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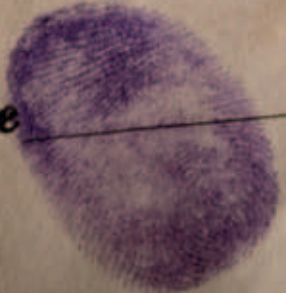
Address

TIBETAN NURSERY  
DHARAMSALA  
KANGRA PUNJAB  
INDIA.



*Who is my mother?  
Where is my child?*

Signature



25.6.63

# TIBI AND HIS MOTHERS

A Film by Ueli Meier

WITH Tibi Lhundub Tsering, Youden Jampa, Ruth Graber CINEMATOGRAPHY, WRITING, DIRECTION Ueli Meier  
EDITING Andrea Bürgi, Annette Brüttsch PRODUCTION CONSULTANT Nico Gutmann SOUND DESIGN, SOUND MIX Dieter Lengacher MUSIC Christian Brantschen  
POST PRODUCTION CONSULTANT Patrick Lindenmaier PICTURE DESIGN Milivoj Ivković ARTWORK Jordy Oral EXECUTIVE PRODUCER Ueli Meier A PRODUCTION OF Tibifilm ZÜRICH  
WITH FINANCIAL SUPPORT OF GEORGE FOUNDATION, ERNST GÖHNER STIFTUNG, HEKS

# TIBI UND SEINE MÜTTER

## Synopsis

In 1963, seven-year-old *TIBI LHUNDUB TSERING* arrives at Zurich Airport. He has been brought to Switzerland from a home for Tibetan child refugees, the Nursery for Tibetan Refugee Children in Dharamsala, through an aid programme privately run by an entrepreneur and approved by the Dalai Lama and the Swiss authorities. When *RUTH GRABER* picks up her foster child at Zurich Airport, Tibi's mother *YOU DEN JAMPA*, working in a road building camp in India, knows nothing of her son's whereabouts.

Well looked after, Tibi grows up in his foster mother's academic family in the small, rural town of Grüningen. However, despite her tender care and devotion Ruth Graber cannot replace the love of her foster son's real mother. When Tibi has completed his apprenticeship as a bricklayer, he embarks on a journey to find his real parents. He eventually finds his family in a Tibetan refugee settlement in southern India. Overjoyed at finding his mother again, Tibi at the same time senses that he has lost her forever. Even if his mother accepts him the way he is, she will never be able to understand him. After his return to Switzerland Tibi goes off the rails and almost loses himself.

Almost four decades later Tibi travels to India once again, now along with his Swiss family. He wants to visit his elderly mother in the refugee settlement in Bylakuppe. For Tibi's five-year-old daughter Sangmo and her little brother Samdub it will be the first encounter with the strange world of their Tibetan grandmother.

The film accompanies Tibi on his journey to his mother – and visits his foster mother in Grüningen in the Zurich Oberland (Zurich Highlands). While observing the now quiet every day life of the two old women, distant memories emerge silently and sometimes painfully to the surface.

## Director's notes

I've known Tibi, whose story my film 'Tibi and his Mothers' recounts, for many years. We played football in the same team. I only found out that Tibi's real name is Lhundub Tsering, when I had to fill in the list of players prior to a match. When I asked him about this, Tibi told me that when he arrived here at the age of seven back in 1963 from the Nursery for Tibetan Refugee Children, nobody in the small, rural town of Grüningen was able to pronounce his exotic name. Therefore he just came to be known as Tibi.

Back then, after the Chinese occupation of Tibet and the Dalai Lama's escape to India, Tibetans were met with a lot of sympathy in Switzerland – even though only very little was known about the far away secluded and mysterious country. It was the time of the Cold War, and the unholy Communists had just trampled down an ancient culture in a bloody campaign. The land of high

and snowy mountains reminded many Swiss of their own country. In the humble piety and the heroic love of liberty shown by the dispossessed and ousted shepherders and farmers, the Swiss recognised national virtues and myths they attributed to themselves. In March 1963, the Swiss Federal Council approved the admission of 1000 refugees from Tibet – the highest number of any country in the western world. The Society for Tibetan Homesteads was founded and in close cooperation with the Swiss Red Cross, families from refugee camps in India and Nepal were chosen to be brought to Switzerland and to settle in new homes in the Alpine foothills.

I still remember how I marvelled at the extensive photographic reports I saw in my parents' newspapers and magazines of the first Tibetans arriving in Switzerland. The privately run foster child campaign by the director of an energy company, Charles Aeschmann, from Olten caught special attention. The Swiss magazine 'Nebelspalter' ran a story about a special performance given by the Swiss national Circus Knie to the foster children and their families in 1964 under the title 'Rendezvous of the little Tibetans'.

