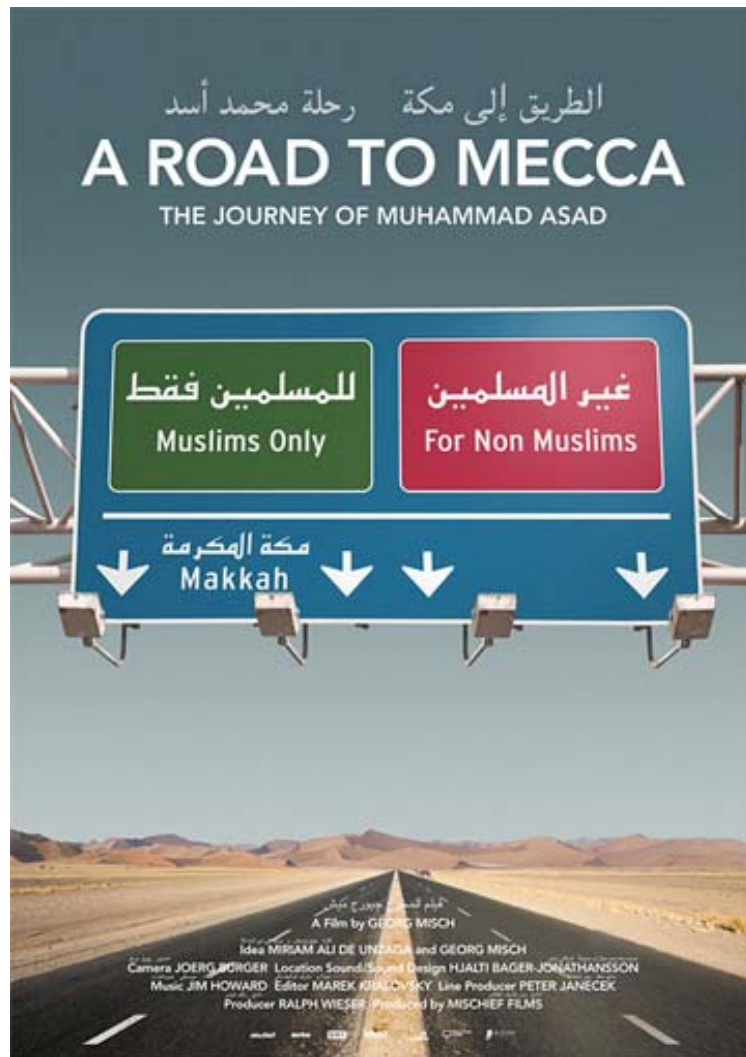


# A ROAD TO MECCA

The Journey Of Muhammad Asad



A film by Georg Misch  
Austria 2008, 92 min

**press kit**

## SYNOPSIS

### A ROAD TO MECCA – The Journey Of Muhammad Asad

In the early 1920s Leopold Weiss, a Viennese Jew, travelled to the Middle East. The desert fascinated him, and Islam became his new spiritual home. He left his Jewish roots behind, converted to Islam and changed his name to Muhammad Asad. He became one of the most important Muslims of the 20th century, first as an advisor at the royal court of Saudi Arabia, and later translating the Koran into English. Asad was also a co-founder of Pakistan and its ambassador to the UN. The director follows his fading footsteps, leading from the Arabian desert to Ground Zero. He finds a man who was not looking for adventures but rather wanted to act as a mediator between East and West. "A Road To Mecca" takes this opportunity to deal with a heated debate which is currently becoming more and more important.



## THE FILM

**A ROAD TO MECCA The Journey Of Muhammad Asad** follows the path taken by Leopold Weiss, alias Muhammad Asad, from the outskirts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to Israel, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and New York. The places he lived and visited are examined, and at the same time a complex portrait of Islam unfolds.

