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'Young people need to know what happened': cinema legend Jonas Mekas on life as a refugee in post-war Germany



Jonas Mekas pictured by his younger brother Adolfas, looking down on the DP camp in Mattenberg in 1948

By [Rob Sharp](#)
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A young man sits on a grassy hillside overlooking a stretch of terraces, the monochrome suburbs now bleached white with the photograph's age.

The view is of a displaced persons (DP) camp in Kassel, Germany, in the aftermath of the Second World War, and the figure depicted is 26-year-old refugee Jonas Mekas. The Allies set up such camps primarily to house refugees and former concentration camp inmates, and Lithuanian-American Mekas lived in two between 1945 and 1949. He had fled his home country in 1944 with his brother Adolfas, before being captured by the Nazis.



The shot is just one of many that Mekas took during his time in Germany. The pictures are being shown for the first time back in Kassel, the setting for Documenta, a contemporary art exhibition taking place every five years and one of the art world's biggest events. After his time in the camps, Mekas moved to the US. Since then, he has become one of America's leading film critics and filmmakers and is often referred to the "godfather of American avant-garde cinema". Those he has influenced include Jim Jarmusch, John Waters, and Martin Scorsese.

"Even in miserable places, besides the fact you were in a horrible situation, there were moments when people were singing and laughing," Mekas, 94, tells me down the line from his home in Brooklyn about that time in his life. "That is the nature of the human spirit. Even in the worst situations there are moments of forgetting it all and being happy. Just being with friends becomes important."



Mekas and Adolfas left Germany for New York in 1949. A cinema obsessive, Adolfas co-founded New York's Film-Makers' Cooperative in 1962 to distribute avant-garde films, and became New York newspaper the Village Voice's first film critic. During his storied career he has filmed luminaries including Andy Warhol, John Lennon, Frank O'Hara, Jackie Kennedy and Salvador Dalí.

This year's Documenta addresses themes including the recent refugee crisis, a subject to which Mekas's photos are obviously pertinent. "My record of that period reflects what's happening now," he says. "It's reconnecting. There's a greater need now among the young people of Germany to find out what really happened."

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His pictures describe life for the hundreds of thousands of people in DP camps across Europe around that time: the cramped living arrangements, the boredom, but also the levity, including Mekas's use of a makeshift cinema in a building doubling as a schoolhouse, where he saw John Huston's 1948 movie the Treasure of the Sierra Madre for the first time.

After working as a journalist in Lithuania while it was under Nazi occupation, Mekas left the country, was caught by the Germans and sent to a forced labour camp in Hamburg. After a year the brothers escaped and worked on a farm, before transferring to DP camps in Wiesbaden and Kassel.

At the Wiesbaden camp, Mekas lived in a cold, windy corridor where the windows had been blown out, sleeping on a table, before moving into an attic room. "Sometimes I am not sure of where I am," writes Mekas in his diary on August 1945, later published in the book *I Had Nowhere to Go*. "I feel like I am in an insane asylum."



The brothers moved to the Kassel camp in 1947, where they stayed for two years before emigrating. Mekas describes how he teamed up with fellow Lithuanian writers in Kassel, including the poet Algirdas Landsbergis – who also later emigrated to New York, to pursue a successful career as a writer and academic – to produce a daily information bulletin, transcribing radio reports and distributing them across the camp. He also organised music and literature evenings.

"I discovered there were others interested in culture, and there were not that many of us," Mekas says. "We all met very fast. People who are of the same interests often attract each other unknowingly. You just gravitate to each other. And in exile [especially]."

Mekas and his brother received their visas to the US on 15 September 1949. "We enlisted to work on a ship cruising between Le Havre and Sydney," Mekas says of his plan to leave Germany. "And while we were waiting to be called to be working on that ship, someone in Chicago found a job and an apartment for us and made papers for us to come to Chicago. So we said, OK, who cares, let's go to Chicago. But we came to New York, and saw New York, and said, 'This would be crazy, we are in New York, why go to Chicago when you are in New York'

Asked about US president Donald Trump's ongoing immigration crackdown, Mekas describes his own project to raise funds to extend the Manhattan headquarters of the Anthology Film Archives, which promotes the study and preservation of film and video. "Trump is trying to build himself and destroy the world," Mekas concludes. "I'm spending all my energy on doing something constructive and positive. Everyone is destroying libraries and I'm building one. I need people's help."

The Documenta 14 exhibition runs in Kassel, Germany from 10 June to 17 September 2017.

Jonas Mekas' diaries of his experiences *I Had Nowhere to Go* are out now in paperback, published Spector Books.