

Story



Tovarisch, I Am Not Dead

Geoffrey Macnab in London

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THIS WEEK'S ISSUE

Dir: Stuart Urban. UK 2007. 83 mins

Stuart Urban's documentary is the latest in an increasingly lengthy list of films made by children about their fathers (Mark Wexler's *Tell Them Who You Are*, Nathaniel Kahn's *My Architect* and Doug Block's *51 Birch Street* are three other recent examples.) *Tovarisch*, however, is neither an intimate family confessional nor a son's anguished account of not being able to live up to an illustrious parent. Rather, it is a real-life story of survival with as many twists as you would expect to find in a Cold War espionage novel. The film may not be especially groundbreaking in its formal strategies (we have the usual mix of voice-over narration, home movie and archive footage and interviews), but it doesn't need to be. The material is rich and affecting enough to make compelling viewing despite the conventional structure.

Tovarisch (which screens in London's Raindance Festival in early October) has played widely on the festival circuit. In the summer, it won the top prize at Biografilm in Bologna. Further festival exposure is likely. Given the continuing interest in Holocaust-themed material and the growing curiosity about the Gulag, it may also earn some limited theatrical play but is most likely to reach an audience on TV.

Director Urban (best known for features like *An Ungentlemanly Act*, *Preaching to the Perverted* and *Revelation* and for his work on the TV series *Our Friends in the North*) accompanied his father Garri Urban back to Russia shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

He knew some but by no means all the details of his father's extraordinary life. Garri, a trained doctor, had been born in Poland in 1916. In 1939, rather than live under Soviet rule, he had tried to escape from eastern Poland to Romania but had been caught by Russian guards. He was then sent to a Gulag in the Arctic circle. Here, he worked as a doctor.

Amazingly, in late 1940, he managed to escape again. Although he was on the run, he became head of health for a large part of the Ukraine. Garri began a romance with Noka Alekseyevna Kapranova, the glamorous editor of a Moscow fashion magazine. Then, in 1943, Garri was re-arrested. Noka, too, was arrested and imprisoned. Garri subsequently escaped a third time, posing as a German prisoner of war in 1946 in order to get to the west.

There are some traumatic scenes here. We see Garri revisit the village where he grew up - and where many Jewish families were massacred by Nazis and their supporters early in the Second World War. Old-timers greet him fondly, but there is a tension in the air - we are never quite sure whether or not these villagers collaborated in the massacres.

As they travel round Eastern Europe together, relations between father and son occasionally become frayed. Garri's main goal appears to be to retrieve his old KGB files. He wants it to prove to sceptics that his stories about escaping the Gulag are all true. However, he may have an ulterior motive. A KGB officer tells Stuart that if he knew all the contents of the file, it would "make his hair stand on end." There is a hint that - under torture - Garri may have become a double agent for the Soviets and that he now wants his file in order to destroy it.

Garri makes an intriguing subject. In his youth, he was a womaniser: a charismatic and immensely strong-willed figure who seldom shirked a fight and "liked to give a punch" as his Soviet captors once remarked.

Despite the death of many of his relatives in the Holocaust, he never succumbed to despair or self-pity. His reunion with Noka - his lover 50 years before - plays like something out of *Dr Zhivago*. Equally poignant is the story of how - two decades after the end of the war - he tracked down his one remaining family member, his brother Misha, in Israel.

Astutely, Stuart Urban keeps the focus on his father - and, in particular, on what his father endured and survived in the war years. There is no attempt to chronicle Garri's subsequent life or how he came to England. Nor does the director weigh down the story with self-indulgent asides about his own changing feelings toward his father.

The filmmaking style is pared down. There are one or two interviews (notably with author Anne Applebaum, author of *Gulag: A History*), but these are there simply to provide historical context and don't intrude on the main thrust of the film - which is Garri Urban's extraordinary story.

Tovarisch boasts a number of different film formats: 16mm home movie footage shot by the Urbans in the 1960s and 1970s, some clips from Urban's debut movie *The Virus Of War* (1972), which he made as a teenager and was selected for Cannes, and footage shot on video in the 1990s.

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