

EX NIHILO & GOGOGO FILMS
PRESENT



GOLDA MARIA

A FILM BY PATRICK & HUGO SOBELMAN

2020 – FRANCE – DOCUMENTARY – FRENCH – 115'

SYNOPSIS

Golda Maria is a holocaust survivor and a beloved mother and grandmother whose past is shrouded in mystery.

Born in 1910 in a Jewish family in Poland, raised in 1920's Berlin, she has to flee to Paris in 1933 and run again to the free zone during the war, where she is separated from her husband and daughter. In May 1944, just a few days before the Normandy landing, she is arrested and deported with her young son. After 12 months in the horror of the camps, she comes back to Paris, without her son but with a life to resume. And a family to love.

In 1994, film producer Patrick Sobelman recorded his grandmother's story. Over two decades later, along with his son Hugo, they will shape Golda's story into a loving portrait which not only uncovers family secrets but which is also a universal testimony from a courageous and spirited woman.

INTERVIEW WITH PATRICK & HUGO SOBELMAN

In 1994, what made you decide to interview your grandmother Maria about her memories of the Shoah?

Patrick Sobelman: In 1992 I produced a television documentary, *Premier Convoi* (directed by Pierre Oscar Lévy) that traced the first convoy of French Jews deported from Drancy to Auschwitz on March 27, 1942. That film really changed me. Subconsciously, it plunged me into my own family's history. I thought, "*We've spent all this time on these twelve survivors, so why don't I interview my grandmother?*" In the meantime, my sons Hugo and Théo had been born. I knew they wouldn't know Maria for long, and she had a story to tell. The idea was to save the footage to show them one day. I was very close to her, so interviewing her seemed like a breeze. It just felt very natural. The footage was recorded over three days, with a little personal camera, in rudimentary conditions. Over the years, I kept copying them onto new formats to make sure they'd survive. It's become an obsession.

What made you want to make a film 25 years later?

Patrick Sobelman: My wife went to Poland, to Auschwitz... When she came back, she convinced me that I needed to put together my grandmother's story. I figured she was right. For the editing, I immediately thought of my son Hugo, who is a director; the film needed to be a family project.

Hugo Sobelman: Patrick initially came to me with the idea of creating an archive film for the family that we might also give to the Mémorial de la Shoah. But as we progressed, we saw something more powerful. Though most of the footage is minimal, my father had shot some close-ups at the end that conveyed so much more than what I'd seen up to that point. We added music that Maria loved and grew very emotional. That's when we decided to take the project further.

The film gives Maria plenty of space to express herself, and she navigates freely between anecdotal and universal. How did you approach the editing?

H. S.: We had between 9 and 10 hours of raw footage. The biggest job was determining what should be in the film and what concerned only the family. Maria covers a lot of subjects. Some of them are purely private, like her relationships with her daughter, her grandchildren and her husband... We do linger on a few details that may seem trivial, but they reveal so much about her personality! We knew the audience would need to get acquainted with her - the student she was in Germany, her attachment to France, her indifference to marriage when she met Pierre - even if that meant the film would take its time. It's a gamble! You need to know her to understand her emotions.

Hugo, what did you know about your grandmother and her story before you saw the footage?

H. S.: I was 22 when she died, so I knew her very well. I would have lunch at her place on Wednesdays, and I'm very close to her daughter - my grandmother.

P. S.: She was the guardian of the family temple! Her apartment was a rallying point.

H. S.: But I never asked her about her past when she was alive. I asked my father and my grandmother a few questions, but 90% of what she reveals in the film was new to me. My memory of her was sitting on the sofa together watching VHS tapes of Platini and eating candy. That's how I remember the room we see in the film. The film revealed a whole other part of her life to me.

In the film, we gather that Maria hadn't spoken much about her memories of the Shoah before these three days of interviews. How do you explain that?

P. S.: She says she didn't talk about it after the Liberation because it wasn't audible. She thought no one would believe her. And you had to live. If you're talking about the past, you're not living in the present. In the film Maria says, "*Now, I'm talking*" because she knows she will soon die and it's crucial to speak out, for history and humanity. But when you return from hell at the age of 35, I can imagine it's impossible to talk about it.

How did you get the dialogue flowing?

P. S.: It was easy, because I think she really wanted to talk. She was ready and waiting. The first two days she even dressed to the nines in a suit and pearls! I hadn't prepared anything; I let her guide me. I had only one question in my mind: "*We're in 1945, you're 35, you just lost your son and a number of other family members, you've come back from absolute hell. How do you find the strength to go on living?*" I was obsessed with getting the answer to that question, but in order to do it, I knew I'd have to start with: "*When and where were you born?*" When I see the film today, I feel like I let a lot of things go by without following up on them!

H. S.: I think that naïveté is what gives the film its charm. That's what moved me the most, and that's why we decided to keep Patrick's voice in the final edit.

Maria is very attached to France, to the point of risking her life to stay there. How do you explain that?

