

INTERVIEW WITH TATIA SKHIRTLDZE AND ANNA KHAZARADZE



DIRECTORS OF "THE ENCOUNTER"
A DOCUMENTARY SUPPORTED BY
EURIMAGES

MARCH 2019

BY SARAH HURTES



Georgian filmmakers Tatia Skhirtladze and Anna Khazaradze (producer, 1991 productions) teamed up for the first time to make "The Encounter", a documentary about winning and losing on the chessboard and in life, and about rebelling against a powerful male system. Meeting again after almost 30 years, the documentary features the four native Georgian female players – Nona Gaprindashvili, Nana Alexandria, Maia Chiburdanidze and Nana Ioseliani – who comprised the Soviet team from the 1960s to the end of the 1980s, twice winning the world chess olympiads, and went on to achieve outstanding individual successes.

THE IDEA OF MAKING THIS FILM TOGETHER AROSE WHILE YOU WERE DISCUSSING PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS. CAN YOU EXPLAIN THIS ENCOUNTER BETWEEN YOU BOTH?

Tatia Skhirtladze: Anna was born in the year that the Soviet Union collapsed. I grew up in the time when these women were at the peak of their carriers. I thought bringing in a younger generation's view was important. Also, I live in Austria most of the time and I thought that having someone working on the project who lives in Georgia was crucial. What's more, from a

visual point of view, I come from arts and often want to tell a story more conceptually. Anna always looks at it from a film production angle, which is truly helpful.

WHERE DID YOU GET THE IDEA TO MAKE THIS FILM?

TS: Currently living in Austria, I frequently get asked where I'm from, and when I say Georgia, people always immediately bring up the Soviet Union and Stalin. This is what most people associate with Georgia. I only had one encounter, during my long life in Europe, with a man who had a different association. When I told him I came from Georgia, he said, "Georgian female chess players". This stuck in my mind. It is an identification that is more exciting than the other ones.

WHAT ATTRACTED YOU THE MOST TO THIS PROJECT?

Anna Khazaradze: When I read the project, it was a one-page synopsis that came with black and white photos of the female chess players at a young age. Visually, looking at these pictures and reading this minuscule synopsis, I was intrigued. It talked about four female chess champions who lived during Soviet times and who were the first women to get the title of grandmaster and pave the way for younger generations.



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They were also the only ones to represent Georgia to the world at that time because it was a very closed society and atmosphere under the Soviet Union. They were outstandingly strong women. Now these women are in their 60s and 70s, you have this entire span of interesting life experience that you can get from interviewing them in the present, and you also have all this old footage from their younger lives. The idea of weaving the old and new footage together in one film caught my attention.

HOW DID YOU EARN THE WOMEN'S TRUST?

TS: It was not an easy process. For example, with one of the protagonists, Maia, there were letters before I could meet her for the first time and it only happened because I was told by some friends of mine that she was going to a certain church to morning prayer. I had to go and wait for her. One day I waited she did not come, but the next day she did. Because she had these earlier letters from me, she already knew about the project. At first, she was very closed, but now she is much more open. These women are superstars and they have had a lot of attention over the years. There are many people asking them to do things and maybe they have had bad experiences. In our case, however, they understood that our project was something different. But it took a long period of time.

WILL THE COLD WAR ERA BE A THEME IN YOUR DOCUMENTARY?

AK: Imagine chess players shown playing on big screens, with people surrounding them and watching in utter silence. That's how it used to be shown in cinemas and on TV in former times. We thought we could

set up the style of the film more like a spy story with action elements, to make it more exciting and help to integrate the archival footage with the footage from the present. The Cold War was definitely an inspiration in setting up the visual style of the film.

I UNDERSTAND THAT SOVIET KGB AGENTS FOLLOWED THESE WOMEN DURING THEIR TRAVELS. WILL YOU TALK ABOUT THIS?

TS: They were always accompanied by people from the KGB, but they don't necessarily talk about it in this way. So they will say something like, "there was someone, a woman or man, I don't know who they were, that was always with us". One of them might say that it was the KGB, but it really depends how they want to talk about it with us.

YOU ARE USING ARCHIVAL FILM FOOTAGE IN THE DOCUMENTARY. WERE THERE ANY INSTANCES WHEN FINDING FOOTAGE WAS DIFFICULT?

AK: We have several archives in Georgia: one is the National Broadcaster archive, and there is also the state archive and the Georgian documentary film studio. All are very helpful and give us total access.

TS: There is one aspect that may create difficulty. There were two Chess Olympiads where all four women were playing and they won. One was in Lucerne, Switzerland, and the other was in Valletta, Malta.



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These are not in the Georgian archives in a good quality. I think this is the only footage we have to search for in Moscow.

