

MONDAY, 21 APRIL 2008

## Historical Background

The film focuses on a specific period in the past – 1939-1946 – and a second period, from 1991-2006, when Garri and his film-maker son Stuart, retraced his footsteps.

Both periods saw momentous upheaval and change in the areas visited by Garri and Stuart when they travelled from their home in the UK to states of the former Soviet Union which had witnessed the ravages of Nazism and/or Communism.

1939-1945 were the years of World War Two, when Garri's homeland (which had been part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1916 when he was born) changed sovereignty three times under the boots of invading armies: Eastern Galicia had been part Poland from 1918 until 1939, when the Soviets occupied Eastern Poland as the Nazis tore into Western Poland. The area was swallowed by the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, but was retaken by the Red Army towards the end of the War and is now part of modern Ukraine. The volatile ethnic and political mix of the region meant that the Nazis were able to recruit the infamous SS Galitzianer Division to fight the Soviets, and found many ready collaborators to bring about the Holocaust.

It was not only the Jews of this territory who suffered in that first period. While most of the Galician Jewish population (including Garri's family) was liquidated in the Holocaust, vast numbers of Ukrainians were rounded up by the Soviets and deported to the Gulag. Many did not return. Among those who survived was the local man featured in the film when Garri returned to Bratkovitze, his parents' home village, in 1992.

The Soviet terror and its system of concentration camps, known as the Gulag, consumed an unknown number of lives, certainly in the millions (the film's historical advisor, Anne Applebaum, devotes a whole appendix to this question in her book, Gulag). While they were ostensibly labour camps rather than death camps like the Nazi's, the death rates among the 18-19 million prisoners from 1929-1953 demonstrated that many of those doing hard labour did not survive more than a few years, especially from 1941-1944.

The Gulag system, which stretched across the whole of the Soviet Union, was at its height from the late 1930s to Stalin's death in 1953.

August, 1991, when Garri first returned to the Russia from which he had daringly escaped in 1946, was a time at which the Communists had still not given up the fight. Garri, whose life demonstrated his ability to locate himself in the midst of drama, found tanks on the streets of Moscow and gunfire at parliament as Soviet diehards attempted to force their way back into power (in an unsuccessful coup) .

This period sealed the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and the resulting tensions that were still present in those lands in 1992 and long beyond (for example, in Chechnya). Ukraine was gripped by nationalist fervour, Uzbekistan had segued into a hardline Soviet-style regime under Islam Karimov, and so on. As Garri and Stuart travelled across these states, they encountered strikes, blatant lawlessness and the aggressive or sly tactics of secret police mechanisms that had not been dismantled – as the film shows.

POSTED BY TOVARISCH - WEB TEAM AT 17:37 2 COMMENTS:

LABELS: FAMILY, GARRI URBAN, HOLOCAUST, WAR, WELCOME

SUNDAY, 20 APRIL 2008

## NOKA ALEKSEYEVNA KAPRANOVA – INSPIRING and SURVIVING



In the 16 years or so that I have known this singular woman, my father's former lover who served 8 years in Soviet jails and camps through her association with him, every fact that I continue to discover about her only inspires me.

When my 17 year-old son David went to Moscow in March 2008, on a school trip, he took some money from my mother who selflessly supports Noka.. She lives in dire circumstances in a decrepit little dacha (the word means something like a "shack", rather than the grand homes of the rich and nouveau-riche that dwarf Noka's crumbling abode in the rural outskirts).

Elena, who collected the money from my son and helps look after Noka, got to know this unique lady through her godmother, who was imprisoned in the Gulag alongside Noka. From Elena I have now learned for the first time two anecdotes that illustrate the extraordinary qualities of Noka.

When Elena's godmother arrived in the Gulag it was after a year of sleepless nights of interrogation just like Noka. Elena continues the story in a recent email to me:



"When my godmother's group of new convicts arrived at the camp in the late 1940-s, they were taken to the baths - whatever those looked like - to wash. She was in a horrible state of mind, having spent a year in prison during interrogation, and expecting worse to come. (She came from a well-to-do Moscow family, close-knit and loving, and although her mother and herself had had their fare share of suffering it was not until her arrest that she lost her friends, her church, and the whole of her Moscow world.) As they came in, she saw some young women inmates, who had just washed and were going to dress. She says she was stunned by Noka's beauty - and thought - "Well, if such perfection can survive here - all hope is not lost!"

And another bit - did you know, that while Noka was in the camp, she looked after abandoned dogs and cats, and had such a reputation for it, that people from outside the camp (from the 'free' world) would smuggle puppies across the barbed wire so she could look after them...(A mysterious feature of the Gulag life - however cruel and dreary its existence was, the people who ran Gulag could never make it completely soulless...and

while the inmates themselves were starving, they still managed to spare a bit for a hungry dog...unbelievable!)

