

A Cinema Guild Release

THE WOMAN WITH THE FIVE ELEPHANTS

A film by Vadim Jendreyko

93 minutes / 1.85:1 / Dolby SR / Switzerland and Germany / 2010
In German and Russian with English Subtitles / Not Rated
Stills available at: www.cinemaguild.com/downloads

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Synopsis

The Woman with the Five Elephants unravels the mystery behind the life and work of the world's greatest translator of Russian literature. It is a poetic, precise and revelatory investigation into language, meaning and the tides of history.

Svetlana Geier is one of literature's foremost translators. Her process, which she describes in the film, includes an ability to internalize the text, just as the original writer had, and draw from her own life story. Her magnum opus are new German translations of Dostoevsky's five great novels – referred to as the five elephants (before Geier translated "Crime and Punishment" it was known as "Guilt and Atonement" in Germany).

But her great success has come with its share of loss. Born in Ukraine in 1923, she witnessed first-hand the impact of Stalin's purges. As a young girl, she watched Nazi forces occupy her country – and execute 30,000 Jews. By the end of the War, she and her mother were in a German labor camp for Eastern European prisoners. It was her unique gift for languages that ultimately saved her. But it forced her to make a choice that altered the course of her life.

Interweaving the story of Geier's life with her literary work (watching Geier in her study translate a phrase from Dostoevsky is as gripping and suspenseful as any Hollywood thriller), the film traces the secret of this inexhaustibly hard-working woman and her craft.

Director's Statement

Svetlana Geier has been dealing with the possibilities and limitations of literary translation for more than sixty years. Much of her passion for her work relates to translation loss, the indeterminate area in which there are words in one language for which there is no correspondence in another. To her this is the arena of translationally erotic instances, here she enters terra incognita and has to take new linguistic paths by drawing on her deep knowledge of Russian and German culture. This creative stance, this enthusiasm for new form informs her personality and her work, and fascinated me from our first meeting onwards.

I began to take more and more of an interest in Svetlana Geier's work as a translator of Dostoyevsky's great novels, in her method of internalizing text and her sensuous handling of language. And through her, Dostoyevsky's questions about freedom and the relationship between means and end were given concrete and vital form.

"Who am I?" This question is the internal motor of all of the central figures in Dostoyevsky's work. In search of an answer, the protagonists fall into internal abysses or turn into murderers, yet beyond disaster always lies self-knowledge, or a step towards it.

Svetlana Geier has been confronted with Stalinism and National Socialism during her life, she left her homeland, the Ukraine, so as to finally find herself in a completely different part of Europe.

During the development of this project it became clear to me that I was once again dealing with the fate of a refugee or emigrant, with a person who has had to find her way between the grindstones of her era. It is a theme that I do not explicitly search for in my work but one which I repeatedly come upon, one behind which the question of my own identity is concealed: "Who am I?" And so the question that drives on Dostoyevsky's figures is also the internal pivot from which I meet this woman and her activities.

- Vadim Jendreyko

Director's Bio

Vadim Jendreyko was born in 1965 in Germany and grew up in Switzerland. He attended grammar school, the Basel School of Applied Art and the Düsseldorf Art Academy. He realized his first film in 1986. In 2002, he and Hercli Bundi founded Mira Film GmbH, where he also works as producer and co-producer.

He is the father of two children and lives in Basel.

Filmography (Selection from 2002 on)

- 2002 "Bashkim", cinema documentary 85 min., produced by Carac Film AG
(Swiss Film Prize 2002, Best Documentary)
- 2003 "Transit– Zürich Flughafen" [Transit - Zurich airport]" 54 min. documentary for Swiss Television (SF), produced by Mirafi Im GmbH (Best of Dok SF DRS 2003)
- 2004 "Leistung am Limit" [Maximum performance] 53 min. Dok–Film SF DRS, produced by Mirafi Im GmbH
- 2010 "The Woman with the five Elephants", cinema documentary 93 min. produced by Mirafi Im GmbH and Filmtank with ZDF/3sat, SF