I READ ONLINE THAT PRE-SHOOTING BEGAN IN SEPTEMBER LAST YEAR. WHAT WAS THE ATMOSPHERE LIKE?

AK: We filmed our protagonists once last year to create the teaser for our documentary. It was a bit hectic. The World Chess Olympiad was taking place in Batumi, Georgia, in this huge building with lots of people. We had to go with our protagonists everywhere and it was quite stressful, yet also very interesting. It was the first time we were with these women with a camera in hand, running after them. We got to see how they react to the camera – who is shyer and who is more open. It was like research for us, slowly getting to know our protagonists. We learned a lot and it helped us figure out our style of working. We are now ready to shoot in April.

DESPITE HAVING BEEN COMPETITORS, IS THERE A SENSE OF CAMARADERIE AMONG THEM?

TS: Two of them don't speak to each other. Their paths sometimes cross, but they really never meet as all four together. They are competitors. They are not close friends. Maybe two of them are closer to each other, but they are not friends who meet every day. When we filmed the teaser, we had four of them on the train together. And before getting on the train, they said, “this is a historical moment”. It has not happened that they were all four together for a very long time, maybe 30 years.

THE TWO THAT DON'T SPEAK TO EACH OTHER – THEY STILL AGREED TO DO THIS FILM AND BE TOGETHER IN THE SAME ROOM?

TS: Yes, I think that they know that this film will tell their story and also I think they are in solidarity with us.

AK: This is my impression as well. I think they realise that this is a bigger project that we are trying to do, which has international co-producers, including Austria, Serbia, Georgia and, especially,

Eurimages. They know this is going to be a documentary for bigger audiences. There have been cases where they offered us scenes from their life and gave suggestions on what we might include. That's what I call collaboration and this is what gives us the confidence to continue working with them, because they are now involved in the process of making the film. They are guiding us into their private lives. They are helping us.

THIS SOUNDS IDEAL ...

TS: It is important to mention that these women are very controlling individuals. So, when they are guiding us through their lives, they often have specific ideas of how they want us to film them and about what. We asked them if we could just be next to them. For us, it is also fine if they plan something but we are happy when we can also see what happens in between moments. Not all perfectly plan their moment on camera with us, yet one in particular does. However, we are still present in between planned moments so that we can capture moments that feel natural.

IN YOUR TIME WITH THEM SO FAR, WHAT STORY DID THEY SHARE WITH YOU THAT TOUCHED YOU MOST?

TS: Probably the story about how Maia won the world championship. There are some stories that we don't



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hear from the person directly, but the other women tell us stories about each other and we can ask the one who has the story if she wants to tell us about it. It is very interesting. Maia is the most religious of the four; she goes to church, covers her head and she is very into the hierarchy of Orthodox Christianity, about the status of women and men. For the world championship competition, there were eight women who had to compete against one another to play against reigning World champion, our protagonist Nona. Maia was in ninth place so she was not among these eight women. But then one of the women from the eight had a sex transformation and became a man. She fell out of the competition, so Maia took her place, and then she won and became the world champion. This is something that is kind of incredible. Imagine how she would talk about this now – after so many years – about this decision of that player to declare herself as a man.

YOU WILL ALSO HAVE A PARALLEL STORY LINE ABOUT THE “OTHER WOMEN” – THOSE WHO WERE NAMED IN HONOUR OF THE MAIN PROTAGONISTS: NONA, MAIA AND THE TWO NANAS. HOW WILL THIS PAN OUT IN YOUR DOCUMENTARY?

AK: The “other women” are the namesakes of our four protagonists, who were named after these women when they were winning championships. That’s how popular they were. For example, when Maia won the championship, every kid in the hospital was named after her. The same thing happened for Nona and both Nanas. We were lucky enough to find these people, some of them accidentally. It was very exciting and interesting to involve them in the movie. The whole “other” part allows us to show the legacy of our protagonists and their impact on society, apart from their trophies and titles. They were so important that people were named after them. We even found triplets who are named Nona, Nana and Maia!

TS: We found so many women from very diverse backgrounds and professions. There are chess players, policewomen, policy makers, cleaning ladies, intellectuals, all so different. But they were named after these four female chess players. We thought this is how we could bring younger generations into our film. What is the story of their names? How do they see this relation? Do they think it is good or bad that they were named this way? We want to show the broader impact of these women on other women and on society.

I WONDER, DO YOU BOTH PLAY CHESS?

AK: I used to as a child, but not anymore.

TS: I do, and I think while making this film I will improve. We are lucky that we are not that good at chess, so we naturally interest ourselves in the women’s lives rather than chess itself as a game, though we are good enough that they can also talk to us about chess. Well, up to a level. (*Laughs*)