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**IDA Preservation and Scholarship Award 2009: Marina Goldovskaya**

**FROM RUSSIA WITH PASSION: DOCUMENTARIAN  
MARINA GOLDOVSKAYA TEACHES, MENTORS**

[By Michael Rose](#)

In an era when nearly anyone can use a cell phone to capture an event, post the results on YouTube, then claim the title of documentarian, it's rare to find someone like Marina Goldovskaya, who got her start with unwieldy 35mm cameras and trained for years to earn her place among the top ranks of professional documentary filmmakers. As director, producer, cinematographer and writer, Goldovskaya has made 32 documentary films and more than 100 TV programs for Russian, Austrian, French, German and American television. Her work has earned her a plethora of prizes and awards around the world.

Goldovskaya witnessed the transformation of her native Russia from the totalitarian Soviet Union to its present incarnation and was there to record history with her perceptive observational documentaries that reveal the grand themes inherent in small things. "You

can capture the big picture in a detail and work on the level of metaphor," she explains. Her film about author Vladimir Nabokov juxtaposes the image of a young boy's face with impoverished people begging, an affluent couple riding horses and a wealthy man driving away in his Mercedes. Goldovskaya uses her lens to create visual metaphors that give the viewer a sense of how people live and how place influences their lives. "Film is like poetry with sound and images," she maintains. "I use people's voices, not interviews. I'm conducting conversations, so my voice is present too, as well as ambient sounds, people on the street, radio and television and images to create film poetry."

Growing up in the Stalin era, Goldovskaya saw the perils of direct confrontation and how fear could intimidate artists. Her father, a respected academic at the renowned Moscow Film School and a friend of Lumière and Eisenstein, was arrested in 1938 and wrongly charged as part of an assassination plot against Stalin. After being tortured, but still refusing to sign a false confession, he was eventually released. But this fear was a constant cloud over all artists, including Goldovskaya.

Despite the omnipresence of the State, she grew up in a nurturing artistic environment, surrounded by actors, writers and filmmakers who either lived in the same apartment building in Moscow or vacationed in the same village. This social milieu included Dziga Vertov, Alexander Medvedkin, Roman Karmen and Eduard Tisse, Eisenstein's cameraman. "It was a contagion of art," she reflects. "You can't get away from that." This artistic crucible shaped her unique perspective on life and influenced her decision to attend the state film school, where she first tasted the "joys of documentary."

This came about while filming a festival for a class project. She writes in her book, *Woman with a Camera*, that watching how real people behave was a revelation. "What could possibly be better than a smile that is born before your very eyes? A person is talking about something and then smiles, his face becomes radiant, something wonderful is happening to him, and I manage to capture the moment. This is the joy a documentary filmmaker experiences when catching authentic feelings."

After graduation, she realized she didn't want to become a feature filmmaker but the official Documentary Film Studio was "a swamp" that only produced boring, cliché-ridden films. And besides, it was a male-dominated club that wouldn't embrace a woman cinematographer. Her father advised her to go into television, and she did.

She got in on the ground floor of an emerging emphasis on documentary production. Here she had access to the latest lightweight 16mm cameras and the opportunity to hone her craft as she worked on a steady stream of projects.

As her career advanced, her films started to be invited to festivals around the world, and American television outlets came calling. Goldovskaya first received international recognition for *Solovky Power* (1988), which was the first film to reveal the horrors of the Soviet concentration camps and the fact that the camps had been started by Lenin, rather than Stalin. The film premiered in the US at the 1989 Sundance Film Festival, where it earned a special jury prize—the first of many honors the film would receive.

By the time *perestroika* set in motion the changes that would upend the Soviet system, Goldovskaya was one of the most respected documentary filmmakers in the country and ready to bear witness to the tumult that followed. In 1990, she made *A Taste of Freedom* for Turner Network Television, which turned the spotlight on the effects of President Mikhail Gorbachev's transformation. This film featured two of her former students: noted Moscow journalist Sasha Politkovskaya and his wife, Anna, who would later be assassinated, in October 2006, allegedly for her coverage of the Chechen conflict and her criticism of President Vladimir Putin. The death of her friend and former student was "a very bad sign that a journalist could be killed. It's clear that things went down."

Goldovskaya had continued to meet with them and film them as part of an ongoing project that chronicles the changes that occurred in Russia over the 20 years since *perestroika*. "I captured the rise and fall of Russian democracy," she notes.

Goldovskaya is the first Russian filmmaker to employ "a personal diary style" in her documentaries. She used this approach in *The Shattered Mirror* (1992) and in *Lucky to Be Born in Russia* (1994), which chronicled the emotions of Russians living through the turmoil of *perestroika* that culminated in the *putsch* of August 1991.

Her other films include *The Children of Ivan Kuzmich* (1997), a poetic journey into the lives of eight amazing people and their Moscow School teacher in 1941; *A Poet on the Lower East Side* (1998), a visit with Allen Ginsberg; and *The Prince is Back* (1999), which takes us into the world of a Russian nobleman and his family as he attempts to reclaim his ancestral estate.

Goldovskaya has not only made a difference with her career, but she's been sharing her passion for this art form with students, having split her time between teaching and filmmaking for over 40 years. "My father told me that you have to work in two places, better three; then you can be independent," she explains. "It's a way to save yourself from the totalitarian state. If you didn't like the bosses, you could leave." While saving herself, she wrote six books on documentary film, wrote two dissertations and earned a PhD in fine arts from Moscow State Film Institute.

In 1995, after having taught documentary at Moscow State University for three decades, she was lured to the School of Theater, Film and Television at University of California, Los Angeles to head up its documentary program. UCLA Dean Robert Rosen, himself a Preservation and Scholarship Award honoree in 1992, met Goldovskaya when he was part of a delegation of scholars sent to Moscow to develop cultural relations between the two countries. He was struck by this "gracious, generous and articulate individual whose commitments and humanistic sensibilities came from the heart," he wrote in a foreword to *Woman with a Movie Camera*. He wanted her to come to California to "build our documentary program, to teach students and especially to serve as a role model for what it means to be an engaged filmmaker. In retrospect, I can't believe how profoundly lucky we are that this came to pass."

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Being in Los Angeles has given her the opportunity to encourage a new cadre of young American filmmakers to turn their lenses on the world and capture events and people before they disappear, just as she did when documenting the history in her native Russia. "It's so exciting to see your students and see all of the hope and promise," she exclaims.

Few are lucky to find their calling and do what they love, but it's even rarer when that combination produces work that changes how we see the world. "Being a documentary filmmaker saves you from the fear and doubts and allows you to do something meaningful," Goldovskaya notes. "I know for a fact that I am the luckiest woman in the world, with the best profession in the world."

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