And she would call her friends and give away the parcel her sister sent her, and would look after an old lady who got no help from home, and would share whatever she had with those who had nothing."

This explains to me the mystery why even today, disabled and without running water or sanitary facilities at 93 and no family to care for her, Noka continues to look after a menagerie of cats and dogs ....

POSTED BY [TOVARISCH - WEB TEAM](#) AT [16:06](#) [NO COMMENTS:](#)

LABELS: [CAMP](#), [CONVICT](#), [FILM](#), [NOKA](#), [TOVARISCH](#)

THURSDAY, 14 DECEMBER 2006

## How the War Began in Poland

The first regular act of war against Poland that marked the beginning of the Second World War for the country, took place on September 1, 1939, at 04:40 hours, when the German Luftwaffe attacked the Polish town of Wieluń, destroying 75% of the city and killing close to 1,200 people, most of them civilians. Five minutes later, at 04:45 hours, the old German battleship Schleswig-Holstein opened fire on the Polish military transit depot at Westerplatte, in the Free City of Danzig on the Baltic Sea. At 08:00 hours, German troops, still without a formal declaration of war issued, attacked near the Polish town of Mokra; the battle of the border had begun.

The Allied governments declared war on Germany on September 3; however, they failed to provide Poland with any meaningful support. The German-French border had a few minor skirmishes, although the majority of German forces, including eighty-five percent of their armoured forces, were engaged in Poland. Despite some Polish successes in minor border battles, German technical, operational and numerical superiority forced the Polish armies to withdraw from the borders towards Warsaw and Lwów. The Luftwaffe gained air superiority early in the campaign. The Polish armies were splitting up into uncoordinated fragments, some of which were retreating while others were delivering disjointed attacks on the nearest German columns.

Polish forces abandoned regions of Pomerania, Greater Poland and Silesia in the first week of the campaign, after a series of battles known as the Battle of the Border. The German advance, as a whole, was not slowed down and the Germans moved quickly, overwhelming secondary positions. Warsaw, under heavy aerial bombardment since the first hours of the war, was attacked on 9 September and was put under siege on September 13. Around that time, advanced German forces had also reached the city of Lwów, a major metropolis of eastern Poland. 1150 German aircraft bombed Warsaw on September 24.

The largest battle during this campaign, the Battle of Bzura, took place near the Bzura river west of Warsaw and lasted from 9 September to 18 September. After the defeat, Poland lost its ability to take the initiative and counterattack on a large scale.

From the beginning of the Polish campaign the German government repeatedly asked Stalin and Molotov to act upon the August agreement and attack Poland from the east. Worried by an unexpectedly rapid German advance and eager to grab their allotted share of the country, Soviet forces attacked Poland on September 17. It was agreed that the USSR would relinquish its interest in the territories between the new border and Warsaw in exchange for inclusion of Lithuania in the Soviet "zone of interest."

By 17 September 1939 the Polish defence was already broken and their only hope was to retreat and reorganise along the Romanian Bridgehead. However, these plans were rendered obsolete nearly overnight, when the over 800,000 strong Soviet Union Red Army attacked and created the Belarussian and Ukrainian fronts after invading the eastern regions of Poland. This was in violation of the Riga Peace Treaty, the Soviet-Polish Non-Aggression Pact and other international treaties, both bilateral and multilateral. Soviet diplomacy claimed that they were "protecting the Ukrainian and Belarussian minorities of eastern Poland in view of Polish imminent collapse." In fact Soviets were acting in co-operation with the Nazis, carving Europe into Nazi and Soviet spheres of influence as specified in the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

Polish border defence forces in the east, known as the Korpus Ochrony Pogranicza, consisted of about 25 battalions. Many Polish lives were lost and the Soviet invasion was one of the decisive factors that convinced the Polish government that the war in Poland was lost. Prior to the Soviet attack from the East, the Polish military's fall-back plan had

called for long-term defence against Germany in the southern-eastern part of Poland, while awaiting relief from a Western Allies attack on Germany's western border. However, the Polish government refused to surrender or negotiate a peace with Germany and ordered all units to evacuate Poland and reorganise in France.

Meanwhile, Polish forces tried to move towards the Romanian bridgehead area, still actively resisting the German invasion. From 17 September to 20 September, the Polish Armies Kraków and Lublin were crippled at the Battle of Tomaszów Lubelski, the second largest battle of the campaign. The city of Lwów capitulated on 22 September in a turn of events illustrative of the bizarre turn due to Soviet intervention; the city had been attacked by the Germans over a week earlier and in the middle of the siege, the German troops handed operations over to their Soviet allies. Despite a series of intensifying German attacks, Warsaw, defended by quickly reorganised retreating units, civilian volunteers and militia, held out until its capitulation on 28 September. The Modlin Fortress north of Warsaw capitulated on 29 September after an intense 16-day battle.

