

Interview: Director Gabe Polsky on Superb Documentary 'Red Army'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on February 3, 2015 - 3:49pm

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CHICAGO – Every red-blooded American has been told the story of the “Miracle on Ice,” the 1980 Winter Olympic upset of the mighty Soviet Union hockey team by Team USA. But who were the Soviet players? Why were they the best in the world? Director Gabe Polsky explores these questions in the documentary “Red Army.”

What makes “Red Army” such an exceptional film is the morality of it. The Soviet hockey team was playing for more in virtually every category. They had more pride, more skill, more strategy, more love-of-nationalism and more focus than any other team in the world. The story of these “mores” is magnificently told by Gabe Polsky, a filmmaker whose parents emigrated from Russia. The story also, interestingly enough, tells of the collapse of the Soviet Union, and what that meant for those hockey players, who were now stuck in a different performance mode and world.



Part of the Soviet Union Hockey Team in 'Red Army'

Photo credit: Sony Pictures Classics

Gabe Polsky talked with HollywoodChicago.com for the second time – [he and his brother Alan was also at](#) [20] the Chicago International Film Festival for their narrative film, “The Motel Life,” in 2012. The passion that Polsky had for his current documentary subject is heartfelt, and comes through in every frame of the story.

HollywoodChicago.com: What struck me initially about the film is that it’s the antithesis of everything we think about the ‘Miracle on Ice’ in

1980, because it gives us the source of the Soviet hockey dominance. What event or circumstance triggered your interest in the story?

Gabe Polsky: Well, my parents are from the Ukraine, and I grew up eating Russian food and speaking the language, but I assimilated quickly when I realized in the 1980s it wasn’t cool to be Russian. [laughs] I was a competitive hockey player at Yale, and wanted to be a professional. So that was my life in hockey, and I studied it. I got a grainy VHS tape in the 1980s that highlighted the Soviet team, and it was the greatest hockey ever played to that time – it makes today’s hockey look amateurish.

It was a creative revolution in sport, and it blew me off my feet. For the first time, I was able to see it as almost an art form, a religious experience, to what them play. That was the beginning of my curiosity regarding their story. It also became about my own background, as a Russian and a hockey player. I just loved how they played.

HollywoodChicago.com: So how did it come back to you as a filmmaker?

Polsky: I was a political science major in college, and that’s where I began my research on the roots of the team. It was a window into a much bigger story about the Soviet Union and their people. It’s about the Soviet system and Soviet experience, and I just used hockey to tell that story. It’s also about friendship and betrayal, culture clashes, and Russia’s relationship to the West. It became this story that was human and relatable.

HollywoodChicago.com: How much of your Russian roots were transplanted and then implanted into the film?

Polsky: When I screened it at the Moscow Film Festival, there was three thousand people there, the Minister of Culture and many famous Russian people. I was terrified, because I thought if they don’t like it, I’m a failure. because it’s basically about them. But it was well received and got a standing ovation, and everybody was deeply appreciative. One person remarked that it was unbelievable that someone who hadn’t grown up in Russia was able to tell this story. In a way, they were ashamed that they hadn’t told the story.

But part of the reason for doing it was my parents, and their experience just came out through me when I made the film. Their people, their friends, the language – you can’t describe what the Russian soul is, you either get it or you don’t.

HollywoodChicago.com: Another element that was impressive is that it shattered the barrier between the Communist-bad perception of the Cold War era, towards more of the reality of their pride and nationalism. What do you feel can never be duplicated today within the inherent pride of the Cold Warrior hockey era?

Polsky: The guy that created the Soviet hockey system from scratch was Anatoli Tarasov. He was a philosopher, visionary and creative thinker who came up with a whole new idea of the sport of hockey. He grabbed things from the culture, and the political collectivism that was prominent in the Soviet Union. All this stuff goes into the Soviet hockey school.

Ideologically as well, the individual was limited in Soviet culture. Each player was assigned a specific role and kept in that box. If you didn’t do that role, you were done. The players were isolated from society, they bonded profoundly and simply spent a lot of time together. That is what creates great performance.

HollywoodChicago.com: So, what can the sport of hockey learn from your documentary?

Polsky: The general North American culture of hockey is centered around an aggressive and systematically dull defensive method. There needs to be more life in the game, but also you need the visionaries like Tarasov, a guy who can put the right people together and foster their creativity. There needs to be an evolution of the game, and it starts with creativity and vision. We need those thinkers.

HollywoodChicago.com: The personality of Slava Fetisov often bristled under your questioning. What do you think makes his sensibility more pragmatic than your over-analytical American filmmaker persona?



Director Gabe Polsky in Chicago, January 16th, 2015

Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

Polsky: He is very skeptical. Americans always want him to say a certain thing, always something in mind that necessarily isn't him. He wants to be the boss of the interview. We always come to stories with our own baggage, but there is always another way to look at it.

HollywoodChicago.com: You've had a pretty long relationship with co-producers Jerry Weintraub and Werner Herzog, which seem an odd pair to produce together. How did they add to your experience with making the film?

Polsky: Werner was one of the first people to get on board, and tell me I had something special. He understood it immediately. Having him, and Jerry, who are titans in their own way, really gave me a lot of confidence. It showed that the film was both commercial and had a soul.

HollywoodChicago.com: I found several projects that you are 'currently working on' in my research, but the most intriguing to me is Mikhail Bulgakov's 'The Master and Margarita.' What is the status of that potential production and others like 'Going After Cacciato' and the remake of the 1960s film 'Charlie,' also known as 'Flowers for Algernon'?

Polsky: Probably first is 'Cacciato,' because the script is nearly done. 'The Master and Margarita' is under our development but we don't control it. 'Flowers for Algernon' is still attached to Will Smith, so we're just keeping it rolling.

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you think was released from your own immigrant soul, through this stirring indulgence of the competition soul of Mother Russia and how their people are connected to it?

Polsky: Because documentary filmmaking is so hands-on, every piece of archival footage, every edit and even music, it all was my choice and taste. I was working with other people, but ultimately it was about me. Every decision was a piece of my soul in a way, and I was trying to connect and relate those pieces to my colleagues on the film – even the hockey. That's what I wanted to put into it, and I want the audience to feel that and enjoy the film.

"Red Army" continues its U.S. release in Chicago on February 6th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Written and directed by Gabe Polsky. Rated "PG"



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Source URL (retrieved on **Apr 19 2024 - 1:59am**):

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