In spring 1996, after the football training Tibi told me that he was going to bring his Tibetan mother from the refugee settlement in India to Switzerland for three months – the duration a tourist visa is valid. It was his mother's first journey to the West. What an interesting story, I thought. Back then I was working as a freelance photographer and asked Tibi if my journalist colleague Eugen Sorg and I could meet his mother and interview her, saying that I would also like to meet his Swiss foster mother.

The encounter with Tibi and his mother Youden Jampa was very touching: a refugee's fate, one of millions in the world, which we hear of on a daily basis, often merely in the form of a short agency report printed in the daily papers. And all of a sudden it had a face and a story behind it. However, equally touching were the doubts expressed by Tibi's foster mother about the rightfulness of her actions back in 1963.

Ten years later, Tibi told me that his old mother's health was deteriorating and that he had decided to visit her together with his wife and his two small children at the refugee settlement Bylakuppe in India. His wish was that his five-year-old daughter Sangmo Lina and her two year younger brother Samdup Dorjee could at least once in their life see their grandmother in her strange world with their own eyes.

I spontaneously asked Tibi, if I could accompany him and his family on their journey to his mother with my film camera. The sequences filmed at Tibi's mother Youden Jampa's home in Bylakuppe, and those filmed immediately after my return from India at Tibi's foster mother Ruth Graber's house in Grüningen were the beginning of my film project 'Tibi and his Mothers'. It took another six years to finally complete it.

The documents and material found during my research on the foster child campaign run by Charles Aeschmann left me wondering how this little known chapter in Switzerland's refugee history in the 1960s had been possible at all. With whomever I interviewed during the course of my work – be it contemporary witnesses, experts in foster care and adoption, politicians, or lawyers – all the conversations sooner or later turned to the same question. Was it in the best interest of the children's welfare? Somehow the question remained unanswered.

Shortly before the film was finished, there was an interview in the 'Neue Zürcher Zeitung' to commemorate the 90th birthday of the Austrian documentary filmmaker Stefan Georg Troller, who had to flee into exile from the Nazis. 'Home' Troller said in the interview 'is synonymous with childhood and the sense of belonging'.

## Protagonists



*TIBI LHUNDUB TSERING* was born in 1956 in Dhanak, a small village in the southwestern Tibet, as the second child of his mother Youden Jampa.

In 1961, after China occupied Tibet and his family's dramatic escape to India, Tibi is separated from his parents and placed at a home for child refugees under the custody of the Dailai Lama in Dharamsala.

In 1963, Tibi and a number of other children are brought to Switzerland from Dharamsala by the foster child campaign and he is placed with his foster mother Ruth Graber.

In 1976, after completing his apprenticeship as a bricklayer, Tibi travels back to India. At the Tibetan refugee settlement in Bylakuppe he meets his real parents again for the first time. After his return to Switzerland he becomes addicted to drugs.

In 1986, Tibi marries a Swiss woman. In the same year their son Sonam Norbu is born. The family moves to a flat in Sood-Leimbach on the outskirts of Zurich. Two years later, Tibi is arrested at his home. After his release from prison, his marriage breaks up.

After training to become a social worker Tibi today works as a team leader in a residential care home for mentally disabled adults in Zurich. He lives in Winterthur with his second wife Mirjam and their two children San Sangmo Lina and Samdub Dorjee.



*YOU DEN JAMPA*, Tibi's mother, was born in Dhanak in 1932. She got married at the age of 21 to the nomadic merchant Gesam Dorjee.

In 1961, when the first Chinese soldiers reached her remote village, Youden Jampa, her husband and their four sons flee across the Himalayas into exile. After reaching India completely destitute, she joins a road building camp in the Kullu-Manali valley. Her husband signs up as a mercenary in the paratroops of the Indian Army.

In 1969, Youden Jampa's family moves to the Tibetan refugee settlement Dichyi Larsoe, newly opened by the Indian government in a jungle clearing in Bylakuppe in the state Karnataka in South West India. To make a living, the family farms a small plot of land producing milk and planting corn. From her seven children Youden Jampa loses three of her six sons: her newborn child dies during their escape from Tibet, another son, who was born when she was at the road building camp, doesn't survive either; her eldest son is killed fighting for India as a mercenary in Bangladesh. Today Youden Jampa still lives in her house together with the family of Tibi's younger brother at the Tibetan refugee settlement in Bylakuppe.



