

**THE BRITISH
INDEPENDENT
FILM AWARDS
Nominee**



A feature documentary by
Stuart Urban

A **Cyclops Vision** Production

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AWARDS & NOMINATIONS

2008 Grierson Awards, UK

Shortlisted as UK Film Council Best Cinema Documentary



Dialektus Festival, Budapest, Hungary

"Special Mention" in the "Human Stories" Category, March 2008

Punto De Vista Film Festival, Pamplona, Spain

Audience Award for Best Film, February 2008

New York Festivals 2008 Film & Video Trophy, USA

Silver World Medal, Category Biography/Profiles, January 2008

The British Independent Film Awards, UK

Nomination Raindance Award, Nov 2007



Raindance Film Festival, UK

Best Documentary Nomination, September - October 2007

The Accolade Film Awards, La Jolla, California, USA

Award of Excellence Viewer Impact: Motivational/ Inspirational
Honorable Mention as Feature Documentary, August 2007



Biografilm Festival, Bologna, Italy

Lancia Award as Best Film June 6 2007

Saratov Sufferings Festivals, Saratov, Russia

Special Audience Award, September 2008

FESTIVALS & SCREENINGS

18th Jewish Culture Festival Krakow, Poland

Official selection (28 June – 7 July 2008)

Documentary Fortnight MoMA, NYC, USA

Museum of Modern Art, February 2008

Jerusalem Jewish Film Festival, Israel

Official Selection, December 2007

Stalker Festival, Moscow, Russia

Official Selection - International Panorama, December 2007

Warsaw Jewish Film Festival, Poland

In competition, Documentary Section, November 2007

Global Peace Film Festival, USA

Official Selection, September 2007

Moondance International Film Festival, USA

Feature Doc Film **Finalist**, September 2007



Rhode Island International Film Festival, USA

Official Selection - Documentary, August 2007



Motovun Film Festival, Croatia

Official Selection, July 2007

Barcelona Jewish Film Festival, Spain

Official Selection, June 2007

Tovarisch I Am Not Dead

Palm Beach International Film Festival, FL USA
Official Competition, Documentary Section, April 2007

Globians Film Festival, Postdam & Berlin - Germany
Official Selection. (August, 2008) Berlin - Babylon:Mitte Cinema (September 2008)

Jewish Genealogy Film Festival, Chicago, Illinois, USA.
18 August 2008

European Festival of Cinema & Television MEMORIMAGE, Saratoga, Spain
Official Competition, November 2008

THEATRICAL RELEASE

London, 2nd May 2008, Odeon Swiss Cottage

UK DVD RELEASE

London, August 2009, Artefact

LOGLINE

"Tragedy. Survival. Triumph. Secrets. The story of my father."

A feature documentary by Stuart Urban on Garri Urban, one of the twentieth century's most extraordinary survivors, who endured both the extremes of Nazism and Communism.

REVIEWS

"The documentary is alive and well. As compelling as it is touching....a gripping documentary."
Peter Bradshaw, **The Guardian** (Highest rated film of the week) **★★★★**
http://film.guardian.co.uk/News_Story/Critic_Review/Guardian_review/0,,2277223,00.html

"Fascinating documentary....a riveting film about a remarkable man"
Philip French, **The Observer** **★★★★**
http://film.guardian.co.uk/News_Story/Critic_Review/Observer_review/0,,2277848,00.html

"wholly absorbing documentary...fascinating narrative....really grips"
Catherine Shoard, **The Sunday Telegraph** **★★★★**
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2008/05/02/bfcatherine102.xml>

"Deeply affectingsuperb documentary....unmissable".
Gerald Aaron, **The Jewish Chronicle** **★★★★**
<http://www.thejc.com/home.aspx?Aid=59898&ATypeld=1&search=true2&srchstr=tovarisch&srchtxt=1&srchhead=1&srchauthor=1&srchsandp=1&scsrch=0>

"Profoundly moving, deeply compelling...a fascinating, moving documentary, brimful of twists and tragedies."
James MacLeish, **Channel 4 Film** **★★★★1/2**
<http://www.channel4.com/film/reviews/film.jsp?id=166146>

"Stuart Urban's skilfully patched together filmproves (Garri Urban's) life seemed to triumph over everything,"
Derek Malcolm, **The Evening Standard** **★★★**
<http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/film/film-23339275-details/Tovarisch%2C+I+Am+Not+Dead/filmReview.do?reviewId=23481575>

Tovarisch I Am Not Dead

"Impressive....memorable....heart-rending".