#### Civilian losses

The Polish September Campaign was an instance of total war that would be repeated continuously throughout World War II. Consequently, civilian casualties were high during and after combat. From the start of the campaign, the Luftwaffe attacked civilian targets and columns of refugees along the roads to wreak havoc, disrupt communications and target Polish morale. Apart from the victims of the battles, the German forces (both SS and the regular Wehrmacht) are credited with the mass murder of several thousands of Polish POWs and civilians. Also, during a pre-planned Operation Tannenberg, nearly 20,000 Poles were shot in 760 mass execution sites by special units, the Einsatzgruppen, in addition to regular Wehrmacht, SS and Selbstschutz.

At the end of the September Campaign, Poland was divided among Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, Lithuania and Slovakia. Nazi Germany annexed parts of Poland, while the rest was governed by the so-called General Government. On September 28, another secret German-Soviet protocol modified the arrangements of August: all Lithuania was to be a Soviet sphere of influence, not a German one; but the dividing line in Poland was moved in Germany's favour, to the Bug River. Even though water barriers separated most of the spheres of interest, the Soviet and German troops met each other on a number of occasions.

About 65,000 Polish troops were killed in the fighting, with 420,000 others being captured by the Germans and 240,000 more by the Soviets (grand total 680,000 prisoner). Up to 120,000 Polish troops escaped to neutral Romania (through the Romanian Bridgehead) and Hungary, and another 20,000 escaped to Latvia and Lithuania, with the majority eventually making their way to France or Britain. Most of the Polish Navy succeeded in evacuating to Britain as well.

The Polish September Campaign marked the beginning of the Second World War in Europe, which combined with the Japanese invasion of China in 1937 and the Pacific War in 1941 would form the conflict known as World War II.

The invasion of Poland led to Britain and France declaring war on Germany on September 3; however, they did little to affect the outcome of the September Campaign. This lack of direct help during September 1939 led many Poles to believe that they had been betrayed by their Western allies.

POSTED BY [TOVARISCH - WEB TEAM](#) AT [17:49](#) NO COMMENTS:

LABELS: [WAR](#)

THURSDAY, 9 NOVEMBER 2006

## Remembrance Day

Hi all, it's Romany here. I feel that this week more than any other, we should relate to the significance of Tovarisch, I Am Not Dead. November 11, 1918 marked the end of the First World War, when governments across the world, shaken by the devastating losses their countries had received, vowed never to let such atrocities happen again. Yet in 1939, just 21 years later, it started all over again. Whilst researching the Polish involvement in WW2, I realised that an awful lot of real facts and figures are missing and that Garri Urban's personal account of escape is only one of many that went largely unrecognised...until now. Have a look at this site dedicated to the men and women who escaped from Poland to fight in World War II. I think you'll find some of the information both fascinating and disturbing.

POSTED BY TOVARISCH - WEB TEAM AT 17:57 NO COMMENTS:

LABELS: WAR

TUESDAY, 7 NOVEMBER 2006

## Family Torn Apart



I imagine that most of us find it hard to contemplate how life under the Nazi regime must have been. Garri Urban's struggle to survive is an incredible story, but what about those family members he left behind, in particular his younger brother Menachem, pictured left? With his father dead believing his brother to be dead for 25 years, he received a telegram from London asking him the names of his closest family members...

Speaking in 2006 in Tel-Aviv, Menachem recalls how Garri was deported to the Gulag. As the Nazis invaded in 1941, their father had "benched" Menachem, letting the 15-year old go to join the partisans. He knew that his father as well as the rest of the family had died in the Holocaust, and presumed for 25 years that his brother had perished in the Gulag. Then, one day in 1964, a telegram from London arrived, asking him the names of his closest family members....

We learn from Menachem and Garri about the amazing and emotional reunion of the two brothers and visit the spot where it happened near Tel Aviv. We also hear from Menachem how he told his brother of the fate of the rest of their family and how he returned home after the war to encounter the man responsible for murdering their sister and nephew. Menachem joined the Jewish underground, capturing several senior SS officers, and handing them over for trial and execution by the Jewish underground movement before emigrating to Palestine, where he became a decorated elite commando in three wars for Israel. We recall how the discovery of a brother brought so much happiness to Garri and his family. Menachem's stories also help shed light on Garri's singular character: how he had become tough and fearless when physically assaulting gangsters and anti-Semitic gangs.

For a detailed and harrowing account of what befell the Jewish community of Garri and

Menachem's home town (nearly half of which was Jewish before WW2),in one of the biggest yet least reported liquidations of the Holocaust, [click here](#).

