representatives of the German documentary photography. This search for a perception of the world, which is based on a scientifically unassailable method of objective typologization while filtering out all emotional aspects, would not be suitable for her to tell something essential about contemporary life.

In the publication *Schengen*, published by Kehrer Verlag in 2018, Ruth Stoltenberg combines two photographic styles. On the one hand she concentrates on everyday situations and objects in portrait-format pictures, which she tears out of spatial contexts with a fragmentary view, and on the other hand she creates double-sided landscape formats that locate what she has seen. With this interplay of perspectives, the photographer takes the viewer for a stroll through the villages. It is precisely the unintentionality in the observations that creates an openness for the interpretation of what is perceived. Thus the photographs from the various countries are not provided with explanatory captions, nor are they divided into chapters that would immediately make it clear where we are. Fixed clichés dissolve in this picture puzzle and we find ourselves often very wrong in our classification of national prejudices. The joyful questioning of one's own values by looking closely at the seemingly familiar in a globalised world is the central theme of Ruth Stoltenberg's work *Schengen*.