



THE GIFT TO STALIN (*Podarok Stalinu*)

NORTH AMERICAN PREMIERE

Director Rustem Abdrashev, Kazakhstan/Russia/Israel/Poland, 2008, 97 min., Feature, Kazakh/Russian with subtitles, 35mm
Thursday, November 6, 9:00 pm, Coolidge Corner Theatre
Supported by: Action for Post-Soviet Jewry

Thursday, November 13, 6:30 pm, West Newton Cinema
Thursday, November 20, 7:00 pm, Arlington Capitol Theatre
Sponsored by: Beth El Temple Center, Belmont, Temple Emunah, Lexington and Temple Isaiah, Lexington
Essay by Maxim Shrayer

Growing up a *refusenik* in Moscow, I had a friend who jokingly referred to stocky, parchment-skinned Jews with high cheekbones and downsloping eyes as “Kazakh Jews.” Unlike its southern neighbors with their once populous communities of Bukharan Jews, Kazakhstan could only boast a small number of non-Ashkenazi Jews. A Soviet domain of forced exiles and labor camps, Kazakhstan received thousands of Jews in the 1930s and 1940s, alongside hundreds of thousands of victims of Stalinist repressions and wartime evacuation. Today’s independent Kazakhstan is home to about 10,000 Jews, mostly Ashkenazi. Extending for some 1600 miles from the Caspian Sea to Xingjian, Kazakhstan is larger than Western Europe, rich in resources and in cultural and religious traditions. In the recent years, Borat presented the Kazakhs as hordes of Jew-baiting nomads, obscuring their ancient heritage. The desire to create an anti-Borat film is not surprising.

In this lyrical film, set during the darkest years for Soviet Jewry, Kasym, a mighty Kazakh, saves a Jewish boy from Moscow. He gives Sasha Povzner a new name, Sabyr (“humble of heart,” of Arabic origin), while preserving the boy’s Jewish self. A Muslim, Kasym lives by tenets of religious and ethnic toleration. Through harmonizing references to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the film preaches universalism as a Kazakh message to the world. But this film is also an outgrowth of what was once a Soviet mythology of the brotherhood of nations. Soviet and post-Soviet subtexts feed the language of the director Rustem Abdrashov (b. 1970) and the seasoned Moscow screenwriter Pavel Finn (b. 1940). We note the spirit of the Kyrgyz novelist Chinghiz Aitmatov and his novel *The Day Lasts More than a Hundred Years* (1980); the film was shot in Saryozek, a town in southeastern Kazakhstan and a landmark in Aitmatov’s novel. We recall *The Confession of a Jew* (1994) by Aleksandr Melikhov, where an exiled Jewish boy grows up in Kazakhstan. Finally, to appreciate the film’s pedigree, one might revisit such post-Soviet films as *Little Angel*, *Bring Me Joy* (1992) by the Turkmen director Usman Saparov or *Barracks* (1999) by Valerii Ogorodnikov, the latter shown at this Festival in 2000.

Maxim D. Shrayer, author of *Waiting for America: A Story of Emigration*, received the 2007 National Jewish Book Prize in Eastern European Studies. He is Professor of Russian and English at Boston College.

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English subtitles can diminish the pleasure of recognition. The word “Odessa” is handwritten on the back of a tattered photo. A Russian translation — recited by the veteran Soviet actor Sergey Yursky — accompanies a reading of the Jewish prayer. The man who plays the adult Sasha is David Markish (b. 1938), a Russian-Israeli writer and son of Perets Markish. After his father was executed in 1952, David Markish and his family were deported to Kazakhstan. This experience informed D. Markish’s first novel, *Story Embellishment* (1970-71). D. Markish makes a double comeback: as himself visiting the places of his Kazakh exile, and as his character who memorializes his Kazakh “father” in Jerusalem and reads Kaddish over his grave in the Kazakh steppe.

Stalinism and the Cold War serve as a backdrop for this film. A secret military object stands in the environs of Kasym’s settlement. The first Soviet nuclear test was performed at a polygon outside Semipalatinsk in northeastern Kazakhstan on August 29, 1949. One wonders what would have befallen the Jewish boy had Kazym not sent him off on a train to find his Odessan relatives. There is wry irony in the film’s title. The real gift to Stalin is neither the nuclear test nor the gifts that millions of Soviet children crafted for Stalin’s 70th birthday. Rather, it’s the “gift” of the old Kazakh: saving a Jewish boy after the Shoah and in the midst of Stalin’s anti-Semitic paranoia.