Svetlana Geier – Biographic Overview

- 1923 Svetlana Geier, née Ivanova, is born as an only child to Russian parents on April 26, 1923 in Kiev. She attends a modest school but receives private tuition in German and French at her mother's behest.
- 1938 Her agronomist father is arrested as an enemy of the people during one of the rounds of Stalinist purges.
- 1939 Death of the father soon after his release. He dies as a result of his ill treatment during his eighteen months of imprisonment.
- 1941 Successfully completes her schooling. On the day of receiving a certificate to this effect, Hitler attacks the Soviet Union. In autumn the German army occupies Kiev. Between the 29th and 30th of September, her childhood friend Neta Tkatsch is killed by an SS special commando along with 30,000 other Jews at Babij Jar ravine near Kiev. Svetlana Michailovna Ivanova works as an interpreter at the Geological Institute of the Scientific Academy and at Dortmund Union Bridge-builders plc during the German occupation.
- 1943 The Germany army retreats from Kiev after its defeat in Stalingrad. A large part of the population is deported, those remaining are subjected to the purges of Stalin's NKVD. Svetlana and her mother leave Kiev. She is interned in a work camp for easterners in Dortmund.
- 1944 In April, German well-wishers succeed in having her released and get her to Berlin, where, having taken a test, she is given a Humboldt bursary (and that, although she was a Soviet citizen!) She and her mother also receive resident alien passports, allowing them to travel to Freiburg in the Breisgau region where they settle. Their charitable treatment leads to a political purge of the ministry responsible for the occupied eastern zones, which is then made answerable to the Nazi Party. The official who stood up for her is sent to the Eastern Front.
- 1945 After the end of the war she studies German Studies and Comparative Linguistics at Freiburg, marries Christmut Geier, whom she divorces in 1962, and becomes a mother to two children.
- 1957 She begins translating Russian literature into German and starts lecturing at Karlsruhe University.
- 1963-89 Lectorate for Russian at Freiburg's Slavic faculty specializing in linguistic pedagogics, translation and literature of the 19th and 20th centuries.
- 1988-92 Lecturing post at Herdecke University.
- 1992 Begins to work with Egon Ammann, for whose publishing house she translates Fyodor Dostoyevsky's five great novels: "Crime and Punishment", "The Idiot", "The Devils", "The Brothers Karamazov" and "The Raw Youth".
- 2006 An accident befalls her son Johannes. He is a handicrafts teacher and injures himself seriously during a lesson. He henceforth requires constant care.
- 2007 First journey back to the Ukraine since 1943. In autumn her son dies as a consequence of his accident.
- 2008 Begins working on a translation of Dostoyevsky's "The Gambler" (to be published by Ammann publishing house in autumn 09).
- 2009 Begins what she says is her last Dostoyevsky translation: "The House of the Dead". She continues to lecture at Karlsruhe University and, more recently, back in Freiburg.
- 2010 Svetlana Geier dies on November 7, 2010.

During the course of her career, Svetlana Geier has translated works by Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy, Solzhenitsyn, Platonov, Bely, Chukovskaja, Sinyavsky, Afanasyev, Voynovich, Katayev, Bunin, Bulgakov and Dostoyevsky into German. Her translations have been published by the Ammann, S. Fischer, Luchterhand, Reclam and Dörlemann publishing houses, amongst others.

She has received many awards for her excellent services to mediating Russian culture, history and literature, most recently one from the Leipzig book fair in 2007. She is an honorary doctor at the universities of Basel and Freiburg (D).

Fyodor Dostoyevsky – Life and Work: A Sketch

Dostoyevsky, born 1821 in Moscow, died 1881 in Petersburg, was the son of a doctor. After the death of his mother in 1837 he went to Petersburg to resume studies in engineering at the military academy. His father died in 1839 under unclear circumstances at his country estate. In 1844, Dostoyevsky decided to become a writer. His first novel, "Poor Folk", was enthusiastically greeted by Vissarion Belinsky, the noted critic of his day. His second novel, "The Double" was less successful but anticipated the inner struggles of the later heroes of the great novels, to wit Raskolnikov, Stavrogin, Versilov and Ivan Karamazov.

In 1849, Dostoyevsky was arrested for participation in the liberal discussions of the Petrashevsky-Circle and sentenced to death by Tsar Nicholas I. After a mock execution, his sentence was commuted to four years imprisonment in Siberia, to be followed by military service in the Seventh Siberian Line Battalion in Semipalatinsk. In 1859, he was discharged from the army having petitioned Tsar Alexander II on the grounds of epilepsy.

Return to literary life: The fictionalized prisoner's account "The House of the Dead" (1862) is the report of a criminologist and missionary Christian, a type central to the five great novels written from 1866 onwards: "Crime and Punishment", "The Idiot", "The Devils", "The Raw Youth" and "The Brothers Karamazov". His story "Notes from the Underground", (1864) which takes a polemic position against instrumental reason, represented by the Crystal Palace of London's Great Exhibition, had its own reception history. In his journal "A Writer's Diary", (1873-1881) Dostoyevsky delivered ongoing commentary on current events. In the framework of the conflict between the "Slavophiles" and the "Westerners", Dostoyevsky stood on the side of the Slavophiles. His fundamental criticism of Western Europe is given literary form in his travel journal "Winter Notes on Summer Impressions".

Dostoyevsky was twice married. First to Maria Isayeva (from 1857 onwards), who died in 1864, then to Anna Snitkina (from 1867 onwards), who survived him by many years and left her "Memoirs" and "Diary of the Year 1867" to posterity. His affair with Apollinaria Suslova (1861-1863) furnished Dostoyevsky with material for his short novel "The Gambler". Dostoyevsky is considered one of the world's most influential novelists.

CREW

Director	Vadim Jendreyko
Camera	Niels Bolbrinker Stéphane Kuthy
Sound	Patrick Becker
Editor	Gisela Castronari-Jaensch
Production manager	Thiemo Hehl
Sound editor	Florian Beck
Music	Daniel Almada Martin Iannaccone
Production Switzerland	Mira Film GmbH Hercli Bundi and Vadim Jendreyko
Production Germany	Filmtank GmbH Thomas Tielsch
Co-production	ZDF/3sat Redaktion Inge Classen Schweizer Fernsehen Redaktion Urs Augstburger and Marion Bornschieer
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