Karl French, **The Financial Times**

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/9a2468d0-1717-11dd-bbfc-0000779fd2ac.html>

"A fascinating portrait of a charismatic personality".

Wendy Ide, **The Times**

http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/film/film_reviews/article3848453.ece

"A poignant documentary...a compelling account of one man's extraordinary family history"

Allan Hunter, **The Daily Express**

"An intriguing investigation...genuinely moving"

David Parkinson, **Empire Magazine**

<http://www.empireonline.com/reviews/reviewcomplete.asp?FID=135559>

"Highly affecting"

Laurshka Ivan-Zadeh, **Metro**

"Intriguing...arresting."

Nev Pierce, **BBC Movies** - Reviews

http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2008/04/28/tovarisch_i_am_not_dead_2008_review.shtml

"It's engaging both as a portrait of the turbulence of life in the 20th century, and of the difficulty of being a father or a son."

Robert Hanks, **The Independent**

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/film-and-tv/film-reviews/tovarisch-i-am-not-dead-12a-819370.html>

"Poignant, affectionate portrait of a remarkable character."

Edward Lawrenson, **The Big Issue Magazine**

"Fascinating. Compelling"

Wally Hammond, **Timeout**

<http://www.timeout.com/film/reviews/85469/tovarisch-i-am-not-dead.html>

"Gripping and harrowing account"

Richard Badley, **The Film Festival Magazine**

An extraordinary and moving tale.

Alison Rowat, **The Herald**

http://www.theherald.co.uk/goingout/films/display.var.2288218.0.Tovarisch_I_am_not_dead_12A.php

"an absorbing and moving tale"

Tom Dawson, **The List**

<http://www.list.co.uk/article/8531-tovarisch-i-am-not-dead/>

"This is a fascinating insight into the impact of the political upheavals of the 20th century on ordinary citizens".

David Parkinson, **Radiotimes**

http://www.radiotimes.com/servlet_film/com.icl.beeb.rtfilms.client.simpleSearchServlet?frn=48031&searchTypeSelect=5

"Stuart Urban's rich and affecting documentary about a survivor of the Soviet Gulags is a real-life story with as many twists as a Cold War espionage novel."

Geoffrey Macnab, **Screen International**

<http://www.screendaily.com/ScreenDailyArticle.aspx?intStoryID=34904&strSearch=tovarisch&strCallingPage=ScreenDailySearchSite.aspx>

Tovarisch I Am Not Dead

"Tovarishch" is a film of great depth, and lasting emotional power"

Tom Birchenough, **The Moscow Times**

<http://www.moscowtimes.ru/arts/index.htm>

"It makes for sensitive and intensely emotional telling..

The First Post, online Magazine

<http://www.thefirstpost.co.uk/32036,arts,film-review-made-of-honour-nims-island-joy-division-tovarisch-i-am-not-dead>

"Probing analysis of an identity"

FemaleFirst

<http://www.bollyfirst.com/movies/Tovarisch+I+Am+Not+Dead-5402.html>

FEATURES & COMMENTS

"Garri Urban's story is worthy of a Hollywood epic"

BBC Radio London - 1st May 2008, Jason Solomons interviews Stuart Urban

The Guardian - Article by Stuart Urban on how he got the film into cinemas himself

<http://film.guardian.co.uk/features/featurepages/0,,2277199,00.html>

"A journey of love, passion, intrigue and emotion, resulting in a film I shall never forget"

John Daly, producer of Platoon, The Last Emperor, and The Terminator

"This is a compelling documentary on many levels and is indicative of the future of documentary-making."

Alison Wrigley, Raindance Best Documentary Nomination Citation

"A genuinely emotional and fascinating insight into one extraordinary and fascinating feisty modern day hero, this is without doubt one to put on your 'watch' list"

Britfilms, Review

"One thing not to miss."

Josephine Burton, The Jewish Chronicle

"Touching, funny, emotional, covering many important issues, and a tremendous tension all the way through".

