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## POV's 'Special Flight,' Airing Monday, July 1, 2013 on PBS, Explores Plight Of Undocumented Foreigners Detained in Switzerland

Fate of Immigrants Denied Asylum Exposes Contradictions Between the Country's Compassionate Social Policies and Its Intractable Immigration Laws

"The docu's subjects get under the skin, and their plight represents one of the major challenges to immigration policy not just in Switzerland, but in the First World as a whole."—Jay Weissberg, *Variety*

**Special Flight** is a dramatic account of the plight of undocumented foreigners at the Frambois detention center in Geneva, Switzerland, and of the wardens who struggle to reconcile humane values with the harsh realities of a strict deportation system. The 25 male inmates at the center are among the thousands of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants imprisoned without charge or trial and facing deportation to their native countries, where they fear repression or even death.

While making his award-winning 2008 film, *The Fortress*, a portrait of a government institution that hosts incoming asylum seekers, Fernand Melgar gained unprecedented access to the Frambois center for immigrants being deported. He returned to the facility for nine months to make **Special Flight**, keeping his camera tightly focused on a handful of detainees, guards and administrators. Behind the prison doors, tensions build day by day. On one side are wardens who are genuinely kind and compassionate; on the other are inmates who are at the end of their journeys: Should they lose their appeals and resist deportation, they will be forced onto "special flights," a Swiss euphemism for plane rides during which deportees are chained to their seats under harsh conditions.

**Special Flight** has its national broadcast premiere on **Monday, July 1, 2013** at 10 p.m. (check local listings) as part of the 26th season of the award-winning PBS series **POV (Point of View)**. American television's longest-running independent documentary series, POV was recently honored with a 25-year retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art and a MacArthur Foundation Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

As Melgar showed in *The Fortress*, Switzerland is strict about granting asylum to foreigners: Less than 12 percent of applicants are accepted.<sup>1</sup> **Special Flight** tells the story of the rest, who are swept into one of the country's 28 detention centers. Frambois, established in 2004, has been criticized for its high cost and relative comfort, yet its deportation rate, 86 percent, is the highest in the country. Many of the "paperless" immigrants and asylum seekers detained there have lived in Switzerland for years—20 years in the case of Ragip, a Kosovar man featured in the film—and have jobs and families. They may be locked up for as long as 18 months before being deported. A staff member sympathizes, saying, "It's really difficult to leave this country. I understand you."

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<sup>1</sup> Swiss Confederation report: "During the year 2012, 28,631 people asked for asylum. . . . Switzerland granted refugee status to 11.7% of applicants. <http://tinyurl.com/bseobf8>

So begins the disconnect between the Frambois wardens, with their dedication to procedure and humane treatment of their charges, and the prison's frightened and angry inmates. Certainly, conditions at Frambois are good. The men are well-fed, have plenty of games, sports, music and television to occupy them and may leave their cells for 11 hours a day. They get paid nominally for their work (although Serge, a Congolese asylum seeker later deported via special flight, feels that food and lodging are payment enough). They are able to receive visitors without a window separating them and may hug, kiss and cry with their wives and children. The close-knit staff, anxious to keep the inmates comfortable and calm, treats them with sincere compassion.

Behind these amenities, however, an inexorable process grinds on. As final appeals are exhausted, the wardens strive to keep up the prisoners' spirits, knowing most will lose. "Everything will go well," Frambois director Jean-Michel Claude tells a new inmate, "but in the end, you'll all leave."

The men are given two choices if their appeals fail. They can willingly get on planes to their native countries and arrive free and unannounced. If they refuse to board, they will return to the prison and later be handcuffed, helmeted, tied to chairs and forcibly loaded onto planes for special flights that can last as long as 40 hours, then handed over to local police upon landing. Many refuse the first choice, to the puzzlement of their jailers. Jeton, a Roma from Kosovo who grew up in Europe and spent several years in Switzerland, was planning his wedding when he was picked up on the motorway. He is convinced he will be killed in the country he hardly knows anymore, explaining his refusal to go voluntarily by saying, "Better to live a couple more days."