Along the way Asad's thoughts are juxtaposed with current problems between East and West. The film crew visits his friends and family, experts and scientists, admirers of his work and numerous chance acquaintances who know little, a great deal, or who will learn about this now-forgotten reformer.

The fact that an Austrian is the key to a better understanding of these worlds is somewhat of a surprise. Muhammad Asad was a visionary whose thoughts and ideas nearly made him a Martin Luther for Islam. A forgotten writer, philosopher, dreamer, and also one of Pakistan's founding fathers and ambassadors to the UN. His writings about the world view, law and philosophy of Islam, and his translation of the Quran, which scientists and academics even today consider his translation one of the very best, exercised enormous influence on modern theological thought in this religion. He saw himself as a kind of mediator, though his religious convictions and political sympathies were clearly divided, and their problematic nature is repeatedly depicted in the film. As a result of his work Asad became one of the most significant cultural intermediaries between the East and West, which makes it surprising that solely a small number of people are now familiar with the name Muhammad Asad.

In its structural principle of capturing statements and counterstatements, **A ROAD TO MECCA The Journey Of Muhammad Asad** studiously avoids facile answers, and it insistently points out contradictions. The areas where contact takes place and conflict has developed in the present day are depicted and examined from a different perspective. Biographical details, quotes from his writings, private photographs and film material are interwoven to reveal a variety of lives in a touching way: simple Saudi Bedouins, Palestinian refugees, Ariel Sharon's advisors, Pakistani Asadians (as his followers are called) and the individuals Asad met on his journey.

With his ideas always present in the background, the film shoots down some deeply rooted prejudices, at the same time illustrating the great distance separating fundamentalist ideas that support terrorism and a profoundly humane Islam. A Palestinian protagonist sums it up: "*Asad taught Islam's true ideas, that it forbids terrorism. Islam is peace. Islam is brotherhood.*" Though at the beginning **A ROAD TO MECCA The Journey Of Muhammad Asad** is set mostly in the Arab world, by the time scenes of a 9/11 memorial ceremony in New York are shown it becomes clear that fanaticism represents a global problem.

In the end the story the film tells is also one of tragic failure. Archival footage of Leopold Weiss, alias Muhammad Asad, shows a frail, wise old man who still had a sharp mind. While he may have been naïve in his youth, this was more than compensated by his critical view of humanity in later years. "I fell in love with Islam," he said matter-of-factly shortly before his death in 1992, "but I overestimated the Muslims."

Georg Misch has successfully portrayed both the positive and negative sides of the two worlds with sensitivity and objectivity. Nothing is left out, not even the fact that, as Asad's life came to an end, he was deeply disappointed by the state of the Islamic world, its intellectual isolation and the intolerance of extremists.

**A ROAD TO MECCA The Journey Of Muhammad Asad** reveals the timeless nature and continuing relevance of the life and work of this outstanding Austrian.



## BIOGRAPHY

### LEOPOLD WEISS alias MUAHMMAD ASAD

#### Muhammad Asad (originally Leopold Weiss) 1900–1992

A brief biography by the films academic adviser Günther Windhager

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In 1900 Muhammad Asad was born Leopold Weiss in what was then the Austro-Hungarian city of Lemberg (now Lviv, Ukraine) in Galicia. While this grandson of an Orthodox rabbi from Czernowitz (now Chernovtsy) grew up in the Jewish tradition, he began during his youth to grow away from the religion of his forefathers. In Vienna, where the Weiss family settled at the start of WWI, Leopold first attended high school, then enrolled at the university in 1918. While he studied Philosophy and Art History, “Poldi” Weiss, as he was called by his friend, the young Anton Kuh, sought out Vienna’s literati and pupils of Sigmund Freud, preferably at Café Herrenhof and frequently in the company of Milan Dubrovic, later editor in chief of *Die Presse*, a daily newspaper, or psychoanalyst and social revolutionary Otto Gross. Just like many talented young people in the early “Golden Twenties,” Weiss decided to try his luck in Berlin. While there he met Bertolt Brecht, Max Reinhardt and Marlene Dietrich; he worked as an assistant on one of Friedrich W. Murnau’s films and wrote two screenplays with the writer Anton Kuh. Weiss often spent his time with artists and writers associated with Expressionism. The Orient—though omnipresent in art and fashion—seemed far away. But soon everything changed.



