

## Interview with Anna Kryvenko



By Karin Schiefer  
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***My Unknown Soldier* is a film in continuous movement between a personal search for a family member and a universal reflection on war and history. I was wondering what might have been the triggering moment with this film project: was it the search for an unknown member of your family or the fundamental change of perspective in your life when you moved from Kiev to Prague?**

**ANNA KRYVENKO:** I think both aspects have played an important role. First of all, it was this unknown person cut out of several pictures that I found in one of our old family albums. One thing might be important: I didn't go to Prague to spend a year abroad; I've been living there for eight years now. Before that I studied theatre directing in Kiev, then in Prague, and when I got my diploma I was not that sure whether this was the artistic field I wanted to work in. One summer while visiting my family back in Ukraine I discovered a family album with several pictures that had one person cut out. When I asked my mother who this missing person was, her immediate reaction was that she had no idea. Only after weeks or months did she remember that it was my great-uncle. Another reason that drove me to this film project was the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. I wanted to raise awareness of the fact that the parties involved in a war should never be considered either black or white – good Ukraine, bad Russia, good Czechoslovakia, bad Soviet Union. It doesn't work like that. We can talk about a political situation, the claims of a government or a dictator, but as a soldier you're only a tool, never considered as an individual. One crucial thing was that during the war in Ukraine (unfortunately it is cut out of the final version of the film) there was a section that showed the mothers of Russian soldiers who knew their sons were dead but didn't know where they were buried. I was angry that this kind of armed conflict could happen in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and I think it's a fundamental right to know where the grave of your loved ones is; nobody deserves to end up as an unknown soldier, wherever he comes from.



Still from "My Unknown Soldier"

**How did you find out that Prague, the city you chose for your studies, had a strong connection to your family history?**

**AK:** My mother started to remember that the man who had been cut out must have been my great-uncle who was part of the Russian army that entered Prague in August 1968. I don't believe in fate, but there are incredible coincidences. The Czech Republic was also the first destination abroad when we went on vacation with my father in the late 1990s. The Czech Republic represented Europe for me, the wonderful western world while we were going through a really cruel situation in Ukraine back at that time. There's no rational explanation as to why I chose Prague as the city where I wanted to study.

**Your film is based on a huge amount of research in archives. What questions and archive material did you take as your starting point? Where did the journey eventually take you?**

**AK:** *My Unknown Soldier* is my first long feature film. I am studying at the film faculty, though my department focuses on new media and visual arts in general. My third year coincided with the uprising and bloody incidents in Maidan. The only thing I could do from Prague was watch the news on the internet. I then recycled news material for my first work, while my second one was a sort of a collage on war without a hero, without narration. In the beginning I thought *My Unknown Soldier*, my third film, would be rather similar. During the research phase I have a very intuitive working method; I take what I like, edit it in my head and do not think about structure. I was very much touched by footage from a Belgian archive where the soldiers looked so young and vulnerable, like kids, unaware what they were doing at war.

**While watching all those faces did you bear the idea in mind that one of them might be your great-uncle?**

**AK:** Interestingly, I didn't think about it consciously. It was only later that I became aware of it, that it must have driven me subconsciously, when somebody to whom I showed the pictures mentioned the possibility that one of the guys on the tanks could be him. I don't know why this wasn't obvious to me from the very beginning.



*Still from "My Unknown Soldier"*

**Where did you find the footage you use in your film?**

**AK:** I found my first pictures online, they were obviously shot in Prague, and I used them in the trailer for the Archidoc workshop where I pitched my project at Nyon. A Belgian journalist recognised the pictures as part of their archives, and eventually we got more material from this Belgian television archive, including all those amazing shots of faces. I did comprehensive research on the Czech and Slovak television archives, at the Film Institutes, and we have some footage from an American archive which I found on the internet. A year ago I spent a week in the National Film Archive of Moscow, where I found the Soviet propaganda footage. Altogether I'd say I spent two years on the archive material. It was not only a question of filtering the pictures; we also needed to clear the rights. Since this is only a school film (not yet my graduation film) the budget was tight, and we also needed time to find the financing.

**The essence of *My Unknown Soldier* unfolds between the poles of strong oppositions: you use on the one hand the means of private historiography, such as diaries, amateur footage, family albums, on the other hand those of official historiography, such as propaganda film footage and texts, the wording of the oath the soldiers had to make when joining the army. What were your thoughts about building the structure on this contrast?**

**AK:** It was important for me to seize the atmosphere and to understand the soldiers. I could have tried to find a hero and interview him. I wanted to delve into this atmosphere of 1968, barely 20 years after WW2: young men, maybe 19/20 years old, the first generation after the war. It must have been important for those young men to serve as soldiers, just as their fathers and grandfathers had done before. Under the influence of the Soviet propaganda they certainly thought they were helping the Czech people. Maybe they only realised once they were confronted with the people yelling in the streets of Prague that they had been sent to a military conflict.

**You have assembled archive material from 1968 and 1945, and while working on this project you were also surprised by what happened in Ukraine. *My Unknown Soldier* strikes an interesting balance between looking at history from a certain distance and the very close confrontation with political actuality. Did you intend to make us realise that the present is also history, that we are part of history?**

**AK:** I did not want to suggest any parallel between Prague 1968 and the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Political circumstances are always different. What happens to people inside this situation, however, is more or less the same: suffering is the same, death is the same. That's something I wanted to show on different levels. The events in Maidan made me perceive something that may sound banal. We always believe that war is something that occurs far away from us. As intellectuals we read and reflect a lot on the situation in Ukraine, we allow ourselves to judge what might be best for the country – what really shocked me about myself was the fact that I had a strong feeling of hatred for Russia, for somebody only because he was from this country. I was overwhelmed by this strong emotion despite all my intellectual reflections.



*Still from "My Unknown Soldier"*

**The film opens with pictures of a forest in the dark and a spotlight on it, as if somebody is being pursued by the police. There are other sequences that introduce a fictional aspect to your documentary essay. Why is that?**

**AK:** It was important to me to find a place for my great-uncle that goes beyond a picture. At the end of my research I didn't have much more information about him. My film is not a detective story that eventually unearths a solution, an answer. In the end, it's like in normal life. There's a hole in the beginning, and there's a hole in the end. Somehow I wanted to find his grave, find his name. I wanted to imagine his inner self and try to imagine in a metaphorical and poetical way what had happened to him. I saw him as a sort of inner deserter. Maybe his only wish was to come back home, back to his family, and to re-experience his last memories of happiness, of vacations by the sea. That's why I wanted the film to end with these images, and to imagine he is free and happy.

**You use a whole range of different elements – official archive footage, home movies, fictional sequences, old photographs and new, experimental ones, voices, texts ... What were the challenges and the questions you and your editor Daria Chernyak were confronted with during the editing process?**

**AK:** One of the most difficult questions was to find the appropriate place for myself in the film. I didn't want to be visible in the film. It was not a film about me. After long months of editing we came to the conclusion that I needed to be part of the film. I agreed on a very short moment, but then we realised it had to be bigger. We wondered whether it should be the diaries or my narration. It had to fit in this succession of official and unofficial elements. It was a very long process for me, and surprisingly, it has turned out to be a film that has a lot to do with me: I talk about family stories, my relationship with my parents, my relationship with my friends, I show my personal space in Prague etc. Resolving this question was much more complicated for me than selecting the archive material.