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“We need to talk”: about inheritance and what it entails

On finishing their political careers in Switzerland, Stephanie and Ruedi Baumann moved to France over 20 years ago to live their dream of working the land and being close to nature. Now it's up to the sons to take over their parents' life work. But do they really want to? In the documentary film “We, the Inheritors”, their son and film director Simon Baumann examines how inheriting can mean different things to different people.

THEODORA PETER

Fields and meadows as far as the eye can see. When there are no clouds, the Pyrenees appear on the distant horizon. It was here, in Gascony, a thousand kilometres from Switzerland, that farming couple Stephanie und Ruedi Baumann created their own ecological paradise on a remote farm. They left their organic farm in Suberg in the canton of Berne to their younger son Kilian in the early noughties. As a small-holder and National Councillor for the Greens, he has taken over his parents' farm and political campaigning. Stephanie and Ruedi Baumann came to national prominence in the 1990s as the first married couple in the Swiss Parliament. She was a social democrat committed to social justice; he was a dyed-in-the-wool member of the Greens, which squared up to the powerful agricultural lobby. The older son Simon chose another path: he was much more interested in music and art than agriculture and politics: “Filmmaking allowed me to keep a certain distance while still staying close to my parents.”

The 45-year-old had been mulling over the idea of making a film about inheriting ever since he became a father nine years ago. “My partner and I asked ourselves what values and outlooks we would pass on to our own children,” the film director told “Swiss Review”. His film idea waited patiently until Baumann's parents – who are now 73 and 77 years old – wanted to talk to their sons about the future of their farm in France. “I said: okay, let's talk, but I'll make a film about it.”

Simon Baumann packed his camera and sound equipment and paid several visits to his parents to film them going about their daily routine while working at home and on the farm. He repeatedly contrasted their perception with his own view. As the camera moves over the land, the author comments in the background: “I see arable land, loneliness and boredom. My parents see biodiversity, ecological hedges and pesticide-free soil.”

“We, the Inheritors” is very much a personal account, but it raises universal questions: what shapes us and how? How do we deal with expectations? And how fair is it to inherit property? The author invites the audience to take part in the family discussions on what is to happen with the property in France if the parents are one day no longer able to run it. While the father Ruedi wants the farm to stay in the family, his son Simon sees this as a burden. And he asks himself fundamental questions in the film: “I have inherited property and a sense of justice from my parents. But the two things aren't compatible. Where is the justice if I inherit property and others do not?”

This dilemma remains unresolved and is the key theme of the film. Simon wants to launch a debate with his production. “If we had more transparency on who owns land and who can afford land in Switzerland in the first place, people would also talk more about justice.”

Simon Baumann also shares extensive background information on his family in “We, the Inheritors”. He talks about how his parents developed their own identities and – as part of the 1968 generation – were able to break free of middle-class convention. Labourer's daughter Stephanie Bieri and farmer's son Ruedi Baumann married in secret in 1974 – “a traditional wedding would have been too bourgeois for them” – and hitchhiked all the way to Africa without any money. Two young people who wanted to change the world while also progressing professionally and in society: “Doors opened for them that had been closed to their forebears.” As a child, Simon experienced mixed feelings as he watched his parent's political careers unfold, first in the cantonal parliament, then in the National Council: “I was ashamed for them, in awe of them, and suffered with them.”

The Baumanns retired from politics when they moved to France in the early noughties. They are still critical of Switzerland, as they re-



Stephanie and Ruedi Baumann have lived in the south of France for more than 20 years.



The remote farm in Gascony is not suitable for the elderly.

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Ruedi Baumann – pictured in his workshop – wants the farm to stay in the family.

vealed when talking to "Swiss Review". "I'd like to see Switzerland play an active role in solving problems within Europe instead of seeking to profit from it," says Ruedi Baumann. Stephanie Baumann also believes Switzerland should "fulfil a role in the world instead of cutting itself off". They feel well integrated in France, where they were both naturalised after five years' residence. They were welcomed to the village with

"Filmmaking allowed me to keep a certain distance while still staying close to my parents."

Film director Simon Baumann

open arms – and then wondered "whether new arrivals to Switzerland would also be made to feel so welcome".

The two Swiss Abroad have made many friendships over the years. At the same time, growing old has seen illness and death visit their social circle. The matter of their own future is becoming more pressing – and it weighs on Stephanie Baumann: "What would happen if one of us were to fall ill or to require care?" The isolated farm, accessible only by car, is not really made for older people: "When we lose our mobility, we won't be able to live here anymore." Maybe the Baumanns will return to Switzerland to be near their sons and five grandchildren. And they'll think of something for the farm.



Simon Baumann (*1979) studied media art and works as a freelance filmmaker and producer. He lives with his family in Suberg in the canton of Berne.

"We, the Inheritors" will screen in Swiss cinemas from January 2025. www.wirerben.ch

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Stephanie Baumann is worried about the future: "What would happen if one of us were to fall ill or to require care?"

"Help, I'm inheriting!"

We are what we are born into and that is what helps determine whether we live on the right or the wrong side of the tracks. Whatever we inherit, whether money, genes or values, it can be a blessing or a curse, a privilege or a burden. And it can trigger a feeling of deep association or the desire to make a clean break from the past.

The "Hilfe, ich erbe!" (Help, I'm inheriting!) exhibition in the Generationenhaus in Berne addresses the different aspects of dealing with a legacy and invites the public to look at their own roots and defining features. There are also a number of video portraits shot for the exhibition by filmmaker Simon Baumann.



Where to grow old? The Baumanns are thinking of returning to Switzerland – pictured here visiting an apartment.

The exhibition in the Generationenhaus Berne runs until 26 October 2025.

www.begh.ch/erben