



# FAMILY PORTRAIT IN BLACK AND WHITE

Directed by Julia Ivanova

\*Official Selection, 2011 Sundance Film Festival

\*Winner, Best Canadian Feature Film, 2011 Hot Docs Film Festival

Opens July 13<sup>th</sup> in New York (AMC 25) with national release to follow

2011, 85 minutes, unrated,

In Russian with English subtitles

A First Pond Entertainment Release

Press site with hi-res images: <http://www.familyportraitthefilm.com/press>

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## **SYNOPSIS**

Olga Nenya has 27 children. Four of them, now adults, are her biological children; the other 23 are adopted or foster children. Of those 23, 16 are bi-racial. She calls them "my chocolates," and is raising them to be patriotic Ukrainians. Some residents of Sumy, Ukraine, consider Olga a saint, but many believe she is simply crazy.

An inheritance from the Soviet era, a stigma persists here against interracial relationships, and against children born as the result of romantic encounters between Ukrainian girls and exchange students from Africa. For more than a decade, Olga has been picking up the black babies left in Ukrainian orphanages and raising them together so that they may support and protect one another.

The filmmakers interview Neo-Nazis in Ukraine reveals the real dangers for a dark-skinned individual in the street. These white supremacist youth joke about their evening raids and how police seem to let them do it. Prosecutors are not particularly determined to give strict sentences to racially motivated crimes, and young thugs can get away with probation for beating someone nearly to death.

Olga sends her foster children to stay with host families in France and Italy in the summers and over Christmas, where they are cared for by charitable families who have committed to helping disadvantaged Ukrainian youth since the Chernobyl disaster. Olga's kids now speak different languages, and the older girls chat in fluent Italian with each other even while cooking a vat of borscht. But Olga doesn't believe in international adoption and has refused to sign adoption papers from host families that wanted to adopt her kids.

"At least when the kids grow up, they'll have a mother to blame for all the failures that will happen in their lives," she says.

## **ABOUT THE PRODUCTION**

Late August/September 2008: The filmmakers spent over two weeks with the family in the suburbs of Sumy, Ukraine, documenting the family's everyday life. They were fortunate enough to establish true friendship and trust with the children, which allowed them an insider view into family's dynamic and intimate moments.

August/September 2009: The filmmakers started filming in Italy, documenting Maxim with his Italian host family and filmed Anya and her Italian adoptive family. Back in Ukraine, they filmed the entire family, and documented the strained relationships between Olga and her children. They also joined Sashka on his escapades in Sumy and filmed Kiril living independently and going to university in Kiev.

June 2010: The filmmakers returned to Sumy for the last time and filmed the children who are now teenagers planning their futures. Olga is making an effort to accept the inevitable – that her children will leave her soon. "Even birds don't stay in the nest forever. They grow up and leave," she says. But at the same time, Olga is still refusing the adoption of any of the younger children by foreigners. The general spirit in the family is much more positive and loving than the year before. It seems that both Olga and the children have learned to be more patient and accepting of each other. The hardest part of this final trip was the testimonial by Andrey of how he was treated at the Mental Hospital for kids with behavioral problems. Without a mother present to protect him, the institution administered their version of a treatment that in North America can only be construed as torture.

## BIOGRAPHIES

### **Julia Ivanova – Director / Writer / Camera / Editor**



Julia Ivanova, a Canadian documentary film director and editor, grew up in Moscow and was trained at the Russian Film Institute (VGIK). After immigrating to Canada in 1995, Julia together with her brother Boris Ivanov self-produced their first documentary "From Russia, For Love" which has been televised in 26 countries. In the decade that followed Julia felt a deep commitment to making films that break individual and societal perceptions. She directed a number of intimate films on the topics of minorities, orphanhood and search for love. These films have been shown on PBS, Discovery, and various TV channels in Canada, Asia and Europe. Other titles include "Fatherhood Dreams" (2007) - a film about gay fathers and their children; "Love Translated" (2010) - a journey into the world of Dating Tours to Eastern Europe. Julia is actively involved with the work of the Documentary Organization of Canada, and she is a Board Member of Hot Docs Film Festival.

## **Boris Ivanov – Producer**



Boris Ivanov is Interfilm Production's producer in charge of development, production, and marketing for documentaries. His producing credits include the documentaries *Love Translated*, *True Love or Marriage Fraud? The Price of Heartache*, *Fatherhood Dreams*, *From Russia, For Love* and *Moscow Freestyle*. Other credits include his work as director/producer for CBS/History Channel's *Beyond Top Secret*, Investigation Discovery's series *Deranged* (2008), WeTV's *Secret Lives of Women* (2008), a special on *Jaycee Duggard: Kidnapped for 18 years* for TLC (2009) and two specials for TLC *Natalie Holloway: Lost in Paradise* and *TV Murders* (2010).

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

### WHY IS OLGA A FIGHTER?

Olga is sacrificing her life to raise her children. Olga does not even have a social worker who would take over for even one hour per week, no psychologist to deal with the issues many of her children have and no tutor to help them with homework. Ukrainian authorities provide Olga with a tiny fraction of what the government gives to orphanages per child. In fact, because the house was bought for Olga by a British charity, local authorities refuse to spend a penny on fixing the heating system, building an in-house toilet or bringing hot water into the house. Instead they send Child Welfare Inspectors. The unhelpful inspectors walk through the house and demand better conditions to be provided to the foster children by Olga. It's an Orwellian picture - an absurd injustice where bureaucrats don't help the family and blame Olga for all shortcomings. The local authorities threaten to "downsize" her family and to send half of the children who have been with her for 10-14 years to orphanages. No one will consult with the children because orphans have no say in any decision that permanently affects their lives. The chilling consequences of a pending separation from Olga and each other becomes clear when Olga travels to visit her troubled foster child Andrey, who was placed at a boarding school for children with special needs.