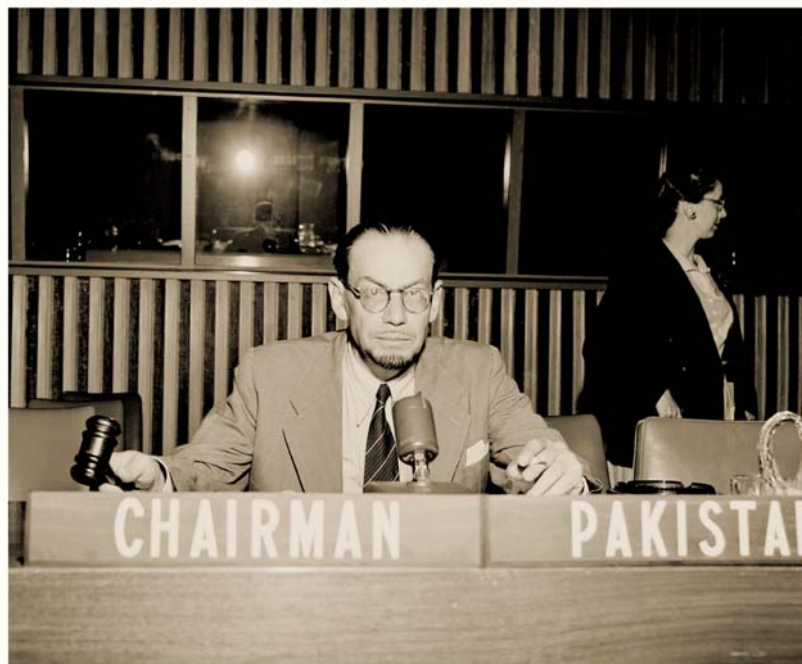
Copyright: Prof. Hermann Dornhege



In 1922 he visited the East for the first time at the invitation of an uncle who lived in Jerusalem. This encounter with the Arab Islamic world marked a turning point. He began to write articles for the *Frankfurter Zeitung* from Palestine and Egypt and soon after that traveled through Transjordan and Syria. Before his first book, *Unromantisches Morgenland* ("The Unromantic Orient," 1924), was published, he had undertaken his second journey in the East, which this time included Iran and Afghanistan. After returning to Berlin he converted to Islam in 1926 and took on the name Muhammad Asad.

Asad's conversion was the beginning of an incomparable career, the early part of which was linked to the birth of two nations, Pakistan and before that Saudi Arabia. Weiss, then a correspondent for leading daily newspapers in Europe, spent several years living in the latter after his first pilgrimage to Mecca; during this period he was an intimate and advisor of King Abd al-Aziz Al Saud (also known as Ibn Saud), who founded the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Asad, thanks to his social and geographical proximity, became familiar with things that were closed to most European travelers.

In the early 1930s Asad went to (British) India. After being inspired by his meeting with the poet and philosopher Muhammad Iqbal, who gave birth to the idea of Pakistan, he became involved with the country's establishment. After Pakistan became an independent country, Asad was made director of the Department of Islamic Reconstruction and later head of the foreign ministry's Middle East department. Equal in rank to a minister, Asad represented Pakistan at the United Nations in 1952.



After leaving Pakistan's diplomatic service, Asad spent more time writing, later publishing his autobiographical book *The Road to Mecca* (1954), which made him widely famous. He lived in Lebanon, Switzerland, Morocco, Portugal and finally Spain, where he died in 1992.