*RUTH GRABER*, Tibi's foster mother, was born in Zurich in 1919 as the daughter of a teacher. After finishing high school she becomes a primary teacher, teaching at a bilingual school for children of Italian immigrants in Zurich. After her marriage to the high school professor of biology, Dr Hans Graber, she stops teaching in order to look after her four children.

In 1961 the family moves to their newly built house in Grüningen in the Zurich Oberland. In the same year, the Grabers apply to Charles Aeschmann and his foster child campaign for the allocation of a Tibetan foster child.

In 1963 the foster child Tibi is handed over to Ruth Graber. Her three daughters are already at high school at the time. Her son is just starting school.

Today Ruth Graber still lives in her own apartment within her house in Grüningen where her son now lives.

## **Facts and Figures about Charles Aeschimann's Foster Child Campaign**

### **About Charles Aeschimann**

Charles Aeschimann, the founder and organiser of the foster child campaign, was born in Geneva in 1908. He studied electric engineering at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH) in Zurich. In 1937, Aeschimann joined Atel, the Aare-Tessin Ltd. for Electricity in Olten. The married father of three led the energy company from 1943 until 1974 as Director, President of the Board of Directors (1951) and member of the Board of Directors. Under his leadership Atel became one of the leading national and international energy services providers. In 1963, he was awarded an honorary doctor's degree by the École polytechnique de l'Université de Lausanne. He was unaffiliated with any particular religion and died in Montreux in 1981.

### **The Foster Child Campaign**

In his 'Report about the Accommodation of Tibetan Foster Children in Swiss Families' from 1968 Aeschimann describes the origin of his foster child campaign. In August 1959 he read an article in a Swiss newspaper about how the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, had fled to India and the desperate situation of the tens of thousands of Tibetans who had followed him into exile. The article pointed out that the Dalai Lama had expressed his wish that American and European families would take Tibetan child refugees into care and enable them to get a Western education.

Aeschimann, who had previously applied to the Swiss Red Cross for the adoption of two Korean war orphans without success, then contacted Heinrich Harrer, the author of the book 'Seven Years in Tibet', who had personal access to the Dalai Lama and his family. In autumn 1959 Harrer arranged a meeting between Aeschimann and the Dalai Lama's older brother, Thupten Norbu, who was visiting the United Nations Office in Geneva at the time. Thupten Norbu promised Aeschimann to look for a Tibetan refugee child in India for him. In return Aeschimann pledged to organise the accommodation of 20 Tibetan orphans at the Children's Village of the Pestalozzi Children's Foundation in Trogen and to guarantee the financing of a Tibetan house to accommodate the children. In August 1960 the Aeschimann family received a two-year-old Tibetan refugee child from a representative of the Dalai Lama, from India for adoption.

Among his acquaintances, Aeschimann found another dozen families who were prepared to take in a Tibetan child. In a personal meeting at the office of the Tibetan Government in Exile in Dharamsala Aeschimann and the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama negotiated a mutual agreement regarding the accommodation of Tibetan foster children in Swiss families. In the agreement, about the size of a letter page, it is clearly expressed that the Tibetan side emphasised the importance of preserving the Tibetan culture and the return of the children: 'The foster parent and His Holiness shall often advise the children to return to India or Tibet since there is the present danger of the Tibetan race being obliterated from the earth. If the child refuses to return, there should be no coaxing.' This agreement had to be signed by the Swiss foster parents as well as by the Dalai Lama's representative at the Children's Village in Trogen, Rakra Thubten Chochar.

On July 12, 1961, the journalist Werner Wollenberger wrote an article about Charles Aeschimann's private initiative in the magazine 'Nebenspalter' and encouraged the readers to support the campaign. 'The Dalai Lama', Wollenberger wrote 'is in support of the campaign. Once his country is freed from the communist butchers, he wants to turn these children into the country's elite.' Within a few weeks, more than 300 families prepared to foster a Tibetan child had got in touch with the magazine and the editors forwarded the letters directly to Aeschimann.

Aeschimann, who had up to then no experience regarding foster children, then chose 132 families according to his own criteria, allocating one or more Tibetan child to each family. The families chosen by Aeschimann almost all belonged to the upper middleclass or upper class.



The selection of the Tibetan foster children in India was organised by the Dalai Lama's older sister, Tsering Dolma Takla, who was in charge of the Nursery for Tibetan Refugee Children in Dharamsala under the custody of the Dalai Lama.

In August 1961, the first group of Tibetan foster children from Dharamsala arrived at Zurich Airport on a Swissair flight. The costs for the flights from India to Switzerland were covered by the refugee service of the World Council of Churches in Geneva and the American refugee organisation United States Escape Program.