John Hopewell of Variety magazine

SYNOPSIS

Garri Urban was a survivor - not a victim - of both the Holocaust and Gulag. Born in the *shtetl* (the Jewish rural community) in 1916, he overcame adversity through a mixture of charm, aggression, and chutzpah. His 1980 autobiographical account of his adventures took its title from when he was shot during his attempt to swim across an icy river from Soviet territory to Romania. He told the snipers who stooped to lift his apparently lifeless body; "no, tovarisch (comrade), I'm not dead" before striking their officer.

In 1992 his son, film-maker Stuart Urban, follows Garri into the former Soviet Union as soon as Communism disintegrates.

The video diaries that were made over a 14 year quest into Garri's KGB records and the fate of his family in the Holocaust, plus extensive 16mm Kodachrome home movies from the 1950s onwards, form the core of the film.

The revelations and surprises begin almost at once, when Garri finds he is still as listed as an "international spy" on the wanted list! Eventually Garri tracks down his KGB file. But the KGB keep back details about Garri which, they tell Stuart, "would make his hair stand on end" if only he knew this about his father ...

As Stuart closely questions his father while he is alive, and then goes in search of answers he could not get until his father was dead, the film takes the form not of a standard biographical documentary but a probing analysis of an identity, a rolling narrative whose chapters bring fresh surprises as we come into the 21st century.

Everyone has, or had, a father, and can relate to this quest. But how many fathers' lives were so extreme, so mysterious, and so eventful?



DIRECTOR'S NOTES

As a child, I do not remember exactly how and when I learnt of my father's full history. I do recall the telegram arriving, when I was five, confirming that my father had found the only surviving member of his family alive after 25 years - Uncle Menachem.



So it dawned on me before the age of 13, when I made my "Brits vs Nazis" 16mm short, *The Virus of War*, that my father and his family had undergone immense suffering in World War Two but my main perception of him was as a supremely successful, confident and inspiring man who had fashioned a family and a luxurious life having escaped the Soviet Union with nothing. His book, *Tovarisch I Am Not Dead*, published while I was at university in 1980, was a powerful and hard-hitting account that sold well in many countries. My father revealed himself to be a survivor of not just the Holocaust, but the Soviet camps: one of the 20th century's most remarkable escapers and survivors.



He was totally extraordinary, but also supremely smart and intelligent, and of course it was clear to people who fell the wrong side of my father that they were dealing with someone capable of generating huge aggression.

Equally, his charm was immense.

Were his aggression, his intelligence and his charm the keys to his survival? As the years went on, I felt that I should address these questions, and others, by recounting his life in a factual film. (I want to do a dramatised movie on him, one day, but that is another story...).

The fall of the Iron Curtain and Soviet Communism meant that in 1992 we could travel, at last, into that world which he had escaped in 1946. The evolution of video technology meant that I could do it "on the run". We started a series of trips, which exposed as much about my father's character as they did about his past. It soon became clear that the version of my father's life recounted in his book was just one aspect of the truth. This made him uncomfortable in the presence of facts which did not fit. On the other hand, tracking people down after 50 years often confirmed the accuracy of many aspects of his book and his stunning recall.

The filmed material went through many changes and re-edits.

Tovarisch I Am Not Dead

In 1998 my father simply decided that the whole subject was too painful for him to want to have it seen in his lifetime. My own efforts had perhaps been in vain.

When Garri died, however, after a long and heavy illness in 2004, I felt that the door was open once more, and I could complete the story. This took more investigation in the archives and a lot more filming, while I pieced together some of the mysteries and was able to interview my uncle Menachem (Garri's brother) and Noka Kapranova (Garri's former lover) without him looming over our shoulders.



Was she, for example, imprisoned because of her love for my father?

My uncle spoke out for the first time, making astonishing revelations about him and his brother.



Garri's former lover Noka in the 1940s

I was grateful to be able to add their testimony to that of my father, heroic voices from a cruel age which will last on film beyond their mortal existence. My uncle spoke out for the first time, making astonishing revelations about him and his brother. I was grateful to be able to add their testimony to that of my father, heroic voices from a cruel age which will last on film beyond their mortal existence.

Clearly, this is in a sense an extended home movie that simply took a lot longer than most home movies to make!