Asad's writing placed him among the important thinkers in modernist and reform-minded Islam, also making him a significant mediator between cultures. In addition to his bestselling autobiography and his other works, such as *Islam at the Crossroads* (1934), *The Principles of State and Government in Islam* (1961), and *The Message of the Qur'ân* (1980), he created an extensively annotated translation of the Quran into English.

### **References:**

Günther Windhager, *Leopold Weiss alias Muhammad Asad. Von Galizien nach Arabien*, 3. Aufl. Boehlau: Wien - Köln - Weimar, 2008.

Ibid., "Vom Kaffeehaus an den saudischen Königshof. Leopold Weiss' (später Muhammad Asad) Begegnungen in Wien und Berlin auf seinem Weg zum Islam," *Utopie und Eros. Der Traum von der Moderne*, ed. Gottfried Heuer, 5th International Otto Gross Congress, Cabaret Voltaire – Dada-Haus, Zurich, September 16-18, 2005; Marburg/Lahn, Germany, LiteraturWissenschaft.de, 2006, pp. 209–228.

Link: [www.boehlau.at](http://www.boehlau.at)



## PRESS COMMENTS

A well-judged, provocative documentary on a fascinating subject, a fine piece.

VARIETY

A remarkable film with impressive visual impact. Highly recommended.

AUSTRIAN MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

Utterly fascinating.

THE CANADIAN JEWISH NEWS

A wonderful film, very different from what you usually get to see about Islam in the media.

DER STANDARD

Lively, entertaining and very topical - A most astounding perspective on multicultural identities.

DER FALTER

A tactful and astute portrait.

KLEINE ZEITUNG

This film retraces Asad's life in the countries he lived in by taking us on a superb sound and cinematographic journey.

NYON NOTES

A lot of respect for this well made thought provoking, rich and multi-layered film that must be a very useful and intelligent visual tool for debate in the world of today.

TUE STEEN MÜLLER - filmkommentaren.dk



## FESTIVALS

DIAGONALE – Festival of the Austrian Film, Austria (National Premier)

VISIONS DU REEL, Switzerland (International Premier)

HOT DOCS - Canadian International Documentary Film Festival, Toronto

MEDIAWAVE, Hungary

VUKOVAR FILM FESTIVAL, Croatia

SARAJEVO FILM FESTIVAL

VANCOUVER INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

KASSELER DOKFEST, Germany

SARDINIA INTERNATIONAL ETHNOGRAPHIC FILM FESTIVAL, Italy

PAGINE NASCOSTE - FESTIVALE LETTERATURA, Italy

## **GEORG MISCH**

Georg Misch is a film director and producer. He studied at the University of Stirling and the National Film School, NFTS, in Great Britain.

His previous film work includes documentaries for the BBC, Channel 4 and ARTE and commercials. Numerous festival screenings and awards.

### **Filmography**

#### **DER WEG NACH MEKKA Die Reise des Muhammad Asad**

(A ROAD TO MECCA The Journey of Muhammad Asad)

2008

#### **CALLING HEDY LAMARR**

2004

#### **I AM FROM NOWHERE**

2002

#### **LINES**

1999

#### **ERE WE GO**

1999

#### **TRAUTONIUM**

1999

#### **INSIGHT**

1997

## CREW LIST

**Written by**

Georg Misch, Miriam Ali de Unzaga

**Directed by**

Georg Misch

**Camera**

Joerg Burger

**Sound**

Hjalti Bager-Jonathansson

**Edited by**

Marek Kralovsky

**Music**

Jim Howard

**Producer**

Ralph Wieser  
Georg Misch

**Line Producer**

Peter Janecek

**Production Company**

Mischief Films

**In Cooperation with**

ORF, arte, NMO (NL)

**Supported by**

Vienna Film Fund, Fernsehfonds Austria, City of Vienna/PID



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Photographs and press materials available for download on [www.mischief-films.com](http://www.mischief-films.com)

The press kit is including various marked photographs with copyright Prof. Hermann Dornhege.

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