Aeschimann planned to expand his foster child campaign. However, at the time, he didn't have the necessary approval by the Swiss authorities. Thanks to his professional position, Aeschimann had excellent contacts to political decision makers in Switzerland. He therefore directly approached the newly appointed Director of the Department for International Organisations at the Federal Political Department, today's Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (EDA), Jakob Burckhardt. He used to be the delegate of the Federal Council regarding atomic power and therefore used to have close professional ties to the Atel Director Aeschimann who was in charge of the planning process for the nuclear power station in Gösgen.

On September 11, 1961, there was a meeting at Burckhardt's office in Berne in the presence of Aeschimann, Elmar Mäder, Director of the Department of Immigration, and Oskar Schürch, Director of the Federal Police. Schürch kept records of the meeting. According to his notes those involved agreed that it was quite clear from the beginning that for most of the Tibetan children 'a return to Asia after a prolonged stay in Switzerland would be out of the question'. Schürch encouraged Aeschimann to involve the Swiss Red Cross in his campaign, something he categorically rejected. Despite the many doubts and objections concerning the privately organised and financed campaign by the top civil servants, they eventually agreed to grant a refugee status to 200 Tibetan foster children.

On February 13, 1963, the Swiss ambassador to India, Jacques-Albert Cottat, informed Jacob Burckhardt in a confidential letter that, on the occasion of the departure of the third group of children at the embassy in Delhi, he had discovered that only a minority of children were complete orphans. He wrote that most of the children still had at least one parent alive and that the Dalai Lama was in favour of them returning to India or Tibet. The Swiss ambassador warned Burckhardt emphatically about the human and mental difficulties of those cases 'where the children placed in Swiss families would be exposed to assimilation without being complete orphans, but instead, to some extent, assigned welfare objects'.

### **The Foster Child Campaign in Numbers**

From August 1961 until March 1964 Charles Aeschmann's foster child campaign brought 154 foster children on eight flights from Dharamsala to Switzerland and placed them with Swiss families. Two children allocated to the Aeschmann family had been flown to Switzerland prior to this. The second child died through an accident shortly after arriving. A third foster child came to the Aeschmann family in August 1966 and another one in April 1968.

In 1968, about five years after their arrival in Switzerland, just 10 percent of these 158 children were still able to speak Tibetan, according to a survey made by Aeschmann. 131 children were raised as Christians, two antroposophical, one Jewish, 13 as Atheists and only 11 of them as Buddhist. In 1972, 48 Tibetan children had been baptised.

92 of the foster children still had both their mother and father while 45 children at least still had one living parent. There is no information about the parents of 2 children. Only 19 Tibetan foster children were complete orphans.

### **ARCHIVES**

- Swiss Federal Archive
- Privat Archive Foster Child Campaign



## Biography and Filmography

*UELI MEIER* was born in Zurich in 1958. From 1977–80 he did an apprenticeship to become a fashion and advertising photographer. He has been working as a freelance photographer since 1983.

### FILMS

2012 *TIBI UND SEINE MÜTTER* – Cinematography, Writing, Direction – Documentary film, Switzerland 75 min  
2004 *DER LETZTE NAVIGATOR* – Cinematography, Writing, Direction – Documentary film, Switzerland 42 min  
1981 *'THE BUCKS' IN HOLLAND* – Cinematography, Writing, Direction – Documentary film, Switzerland 65 min  
1980 *THE WEEKEND DRIVE* – Cinematography, Writing, Direction – Documentary film, Switzerland 15 min

## Film Credits

Cinematography, Writing, Direction: Ueli Meier

Editing: Andrea Bürgi, Annette Brütsch

Production Consultant: Nico Gutmann

Sound Design, Sound Mix: Dieter Lengacher

Music: Christian Brantschen

Post Production Consultant: Patrick Lindenmaier

Picture Design: Milivoj Ivković

Artwork: Jordy Oral

Executive Producer: Ueli Meier

Production: Tibifilm

With the financial support of George Foundation, Ernst Göhner Stiftung, Heks

## Film info

Production Country: Switzerland

Production Year: 2012

Length: 75 min

Original Version: Swiss German, Tibetan with German Subtitles

Subtitles: German, English, French

Format: DCP | Colour | Picture Format 1.78:1 (16:9) | Audio Digital 5.1

Premiere: 48. Solothurner Filmtage 2013

Film Start Switzerland: 10 February 2013

### DOWNLOAD IMAGES

<http://www.tibifilm.ch/downloads>

### PRODUCTION | DISTRIBUTION | WORLD DISTRIBUTION

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