But the growth of "first person documentary" arguably demonstrates that film-makers who offer interesting stories or viewpoints are attracting audiences beyond their own front rooms, and I hope that this film's themes - reconciliation between those who suffered in the Holocaust and those who (arguably) profited from it, the power of love that outlasted war and Gulag, and what it took to survive the worst and the best of the twentieth century - can offer some universal appeal.

A blue ink signature, likely the author's name, written in a cursive style.

March 22 2008

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

This film was created in the long shadow of the Soviet Gulag and the Nazi Holocaust.

Our website www.tovarisch.net provides some basic bibliographies, forums, and links for those interested to know more. We invite comments on this blog based site for all who wish to contribute and learn on these topics.

While the phenomenon of Holocaust denial remains a live issue, it is also true to say that in Russia today there is no great focus on the horrors of Stalin's period. Indeed one can say there is silence. It is a silence that must surely be broken, once in a while.

TRIVIA

"Film-makers arrested (twice)"

In returning to the site in Uzbekistan where Garri Urban was tortured and condemned to death by the KGB 50 years previously, he and his son, the director, were arrested while filming by the hardline secret police of modern Uzbekistan. Garri bluffed his way out of detention by producing the telephone number of the President, whom he did not in fact know. After Garri died and Stuart was filming at the Kremlin in 2005, he was arrested by interior ministry soldiers who demanded a bribe for his release. This time there was no bluffing to get him out.

ON SCREEN PARTICIPANTS

Garri S Urban (1916-2004)



For overviews of Garri's life, see Obituaries from British newspapers The Times and The Independent (attached).

The autobiographical book by Garri Urban, also called *Tovarisch I Am Not Dead*, has recently been published in a new edition and is available in hard copy or download at www.lulu.com. The book is also available at Amazon.

Noka Alekseyevna Kapranova



Born 1914, Tuapsi, Russia. Noka was the daughter of an engineer, and the key person (designer, model etc) at Moscow's only fashion magazine, Models of the Season, when Garri met her in 1940 while on the run in Moscow. Romance bloomed in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, where they lived together from 1941, but was brutally cut short when Garri was re-arrested in 1943. He did not see her again for nearly half a century. After Garri escaped from the Soviet Union, Noka was repeatedly interrogated by the secret

police, before being condemned in 1949 for associating with "international spies" (she had also been engaged to a French diplomat). Served 8 years in the Gulag and was released in 1957. Garri traced her in 1992, as captured in the film. Never settling down with another partner or having children, she lives alone in a small dacha outside Moscow. Stuart Urban traveled to show her the film on his laptop in November 2006. She professed herself very happy with the result.

Menachem "Misha" Urban



Born in 1925 in the village of Bratkovitse in what is now modern Ukraine, Menachem joined the partisans (not yet 16) when the Nazis attacked in 1941, before falling sick and being evacuated East. He trained as an engineer. After the liberation of Ukraine, he joined the underground Jewish resistance, acting against collaborators in Ukraine and high ranking SS officers in Germany, before emigrating to Palestine. After serving in the Palmach (Israeli special forces), he continued as an engineer.

Today he lives near Tel Aviv, the last survivor of the family that was mostly wiped out in the Holocaust. He has six children and many more grandchildren!

Anne Applebaum - Historical consultant



Anne's landmark book [Gulag](#) won the Pulitzer prize for non-fiction in 2004 and was a finalist in the National Book Award, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the LA Times Book Award. She studied Russian history and literature at Yale and International Relations at the London School of Economics and at Oxford. She is a columnist and board member on [The Washington Post](#). She has written for [The Wall Street Journal](#), [The International Herald Tribune](#) and several major European

publications. There are few experts better qualified to provide an overview of the historical context of the Soviet camps and system of repression, including the Jewish dimension.

PRODUCTION CREW

STUART URBAN - Director

Born UK, 1958. A film-maker since 1982, Stuart has made highly regarded, award winning popular TV drama and movies that have sold around the world, winning him two British Academy (and other) awards.

At 13, Stuart had his first film shown at the Cannes Film Festival. The Virus of War was a thirty-minute 16mm drama about a fascist outpost on some British Islands in the Atlantic. It is preserved in the National Film Archive.