Things go differently for Congolese prisoner Pitchou. He is fervently praying aloud when a guard sits him down to read an official letter from the government. Pitchou can hardly believe what he is hearing: He is about to be released. "Thank you, oh Lord, thank you!" he exclaims. He tells the other inmates, "Your day will come, too, you understand?" Still incredulous, he even asks a warden, "Are you still cross with me?" and embraces him warmly.

Then the time arrives that so many have known would come, but still dread: Five men will be going home on a special flight. The staff chooses the best time to break the news, and one by one the men are given notice and the required physical checkups, along with the staff's heartfelt wishes for a better future. Anger has given way to resignation as the inmates quietly submit to the final procedures. They are soon en route to their home countries.

But there is shocking news: 29-year-old Nigerian Joseph Ndukaka Chiakkwa has died at the airport, an event witnessed by Julius and Emanuel, rejected asylum seekers from Frambois also en route to Nigeria. It turns out, according to Swiss media, that "this is not the first tragic ending to an expulsion," and deportees were being roughly handled, tightly bound to chairs and masked. Some have suffocated or choked. "I couldn't even lift my hands or turn my back," Julius attests. "I couldn't move; I couldn't walk." Special flights are suspended until further notice. Frambois' director, Jean-Michel, clearly shaken, promises "to request and obtain humane treatment of expelled people, because I'm not proud to be Swiss after these events. I'm not."

"If it had been a Swiss citizen who died yesterday, all hell would be loose," one inmate says ruefully. "To deport someone, there is no need to kill them." "It's the police that killed the person," prisoner Wandifa avers. "That's what the director has just said. Things will change because of this." Ralph tells his Swiss jailers, "We just tried to find a better future here. Why? Because you came to Africa and destroyed everything, leaving wars behind. So we came here to seek a better life because we're human beings like you." One angry detainee asks, "Why do you treat people that way? I implore you! This is not right."

**Special Flight** is an intimate and heart-wrenching exposé of the contradictions between Switzerland’s Western ideals and the rule of law that many of its citizens may not fully grasp. It gives audiences of all nationalities an opportunity to gain greater understanding of the people who seek freedom and a better life in a foreign country—and those who must implement the law and turn them away.

“In the discussions that followed screenings of *The Fortress*, it struck me that the public was largely unaware of how the continual hardening of the laws on asylum and foreigners affects innocent human beings,” says filmmaker Fernand Melgar. “One hundred fifty thousand paperless migrants live in Switzerland. The vast majority of them work and pay taxes. They look after our elderly, care for our children and clean our flats and hospitals. Both unsuccessful asylum seekers and undocumented immigrants live with a sword of Damocles dangling over their heads: They may be arrested at any moment, imprisoned for months or years and deported from Switzerland without any form of trial.

“After obtaining the authorization to film at Frambois, I spent a lot of time with the inmates,” he continues. “Gradually, I gained their trust and they started confiding in me. Feeling rebellious and forgotten by the outside world, almost all of them agreed to participate. They knew that it was not going to change their personal situations, but it was a way for them to be heard.”

**Special Flight** is a production of Climage in association with Radio Télévision Suisse (RTS) and ARTE G.E.I.E.

#### **About the Filmmaker:**

##### **Fernand Melgar, Director, Producer**

Fernand Melgar, the son of Spanish unionists exiled to Tangiers, Morocco, was smuggled into Switzerland by his parents in 1963, when he was 2 years old. In the early 1980s, he cut short his business studies and co-founded Le Cabaret Orwell in Lausanne, a nightspot that became a mecca for French-speaking underground culture. Also in Lausanne, he later established the internationally renowned rock music venue La Dolce Vita.

