

Miss GULAG Director FAQ's

1. How did this project form?

One night I came across a story on the Internet about a women's prison camp in Siberia where every year they hold a beauty pageant. Right away that caught my imagination, and I thought, that's really incredible, how amazing would that be to film? The surroundings must be really stark and grey and harsh and once a year they have this explosion of color. I wrote to them and asked if there were any pictures and started researching about where this prison was and if it was possible to gain access. I got two producers on board, Irina Vodar and Raphaela Neihausen, and we began really intense pre-production.

2. How did you get access? And what was that access like?

It wasn't easy. Our talented team of producers went through all the official channels, and mainly through their charm and persistence we were allowed to film at the camp. Initially, we were only allowed to film the beauty pageant and a day of interviews with the women. After some time filming we gained the trust of the administration and were given more access. It helped that we were considered a foreign entity. Access was still very restricted and we were watched and escorted always. At the end of filming, the whole team had to sign special waivers that we understood filming certain things was against the law and can be punished, (by what else?), imprisonment.

3. How long were you in Russia filming?

We were there for a month. It was a month straight through, both at the prison and in the countryside. We understood fairly quickly that this wasn't going to be an exposé on prison conditions and it wasn't going to be a human rights story, but it was going to be the personal story of our characters. Once we realized that and found our characters we knew that what we needed to do was to go and see where they were from and talk to their families and relatives. So we started this exploration of the villages and the suburbs that don't get a lot of attention in the international media.

4. How and why did you choose Yulia, Tatiana, and Natasha to be your main characters?

I had known about Tatiana as a character from the piece that inspired the film, and on the first day that we got there they told us she was having her parole hearing which we filmed. To see this incredibly vibrant and magnetic person literally shake in front of the judge was a duality that I knew would be fascinating to explore on film. What cinched it for Yulia is that there's something really sweet and nice and kind about her in contrast to Tatiana who was this fireball. You look at Yulia and you still see the little girl and it made me wonder how this little girl wound up in prison. The third character Natasha was a bit of a happy accident. She was living in Voskresenka, this village in the middle of nowhere, with her family, and we weren't sure that we'd ever be able to find her or that she'd want to recollect her past. Her story is the most complex and we knew that it would be a big challenge to bring it to the screen. She won us over not just because she was so vivid and powerful and creative, but because her spirit never broke, so we knew that we had to give her and her family a chance to tell their story on their own terms. My goal was to have a triptych – one woman who has gone through this prison experience and is already in freedom, one woman we're following who is possibly on the brink of her release and one woman who is stuck there. So we catch each one at a different point in their lives, but the experience as a whole is something they all go through.

5. Why did you make this film?

This story spoke to me on many levels – emotionally, intellectually, and visually. But mostly, it helped me to explore a question that has tormented me for many years – what would have happened to me if I hadn't left the Soviet Union as a child? What twists and turns would my life had taken if I lived through one of the most chaotic and exhilarating moments in history? Would I have turned to drugs and violence? And maybe today, would I be one of the young women on the stage at UF 91/9?

6. What were some of the challenges in making this film?

The access was limited and it was very difficult to shoot at the prison. We were constantly under surveillance and followed. There was not a dull moment. We were told in no uncertain terms that we were their "guests" and we would play by their rules. Indeed, there was an episode while we were filming the beauty pageant. I started to feel overwhelmed, so I stepped out of the auditorium to catch my breath for a moment. Right then, I was cornered by "the General" in charge and he "invited" me into his office for a cigarette. There commenced what can only be described as a gentle interrogation. One of my favorite questions was "Maria, do you love Russia?" - to which I replied, "Do you think I would be making this film if I didn't?" After I made it out of his office, I tried to ask that question of everyone I interviewed.

Gaining people's trust to open up was also a challenge, because this is a corner of the world that hasn't seen reality shows, or Oprah, or anything like that. They are not used to cameras and they are not used to baring their souls in front of strangers. There really isn't that tradition in Russia. There are some talk shows but it's only starting now, and it's in a Moscow studio. Nobody cries in front of the camera, nobody will tell you their life story. It just isn't done; it's considered bad manners to ask personal questions.

In the shooting and in the editing, I always wanted to be very sensitive to not objectifying the women. It is important to me to not exploit these women's femininity or sexuality. I wanted them to retain their beauty, inner and outer, on film, but I also wanted them to retain their dignity as much as possible. I didn't want them to feel like they were just machines or powerless inmates. Mainly, I just wanted them to feel like human beings during filming and that this humanity is respected in the editing and in the final film.

In general, it was a challenging shoot for a documentary, the way that we did this. Often filmmakers - and this is a wonderful way to make a film - have a story and follow it for years and years and have hundreds of hours of footage and get to really go deep or at least, try and go deep into the story. But with our film it's a little bit different. We set out to take a snapshot of people in a certain moment in time and space, and this piece of fabric of their lives is what you will see on the screen, that is **Miss GULAG**.