After graduating from Balliol College, Oxford, with a first in Modern History, Stuart worked as writer, director and producer. His first feature-length BBC drama, [An Ungentlemanly Act](#), dramatising the first 36 hours of the Falklands War starring Ian Richardson and Bob Peck, won a British Academy award as Best Single Drama and many international awards. From 1994-95, Urban directed [Our Friends in the North](#), the most successful drama for 15 years on BBC2, which won him another British Academy award for Best Drama Serial. It was voted one of the Top 25 Television Programmes Of All Time in the influential British Film Institute Poll of 2000. UK Channel 4's 2007 programme on the Top TV Dramas Ever Made placed it number 8.

In 1995, he wrote the \$6 million HBO/BBC film [Deadly Voyage](#) that won the Silver Nymph for Best Screenplay at Monte Carlo and proved one of HBO's most popular movies of the year, nominated for an NAACP Image Award for Best Drama/Miniseries. In 1997, through his company Cyclops Vision, he wrote, produced and directed cult comedy [Preaching to the Perverted](#), theatrically released in 23 countries and a popular title on the film festival circuit (US Premiere was at The Hamptons, 1997). In 1999, Harold Pinter chose Stuart to co-write, produce and direct [Against the War](#), an acclaimed and hard-hitting documentary attacking the NATO bombing of Serbia for the BBC and Cyclops Vision. It made the shortlist for the British Academy awards for TV single documentaries.

From 2001-2002 he co-produced, wrote and directed [Revelation](#) a Cyclops Vision Production for Romulus Films. This mystical/supernatural thriller concerns the quest to locate and understand a relic that heralds the fusion of science and religion. Budget is \$10 million and it was theatrically released in UK April 2002, playing for 5 weeks in the West End and has sold to 24 countries.

Stuart has also directed extensively in factual television, most recently for BBC's flagship current affairs slot, Panorama, where he did the influential 2005 edition entitled [Blair v Blair](#) which covered civil liberties and terrorism.

EMILY HARRIS - Co-Producer/Editor

Emily is an award-winning film maker with producing and editing credits in factual films for companies such as Channel Four UK, Discovery UK, Discovery US and Dreyfus James Productions, Richard Dreyfus' company in New York. Since her studies at New York's Pratt Institute in 1992 she went on to complete a post-graduate degree in film making at the internationally acclaimed London Film School, mentored by Mike Leigh, and received her Masters Degree in Producing from Royal Holloway, University of London, mentored by Tony Garnett. The combination of producing and editing is what Emily does best and the results can be seen in documentaries such as [Family Found: The Lifetime Obsession of Morton Bartlett](#) - currently shown in museums worldwide including The American Folk Art Museum in New York, The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles and the Lausanne Museum in Switzerland and [Notes From Rishikesh](#) which was the official selection at the Warsaw Jewish Film Festival and has since sold to two major international television channels. Her short film [Three Towers](#) screened at Montreal and Tribeca festivals and won Best Dramatic Short at [Raindance](#) 2006.

DIRK CAMPBELL- Composer

Born in 1950 in Ismailia, Egypt. He studied composition at the Royal College of Music with Edwin Roxburgh, began his full-time career as a composer in 1989 with several commissions from Redwing Films, one of whose directors was David Anderson. Dirk Campbell had composed the score to Anderson's BAFTA-winning animated film [Dreamland Express](#) in 1983. Dirk Campbell has composed award-winning music for television commercials, films and documentaries. His album [From a Round Tower](#) was ranked third in the international Green Dolphin critics' awards for 1997. He wrote the music for David Rudkin's critically acclaimed play [Red Sun](#) in 2003. His most recent work for BMG Zomba Production Music are two sets of double CDs entitled Early History and The Middle East.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Producer/Writer/Director	Stuart Urban
Co-Producer/Editor	Emily Harris
Executive Producers	Alan Jay, Mark Pegg
Music	Dirk Campbell
Sound Editor	Christian Bass
Production Manager	Chris Fretwell
Production Team	Maria Brock, Ellie Cook, Lawrence Donello, Victoria Orlova, Alex Smith, Kevin Smith
Research	Alexander Dunai, Andrea Dunai, Dana Urban
Camera	Stuart Urban. Shai Peleg, Ben Nicolosi Endo
Online Editor	Wozy at Warrenfilm
Opening Titles	Howard Watkins at Lipsync Post
Graphics & Online Services	Wozy at Warrenfilm
Dubbing Mixer	Thom Paisley
Post Production Sound Services	Lipsync Post
Post-Production Assistant, Accountant	Marie-Ange Rogues
Auditors	AGN Shipleys
Legal Services	Simkins Partnership
Special Thanks:	Josephine Urban, Anne Applebaum, Chris Atkins, Yoni Bentovim, Jonathan Blair, Chasia & Moshe Dovrat, Sir Martin Gilbert, Kenneth Griffith (1921-2006), Naomi Gryn, Michael Joseph, Noka Alekseyevna Kapranova, Marina Hotel Tel Aviv, Julian Rodd, Robin Sales, Mark Urban, Menachem Urban, Wiener Library, Yad Vashem