H. S.: She explains it herself, first through her love of literature, which she discovered in Germany, and then through the freedom France represented after she'd fled Poland and Germany. She was educated in Germany, but her life truly began in France, where she met her husband and had her children.

P. S.: In *Idiss*, a book about his grandmother, Robert Badinter describes how, up until very recently, Central European emigrants idealized France. It was the land of revolution, human rights, universal values. Maria really believed in that. When she and her family fled the pogroms, France was a welcoming land with the right of asylum.

The sobriety with which you film Maria evokes the work of Claude Lanzmann. Did he influence you?

P. S.: I was very struck by *Shoah*, and perhaps even more so by another extraordinary Lanzmann film, *Sobibor, October 14, 1943, 4 p.m.*, in which a man tells how, at the age of 19, he killed a German to save his hide. It's a static shot of an old man talking, and it's the greatest thriller I've ever seen. But to say was channeling Lanzmann when I filmed my grandmother would be a lie! However, I'm of a generation who believes that Lanzmann's approach, his obsession with documenting the past down to the minutest of details, is the only way to go.

Though you included a few archive images, the bulk of the film is Maria facing the camera telling her story. Was it essential to stay on her as much as possible?

H. S.: Yes. We didn't want to illustrate her life, we wanted to follow what was happening inside her. It was generally far more interesting to hold her gaze. But when she evokes her feelings about France at the end of the First World War, I needed to illustrate that, because those were images she had in her mind. And I used quite joyful music when she talks about going to get her visa and narrowly escaping sexual assault, because she tells the story with such lightness, as though it were a youthful misadventure, and I wanted to reflect that sentiment.

P. S.: We were also surprised to find ourselves looking at her almost more than listening, or listening all the more closely *because* we're looking at her. People say they notice her hands, her face, her coquetry when she adjusts her skirt, the way she leans forward and back again after saying something important... She's directing herself! And we needed to embrace the film's slow pace, the long static shots, the dicey quality of the sound and image. Those elements are all part of the film's DNA. You mustn't deviate from that.

Where does the film's music come from?

P. S.: Early on we knew we should use klezmer, the music of her childhood. We share a passion for Giora Feidman, a klezmer clarinetist from Argentina. He's a great musician. We selected pieces from his body of work.

H. S.: The music was decisive. I spent a week trying out a variety of styles. Then *My Yiddische Mama* (a traditional Ashkenazy folk song) sprang to mind. Over the ending credits, my little brother Noé plays the tune on clarinet in homage to Maria. The music breathes air into the heaviness of my great-grandmother's story.

We see only Maria on screen until you reveal Pierre, her husband, sitting next to her. What does his appearance in the film mean to you?

P. S.: It's quite possibly the moment that moves me the most. My grandfather wasn't talking much anymore at that point. He was very ill and, as we indicate in the film, he died 6 months after the shoot. I didn't ask him to sit next to his wife and listen to her, but he did, for the whole 3 days. When he appears at the end, he says nothing. He simply retreats into the shadows, shielding his face from the blinding sunlight coming in through the window. I find that image so incredible. It sums up his entire life. He lived with a survivor of the camps. His personal story is nonexistent in comparison. The war as he experienced it, despite all the things he did, simply doesn't exist, because Maria's war takes up all the space. That's what his appearance in the film means to me, and it moves me all the more because I adored my grandfather. He was extremely generous, and helped me when I was starting out as a producer.

What does the idea of transmission mean to you, Patrick, as a producer and a father? And to you, Hugo, as a young man of thirty?

P. S.: Transmission is my main motivation these days, probably because I'm 63. Passing along to my children and my students some of what I've received. I'm blessed with a wonderful life, wonderful parents, a fulfilling career and my fantastic kids Hugo, Théo, Émile and Noé. This film brings all those things together.

H. S.: I feel like this film is a logical extension of my relationship with my father. Imagining the film and watching it take shape together has been like an ongoing masterclass. Especially with subject matter that has such a powerful emotional pull for both of us.

Indeed, you end the film with a sort of family tree of the children who have been born since. What does that signify?

P. S.: That was 100% Hugo's idea!

H. S.: It was also linked to Maria's emotion at the end, when she says, "*There is no life without the love of children.*" She had another child after the Liberation, in 1948. And there's this beautiful moment when she tells us that whenever she would see children, she would give them candy. Life continued, and it continued joyously. What a victory! What sweet revenge on the hell she went through! Without Maria, none of the descendants in the film would have existed. We're paying tribute to her spirit when we end the film on life, because the film is about life, not death. That's the essence of what she's saying.

P. S.: Otherwise we would have finished the film on her story about refusing compensation for the loss of her son. She says you can't put a price on a child, which is very moving, but also extremely heavy. Hugo's idea was wonderful.

How do you think Maria would have felt about her story becoming a film for the cinema?

