

# MARTIN ROTH INITIATIVE: OFFERING SAFE HAVEN IN GERMANY AND BEYOND

By Kaleem Aftab



Maik Müller

**"I hold terms such as freedom, tolerance and solidarity sacred. Just sitting there, concentrating only on the 'nice' topics and unendangered institutions in safe countries, letting events pass us by without any comment: this is no longer possible,"** said Martin Roth, the famed museum director and cultural scientist who died in 2017. He was a long-standing trustee of the Goethe-Institut, and at the end of his life, President of the ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen).

The Martin Roth Institut, headquartered in Berlin, was set up in 2018 in his name to support artists at risk.

Maik Müller is head of the Martin Roth Institute, which provides temporary shelters and relocation initiatives to help artists persecuted for expressing opinions and viewpoints that fall foul of their country's authorities. Müller tells EFA Close-Up how his organisation works with partners and supports filmmakers.

## What is the Martin Roth Initiative?

The Martin Roth Initiative is a relocation and protection programme. The mandate is to support artists and people from the cultural field who are at risk because of the artistic work they do, who are denied freedom of expression. We help them by organising scholarships or a stipend so that they can either come to Germany or go to a safe state near their country of origin.

## How do these scholarships, grants and stipends work?

The stipends and support depend on where the people are based, the specific situation and the host organisation. We always work with host organisations. The idea is that we provide a safe space so people can take a breather and recharge batteries and we facilitate intercultural and cultural exchange between the artist-at-risk and the cultural scene of the safe state country. In Germany, we are working with institutions from the cultural field and, usually, the artist-at-risk stays for up to 12 months. At the end of a year, we can see if it's possible to prolong and do a follow-up project for another 12 months. The maximum stay is 24 months in Germany. For the safe stay within their region, it is a shorter period from three to six months.

## How do you assess if a filmmaker is at risk?

In general, we work with artists from almost all art and cultural fields. So far, we have supported 56 people, 12 of them are filmmakers – directors, producers, screenwriters. We usually get contacted via our networks of partners, such as our partner the Goethe-Institut, which has many offices all over the world, or civil society organisations or organisations like the European Film Academy, which has partners across the globe. They contact us, or

individuals artists contact us via email. What we usually do is try to verify the cases via a network of supporting organisations that are focused on human rights and freedom of expression. We try to connect with these people so that they can verify if the person who is contacting us is actually, for example, a director and then to see if there's a risk situation involved. Within this verification process, we also do our own research.

## How have you helped filmmakers, specifically?

These 12 persons from the film world contacted us, or partners of ours contacted us. We searched for host organisations or, in some cases, a host organisation came to us and said they would be willing to host this person. We recommend or consult with the person and with the host organisation, helping them to create a project which is the basis for the scholarship application. Then we provide funds for the person-at-risk and for the host organisation so that they jointly can implement a joint project during that time. Host organisations can be a film festival, an organisation like the European Film Academy, or any kind of legally constituted organisation that's able to process money with a capacity to support the artist-at-risk. Importantly, the organisations must have the capacity to link the person to the film world within the country where the person is going.

## How many of the filmmakers you've helped so far have come to Germany?

Most of them came to Germany or are about to come to Germany after we get past the Coronavirus travel ban situation. We had two cases where we provided a safe space within the region. We had several people from Turkey, from Iran, somebody from Afghanistan, Yemen, and Belarus. With requests from Iran, Syria and Turkey it's very difficult to find neighbouring countries that are safe for the filmmakers-at-risk to stay.

## And how tricky is it for you to get visas to bring them to Germany?

The Martin Roth-Initiative was started as a joint project by ifa (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen) and the Goethe-Institut and it's 100% funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. So, we have political support. They help us as well with getting the visas. In some cases, obtaining a visa took more time than we thought, but in general, it's going well. Not everything depends on the Federal Government – we also need the support of local authorities and the different entities within the different countries.

## What ongoing support do you give an artist after the bursary ends?

We are looking at the issue of supporting safe return. We have a very young programme. We started in 2018. Our first focus was to develop all the processes and get our work started supporting people. Only now do we begin to build up the support for people to return. At an early stage, with the scholarship holders and the host organisations, we enter into communication about the issue of return. If it's not possible to return, then people can use the time during the scholarship to create networks of support and opportunities so that after the scholarship, they can stay. The follow-up support is something we are currently looking at, but which doesn't currently exist.

## Obviously we're living in a very strange time with the pandemic. How is Covid-19 impacting your work?

We have several projects that we wanted to start in March, April and May which have been impacted by the travel ban. There are networking events on hold as people work from home. Our programme is affected. As yet, we have not cancelled any project, and we are looking at ways to allow those receiving supporting from us to continue to receive support.

*Polymath Kaleem Aftab is a writer, festival strategist and film programmer based in London. Sometimes, he even produces too.*