PRODUCTION DETAILS

Original title	Tovarisch I Am Not Dead
Genre	Documentary, Feature
Country of production	UK
Date of completion	March 2007
Duration	83 min
Shooting format	8mm, 16mm, 35mm (archive footage only), Super VHS, Betacam, DV Cam, MiniDV
Format/Aspect ratio	Digibeta PAL, Digibeta NTSC 4:3 35mm / 1:78
Print details	Colour / Black & white
Sound	Stereo
Principal photography	1992-2006
Spoken languages	English, Russian
Locations	Israel, Russian Federation, U S A, Ukraine, United Kingdom, Uzbekistan
Production budget	US \$500,000
Official site	www.tovarisch.net

THE TIMES



HARRY URBAN

Doctor who survived immense hardship during the Second World War to work in international relief aid

HARRY URBAN pioneered one of the basic principles of international relief — that medical help must be freely given to all, no matter whether those in need belonged to the culprits or the victims in the disaster that preceded the relief work.

In the aftermath of the Second World War Urban was working under American direction in Creus, in South Germany, for the United National Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). His main responsibility was the care of concentration camp survivors — until a German woman, the widow of a Nazi officer, came to beg him for scarce sulphamide supplies for her four-year-old daughter suffering from pneumonia. This would breach the regulations under which Urban was working. He ignored them, saved the child's life, was reprimanded

and transferred to another town. But the principle was established, and is today beyond question.

As a Pole without a passport, Urban saw no future for himself in Europe, and joined the rudimentary public health service in Venezuela. He was given responsibility for a large and desperately poor area of the Orinoco Valley and rapidly became known as "the horseback doctor who cures and does not charge". With that he established the principle, revolutionary in Venezuela, that public health treatment must be free to those in need.

Harry Urban completed his medical training just before Hitler's armies marched into his native Poland on September 1, 1939. He fled east in an attempt to escape into still neutral Romania from an area occupied by Soviet troops. On Christmas Eve he reached

the border formed by the River Prut and was about to plunge in to swim across when a hail of bullets whizzed around his head. One pierced his hat and singed his hair. Another felled him as it hit his stomach. So began five years of playing cat and mouse with the Soviet secret police, the NKVD.

His first spell in the Gulag was near Kandalaksha inside the Arctic Circle, where temperatures plunged to -40C (-40F). But Urban had an overpowering will to survive and a resourcefulness to match. His medical skills got him switched from labour with spade to that with scalpel and stethoscope. And in less than a year he walked out of the camp in a "borrowed" NKVD uniform. He worked as a doctor in Moscow, then in Tashkent, before the secret police caught up with him again. After torture, an attempted

suicide, and another escape, he found work as a doctor in the newly liberated Ukraine.

As peace returned to Europe, Urban found that his family had been wiped out in the Nazi death camps. With Soviet troops now in East Germany, Urban needed two more escapes before he found personal safety in the West. His account of those turbulent years, *Tovarisch, I am Not Dead*, which was written with the narrative skill of a professional, became an international bestseller in the 1980s.

Urban's life changed direction when he met an English postgraduate student, Josephine Johnson, in Venezuela in 1954. They married, set up home in England and Urban channelled his abiding generosity into considerable philanthropy in this country. He is survived by his wife and their two sons.



Harry Urban, doctor, was born on December 12, 1916. He died on October 16, 2004, aged 87.