H. S.: Her daughter - my grandmother - fondly refers to her as a star. She behaved like a star, so she probably wouldn't have been surprised to see herself on the big screen, whereas for us, it's a real trip! I think she would have been flattered and happy.

What is the importance of showing this film today?

P. S.: On Saturday, January 25th - the 75th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz - the front page of (French newspaper) *Libération* read: "*If you get out, you must tell your story...*" If this film has a resonance, it is for those who know nothing of the story. If we raise awareness in even a few of the 34% of young people who say they know nothing about the Shoah, then stories like Maria's can make humanity better. A wild hope, no doubt, but a worthy one. Also, I think it's important to know your roots. The best compliments I've received about the film are: "*Why didn't I film my grandmother?*" or "*I should film my grandmother!*" We tend to let our elders rot in rest homes these days. It's atrocious! In African cultures, for example, old people are wise. They sit under a tree and tell their stories. They teach us.

H. S.: Maria was driven out of her homeland and her first host country. When we show the film, I can't help thinking of today's migrants, uprooted and desperately hoping to find a place of welcome where they can feel at home. Up to the age of 40, Maria fled from country to country and was never at peace. If that doesn't speak to the today's situation, I don't know what does!

Interview conducted in January 2020 by David Ezan for TROISCOULEURS

ABOUT THE FILM, BY ANNETTE WIEVIORKA

She is seated. Blue hues - the sofa, her clothing, her eyes, the reflections in her white hair - attest to the serenity of this dignified and elegant old lady. She speaks. The camera films her face and hands. On rare occasions, a family photo or an archive image illustrates her story.

Maria-Golda, born Jewish in Poland in 1910, is telling a story we've already heard, a story we know. Immigration to Germany, Dantzig, Berlin. Hitler's rise to power. Flight to France. Difficult living conditions for refugees. The start of the persecutions. Nomadism to avoid arrest. Marseille, La Bourboule, Clermont-Ferrand. Arrest and deportation. Drancy, Birkenau, Bergen-Belsen, Raghun. The liberation of Theresienstadt. The return home.

And yet her story is unique, because it relates what we never hear, or only rarely. Maria is talking not to an anonymous journalist but to her grandson Patrick, in the intimacy of a conversation that is also a quest for her truth. "Something's opening up. My brain is opening up, something is opening in my brain." The very mechanisms of memory are on display, in a language always seeking the right words, with perfect diction and an accent bearing traces of Yiddish. An accent we no longer hear in our cities, from a language she claims to despise (proudly: "I spoke German.")

Her story is part of history. An immigrant in distress meets a woman she will go on to love very much, who becomes her mother-in-law when she marries her son. The pure and lasting joy of the birth of her daughter Simone, who she entrusts to her husband in 1942 to help him pass into Switzerland while she remains in France, hoping to experience a liberation on par with the celebrations of November 11, 1918. Secretly pregnant at the time, she aborts on her own, nearly dies and has to be hospitalized. Then she tries in vain to get into Switzerland herself and is arrested. Arriving in Birkenau, disoriented, she hands over her three-and-a-half-year-old son Robert to her mother-in-law, who'd been arrested along with her.

How does a mother go on living after such a tragedy? It's a question we all ponder, and dare not ponder. Maria answers it. Throughout her life, she carried the image of Robert inside her, never forgetting. She saw him in every child she gazed at tenderly, probably even Gérard, her second son, born after the war. And yet, she strongly states and demonstrates that she was happy, that her children and grandchildren brought her happiness. We are far from the stereotype which has immersed in recent years, with so many survivors asserting that they never got out of Auschwitz.

The last images of the film show the family on a seaside holiday. The blue hues expand to encompass the immensity of the ocean, and of the future, which will be a future of memory when there are no longer any survivors among us. They illuminate a path of transmission, from Maria to her grandson Patrick and her great-grandson Hugo, to whom we owe this film. And now, to all of us.

Annette Wieviorka, born in Paris on January 10, 1948, is a renown historian and specialist of the Holocaust.

DIRECTORS' BIOGRAPHIES

PATRICK SOBELMAN

Patrick Sobelman is a French producer, born in 1956 in Paris. He co-founded the production company Ex Nihilo in 1984 and has been a partner in AGAT Films & Cie since 1993. He has produced more than fifty films, many of which have been selected in prestigious festivals, such as *The Summer House* by Valeria Bruni Tedeschi (Venice 2018) or *The Together Project* by Sólveig Anspach (Cannes 2016 Directors' Fortnight - SACD Prize).

Golda Maria is his first film as a director.

HUGO SOBELMAN

Born in 1988, Hugo Sobelman started his career as a production assistant, and then worked as assistant director on films such as *Queen of Montreuil* by Sólveig Anspach (Venice Days 2012). In 2012, he began directing music videos for bands such as Mayra & Mr.Mow for the independent label X-RAY Production. *Golda Maria* is his first film. His second documentary, *Soul Kids*, is currently in post-production

CREW

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Produced by	Muriel Meynard and Carine Ruzniewski
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