SERGEY, 14, joined the family just a few years ago, and he can easily compare Olga to his previous foster mother. His testimonial raises an alarming question about foster care in Ukraine. In its desire to eliminate orphanages, the government allows pretty much anyone to provide foster care, including people with greed in their heart instead of compassion.

### DO WESTERNERS HELP OLGA AND HER FOSTER CHILDREN?

The modern world is interconnected. A British Charity bought the house for the family, and the children spend summers with host families in France and Italy year after year. Many European families have chosen to help Ukrainian disadvantaged kids since the time of the Chernobyl disaster by inviting them to stay during their summers and Christmas. Many of Olga's kids can speak different languages; the older girls often chat in fluent Italian with each other even while cooking a vat of borscht.

### WHY IS ADOPTION NOT AN OPTION?

Many of these host families have wanted to adopt Olga's foster children but face Olga's resentment. Though Olga has arranged the summer stays for her kids in Europe, she doesn't believe in international adoption and has refused to sign the adoption consent papers. Like many Ukrainians, she believes in patriotic feelings and love to the Motherland even when the love is unrequited. Also, she feels the children already have a family – her family.

During the filming, Anya, the oldest girl in the family, was finally adopted by her host family in Italy where she had been spending her summers for the last 13 years. Neither Olga, nor the Ukrainian authorities had a say in this adoption any more because Anya is 18 and legally an adult.

#### BLACK CHILDREN IN UKRAINE – ARE THEY ADOPTED FROM AFRICA?

All kids were born and raised in Ukraine. Their birth mothers are unwed Ukrainian girls while their fathers, in most cases, are students from Africa who came to Ukraine to study at universities and medical schools. Despite the fact that these kids see themselves as 100% Ukrainian and they don't know any other culture, they are seen as "different" by the world around them. As one neighbor points out, "mixing blood types is deadly, and here we have children that are born that way!" Does such attitude affect the way Olga Nemya's foster children feel and behave? It sure does, but not in the way one would expect. No one carries race-related complexes in this household. It was Olga's idea – to raise many mixed-race children together so that they could support and protect each another.

#### WHO ARE THE CHILDREN IN THE FILM?

The lessons the kids learn very early in life are: "stick together and fight" and "life is not fair." Is Olga always fair to them? By no means! Olga is not Mother Teresa; she bears much closer resemblance to a wartime commander or a platoon leader. Some kids have learned to manipulate her, some obey, and only one constantly battles with her.

KIRIL, a 16-year-old boy nicknamed "Mr. President" for his intelligence, work ethic, and effortless aristocracy, is the only one who dares to openly argue with Olga. He has a clear vision of the future he wants for himself but when it doesn't coincide with Olga's vision, the clash has everlasting consequences not only for him but also for the whole family.

ROMAN, 13, never argues but stubbornly breaks the rules if anything stands in the way of his true passion – soccer. Being in charge of the numerous goats in the household, he has little time left and little support in achieving his dream, which is to become a professional soccer player. When his biological father appears in the picture, it makes his life even more complicated.

SASHKA, 14, one of Olga's favorites, is a charming candidate for a school dropout and the leader of local rebels. Sashka loves and adores his foster mom – Olga. He is bitter that local authorities have little understanding of the scale of Olga's altruism and love for her foster children. His story starts with him being a proud Ukrainian, but two years later he is determined to leave the country because of the rampant racism in Ukraine.

SYLVIA, 13, is a beautiful, shy, obedient girl, who plays violin and whose parents were both students from Egypt. Sylvia is lucky to have at least some information

about her parents – most of Olga's children were left at the orphanages at birth and don't even know the first name of their birth mother or father.

ANYA, 18, is a quiet older girl who is in charge of cooking for the whole family everyday. Anya, unlike all the other kids in the family, is finally being adopted by the Italian family with whom she has been spending summers and Christmas since she was seven years old. Anya believes she has two mothers – Olga and Barbara, her Italian host. Olga finds it difficult to cope with Anya's adoption because, for Olga, it simply feels as if Anya has betrayed her.

ANDREY, 11, is a quick-tempered boy who authorities have sent to a boarding school for children with special needs. His story is the most tragic – by the end of the film he is visibly damaged by the torture he suffered at the Psychiatric Hospital where he was sent for treatment.

MAXIM, 9, is a sweet boy who just can't learn to read. In Ukraine, authorities do not recognize dyslexia as a genuine condition so there is a threat that Maxim might end up in the same boarding school for children with special needs as his foster brother Andrey. Maxim has a loving and devoted host family in Italy, and his love to "papa Sandro" and "grandpa Franco" is obvious. For Sandro and Franco this little boy from Ukraine is their son and grandson, the centre of their lives. However the government will not allow the adoption of a Ukrainian orphan by Sandro, a single man.



## **CREDITS**

Director / Writer / Cinematography / Editor

JULIA IVANOVA

Producer

BORIS IVANOV

Associate Producer

MIKE JACKSON

Camera

STANISLAV SHAKHOV

Original Music

BORIS SICHON

Vocals

RIVKA SICHON

BORIS SICHON

Additional Songs

“Mama”

Written and Performed by BASTA

Courtesy of GazGolder-Record

“Mama for baby Mammoth”

Written by Dina Nepomniashaya

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Ukrainian Skinhead Footage

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