OBITUARIES 53

Harry Urban

Gulag escaper who settled in London

MILLIONS MAY have dreamt of escape from a Soviet labour camp but only a tiny number ever managed it. And those who did were soon run to ground. Harry Urban was not only a successful Gulag escaper but had a starring role in swinging London and the friendship of many of Britain's rich and powerful. Nobody who met him was likely to forget it.

The Central European town he grew up in was Austro-Hungarian when his parents met, Polish until the Second World War, and part of Soviet Ukraine after it. In this flow of shifting loyalties and languages he was firmly rooted in the Jewish shtetl. His childhood world was something out of the novels of Isaac Bashevis Singer, where Yiddish songs or tales of spirits created gave comfort in a time of pogroms and Fascism.

Urban was one of those millions whose life was changed by the 1939 Nazi-Soviet carve-up of Poland. He found himself on Stalin's side of the divided country and decided quickly to leave. Trying to steal across the Romanian border, he was shot, arrested, and propelled into the nether world of the Soviet penal code and the Gulag.

His camp, Niva III, inside the Arctic Circle, was a ghastly nightmare of criminal gangs, ruthless NKVD overlords and men ground so low by the suf-

fering that many chose death over life. But he had a trump card: having completed medical studies just before the war began, he became indispensable to the authorities as a prisoner-doctor.

In his battle for life, Urban lived on his wits and made his own rules. He altered the spelling of his name, and invented a patronymic, "Semyonovich", in order to win over Russians. He used his looks and charm to seduce women, including the wife of one NKVD officer who eventually helped him escape the camp.

Years later, Urban recounted the story of how he got out in his memoir *Tovarisch, I Am Not Dead*, published under his Russian name, Garri S. Urban, in 1980. At the time, some reviewers wondered at the truth of it, but, following the fall of the Soviet system, Urban had the last laugh, obtaining his secret police files, including one that recorded there was no record of his release from prison camp.

Having escaped, he made his way to Moscow late in 1940 and then on to Tashkent. All the time he worked as a doctor, charming women and local apparatchiks in equal measure, so that, when the NKVD eventually caught up with him, he was not hurled back into the Arctic Circle, but, rebuffing their attempts to turn him into an informer, somehow remained at large.

In 1945, thinking that none of his brothers and sisters had survived the



'Tovarisch, I am not dead': Urban's labour-camp ID from 1940

Holocaust, Urban made his way, in stages, via Germany and Belgium to Venezuela, where he lived with a fellow Russian doctor and her daughter, practising medicine. This work took him to treat head-hunters and the poorest settlers in the country's interior. Later he went into the jewellery business and, later still, bought a hotel in Caracas.

Urban longed to start his own family. It was a British woman, Josephine Johnson, whom he met in Venezuela in 1954 and married, who eventually brought him to England; and they had two sons.

The traits that had saved his life in war now became his passport in London, a society he found repressed but refreshingly honourable. He became a denizen of fashionable clubs, a founder member of Tramp, a regular at Annabel's. He entertained lavishly, drawing actors, politicians and magnates to his home near Kingston upon Thames.

Gambling, and in particular poker, played a big part in this social world. He traded cards with everyone from Saudi princes to Lord Lucan. His unerring instinct for bluff and innate strength of character overthrew many of his opponents at the tables and, at times, his winnings were so great that many thought his lavish life style was funded by gambling.

The same characteristics that had earlier ensured his survival also guaranteed that he was never an unqualified success in Britain. When he lost interest or faith in people, he made it crushingly obvious. His distrust of others meant he was rarely able to capitalise on connections with those that floated around him at Aspinall's or the Royal Enclosure at Ascot. He was nobody's idea of a sleeping partner.

In 1964, he discovered that one of his brothers had survived the war and was living in Israel. This restoration of a small part of what he had lost, combined with his joy at creating his own new family, made the Sixties and Seventies the happiest years of his life.

There were similarities between Urban's background and Robert Maxwell's or those of members of Harold Wilson's kitchen cabinet. At times, he admitted envy of the business success of some of those other East European émigrés. In truth, it was precisely the quality of truthfulness to himself and his immediate family that ensured both the admiration of those closest to him and denied him the wider success he craved.

BEN SHELLEY

Harry Urban, medical practitioner and businessman: born Warsaw 12 December 1916; married 1957 Josephine Johnson (two sons); died London 16 October 2004.

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