Melgar became a self-taught freelance film director and producer, beginning with experimental films and interviews for television in 1983. In 1985 he joined the collective Climage, under whose auspices he has produced a dozen documentaries, many about immigration and identity. His documentary *EXIT: The Right to Die* won the prestigious 2006 EBU Golden Link Award for best European co-production and the 2006 Swiss Film Prize. In 2007, Melgar won the screenplay competition of Télévision Suisse Romande (French-speaking Switzerland’s main broadcaster). In 2008, his documentary *The Fortress* won a Golden Leopard at the Locarno International Film Festival. Melgar has edited several of Jacqueline Veuve’s films, including *Journal de Rivesaltes 1941-1942*, awarded the 1998 Swiss Film Prize.

#### **Credits:**

Director/Producer:	Fernand Melgar
Cinematographer:	Denis Jutzeler
Sound:	Christophe Giovannoni
Editor:	Karine Sudan
Music:	Wandifa Njie
Running Time:	56:46

#### **POV Series Credits:**

Executive Producer:	Simon Kilmurry
Co-Executive Producer:	Cynthia López

Vice President, Programming and Production: Chris White  
Coordinating Producer: Andrew Catauro

#### Awards and Festivals:

- Anne Dellinger Grand Jury Award and Center for Documentary Studies Filmmaker Award, Full Frame Documentary Film Festival, 2012
- Special World Feature Jury Mention, AFI-Discovery Channel Silverdocs Documentary Festival, 2012
- Best Documentary, Swiss Film Prize, 2012
- Best Film Award, One World International Human Rights Documentary Film Festival, 2012
- Prix Italia, Current Affairs, 2012
- TV IRIS Award, Prix Europa, 2012
- Student Jury Prize, Paris International Film Festival on Human Rights, 2012
- Amnesty International Grand Prize San Sebastián Human Rights Film Festival, 2012
- Grand Prize, WATCH DOCS Human Rights International Film Festival, 2011
- Ecumenical Jury Prize and Junior Jury Award, Locarno International Film Festival, 2011

For additional details about **Special Flight** and a complete list of awards and screenings, visit <http://www.volspecial.ch/en/>.



Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and beginning its 26th season on PBS in 2013, the award-winning POV is the longest-running showcase on American television to feature the work of today's best independent documentary filmmakers. POV has brought more than 365 acclaimed documentaries to millions nationwide. POV films have won every major film and broadcasting award, including 32 Emmys, 15 George Foster Peabody Awards, 10 Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Awards, three Academy Awards® and the Prix Italia. In 2012, POV achieved a new milestone, winning five News & Documentary Emmy® Awards. Since 1988, POV has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today's most pressing social issues. Visit [www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov).

#### **POV Digital** ([www.pbs.org/pov](http://www.pbs.org/pov))

POV's award-winning website extends the life of our films online with interactive features, interviews, updates, video and educational content, plus listings for television broadcasts, community screenings and films available online. The *POV Blog* is a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss their favorite films and get the latest news.

#### **POV Community Engagement and Education** ([www.pbs.org/pov/outreach](http://www.pbs.org/pov/outreach))

POV's Community Engagement and Education team works with educators, community organizations and PBS stations to present more than 600 free screenings every year. In addition, we distribute free discussion guides and standards-aligned lesson plans for each of our films. With our community partners, we inspire dialogue around the most important social issues of our time.

#### **American Documentary, Inc.** ([www.amdoc.org](http://www.amdoc.org))

American Documentary, Inc. (AmDoc) is a multimedia company dedicated to creating, identifying and presenting contemporary stories that express opinions and perspectives rarely featured in mainstream media outlets. AmDoc is a catalyst for public culture, developing collaborative strategic engagement activities around socially relevant content on television, online and in community settings. These activities are designed to trigger action, from dialogue and feedback to educational opportunities and community participation.

POV has the honor of receiving a 2013 MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions. Major funding for POV is provided by PBS, The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, New York State Council on the Arts, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council, the desJardins/Blachman Fund and public television viewers. Funding for POV's Diverse Voices Project is provided by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Special support provided by The Fledgling Fund and the Lucius and Eva Eastman Fund. POV is presented by a consortium of public television stations, including KQED San Francisco, WGBH Boston and THIRTEEN in association with [WNET.ORG](http://WNET.ORG).