POSTED BY [TOVARISCH - WEB TEAM](#) AT [21:01](#) [NO COMMENTS:](#)

LABELS: [FAMILY](#)

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## SUGGESTED READING



- [Garri S. Urban: Tovarisch, I Am Not Dead](#) This is the true and striking story by a Jewish doctor of his struggle for survival when caught in 1939 between the evils of Nazi Germany and Stalin's Russia. After facing death from frontier patrols, a firing squad and torture, Urban arrives at a position of considerable power in Soviet society in a medical post. He risks his life again, fighting epidemics. These fascinating memoirs give a very rare glimpse of the Soviet Union in wartime, particularly into the exotic life of the Moiscow elite, where beautiful women, diplomats and spies mingled at parties and sex was used as a method of recruiting agents.



- [Ruth Kluger: Landscape of Memory - a Holocaust Girlhood Remembered](#) Ruth Kluger is one of the child-survivors of the Holocaust. In 1942 at the age of 11, she was deported to the Nazi "family camp" Theresienstadt with her mother. They would move to two other camps before the war ended. This book is the story of Ruth's life. Of a childhood spent in the nazi camps and her refusal to forget the past as an adult in America. Not erasing a single detail, not even the inconvenient ones, she writes frankly about the troubled relationship with her mother even through their years of internment and her determination not to forgive and absolve the past.



- [Sir Martin Gilbert: The Holocaust](#) A very thorough account of the experience of the Jews of Europe during World War II. This title gives a virtual day-by-day account, in men and women's own words, of the horrifying events of the Holocaust - the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jewish race.



- [Anne Applebaum: Gulag](#) The Pulitzer Prize winning narrative of the origins and development of the Soviet concentration camps. Based on archives, interviews and new research the book explains the role that the camps played in the Soviet political and economic system.



- [Jean-Francois Steiner: Treblinka](#) This is without a doubt one of the better books about the death camps. You will become intimately acquainted with Treblinka and the Nazis who ran it. Steiner's book is well-written and does justice to the horror.



- [Richard Overy: Russia's War](#) The astounding events of 1941-45 in which the Soviet Union, after initial catastrophes, destroyed Hitler's Third Reich and shaped European history for the next fifty years.



- [Willy Peter Reese: A Stranger to Myself: The Inhumanity of War: Russia, 1941-1944](#) The haunting memoir of a young German soldier on the Russian front during World War II. Willy Peter Reese was only twenty years old when he found himself marching through Russia with orders to take no prisoners. Three years later he was dead.



- [Slavomir Rawicz: The Long Walk](#) The story of a young Polish cavalry officer who was arrested by the Russians, tortured and sentenced to 25 years forced labour. His escape and journey across the Gobi desert to Tibet and freedom.

- [Rodric Braithwaite: Moscow 1941](#) Sunday Times review - 'a wide-ranging and excellent account...Braithwaite never shirks the terrible truths'.



#### ANNE APPLEBAUM

[Anne Applebaum](#) made a key contribution the documentary of Garri Urban's life. Her website documents her work on the legacy of communism contains extracts from her Pulitzer Prize book - *GULAG: A History*

#### SIR MARTIN GILBERT

[Sir Martin Gilbert](#) is considered by many to be among the leading historians of the modern world. His website contains a wealth of information about his work, and also provides links to his most recent thoughts and writings.

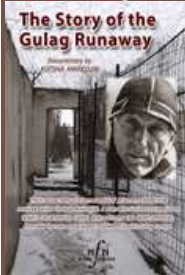
#### SUGGESTED FILMS

##### **Schindlers List**



The 2004 release telling the true story of Schindler's attempts to save Jewish workers from the horrors of the German camps....

##### **The Story Of The Gulag Runaway**



In Stalinist Russia, Chabua Amiredjibi endured years of imprisonment, backbreaking punishment, horrific torture, and two death sentences. But his broken life and ill health did not kill his hope of gaining freedom. In all, he managed six escapes from Stalin's Gulag Camps. He stood up, fought and survived.

#### HISTORICAL LINKS

- [Gulag - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia - An overview of Russian Gulags](#)
- [Holocaust Map of Concentration and Death Camps - A map showing the location of German Concentration and Death Camps during World War II](#)
- [Concentration Camps - A brief history of German Concentration Camps - A useful resource for teachers...](#)
- [Russian Newspaper Feature: Для русскоговорящих - For native Russian speakers, there is a fascinating article about Urban and the Gulags. Click on the link to read further.](#)

#### NOTABLE GEOGRAPHY

- [The Gulag Era](#)
- [Russia and the Former Soviet Republics](#)
- [Map of Russia](#)
- [Russian Empire](#)