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POV's "My Perestroika" Tracks Classmates From Soviet Childhoods To Putin's Russia, Tuesday, June 28, 2011, on PBS

An Era of Dramatic Historical Change Is Rendered in Vivid Detail,
As Five Muscovites Recount Their Personal Stories and Old Ideals Shift to New Realities

*A co-production of Red Square Productions, Bungalow Town Productions and ITVS International
In Association with American Documentary | POV and YLE*

"My Perestroika' gives you a privileged sense of learning the history of a place not from a book but from the people who lived it. . . . Astoundingly timely." — Stephen Holden, *The New York Times*

The 1970s-era home movies featuring well-scrubbed, rosy-cheeked kids playing in the snow or at the beach would not be out of place in an American family. Even the 1977 parade of children through Red Square in uniforms that are evocative of American scouting outfits does not appear alien. It takes one child's resoundingly enthusiastic salute, thanking "Dear Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev . . . for the fact that we live in the Country of Happy Childhood!" to remind us that we are gazing into the looking-glass world of the last years of the Soviet Union.

And nobody knows more about that world — and its sudden, spectacular crumbling — than the generation of children pictured in the opening sequences of **My Perestroika**. "I simply was like everyone else," says Lyuba Meyerson, one of the women profiled in the film. "I was completely satisfied with my beautiful Soviet reality."

A rare account of the collapse of the Soviet Union as experienced by five members of the last generation of Soviet children, Robin Hessman's **My Perestroika** has its national broadcast premiere on **Tuesday, June 28, 2011** at 10 p.m. on PBS as part of the 24th season of **POV (Point of View)**. (Check local listings.) POV's regular season continues on Tuesdays through Sept. 27 and concludes with special broadcasts in 2011 and 2012. American television's longest-running independent documentary series, POV has won a Special Emmy for Excellence in Television Documentary Filmmaking, an IDA Award for Best Continuing Series and NALIP's 2011 Award for Corporate Commitment to Diversity.

Woven from nearly 200 hours of footage of former Russian schoolmates filmed from 2005 to 2008, hundreds of reels of home movies from the 1970s and 1980s and dozens of Soviet propaganda films of the era, **My Perestroika** is a nuanced account of a tumultuous time — the last years of the Soviet system — as experienced by a generation coming of age just as its country broke apart. The film is also an affecting portrait of the paths five young people took when their world turned upside down.

Lyuba, her husband, Boris Meyerson, and neighbors Olga Durikova, Andrei Yevgrafov and Ruslan Stupin, now in their early forties, grew up in the Brezhnev era, known as the "Period of Stagnation." But stagnation had a positive side. The youngsters were well-fed and well-clothed, and their families took

summer vacations at the beach. Safe and carefree, they played outside together after school. Olga, like Lyuba, remembers “such wonderful times.” Ruslan, a self-declared outsider who went on to become a punk rocker, agrees, “My childhood was fine.” Even Borya, who has Jewish roots and grew up more suspicious of the system, says, “It was childhood, so it was a happy time despite the whole USSR.”

Growing up in typical Soviet fashion, the five progressed through the hierarchy of youth organizations, but for some of them, the innocence of childhood gave way to the skepticism of adolescence. “By eighth or ninth grade,” says Borya, “it became clear that people all around you were saying things that didn’t correspond with reality.” But at age 14 they all joined the Komsomol, the Communist youth group that was the final stage before joining the Party, since it was simply unthinkable not to join. In 1984, Borya, Andrei and Ruslan went off for two years of mandatory service in the Soviet Army.

By the time Mikhail Gorbachev launched his programs of Glasnost (openness) and Perestroika (restructuring) in 1986, in an effort to liberalize Soviet society, the five were young adults. “We came back to a totally different country,” says Ruslan of his return from the army, seeing that punks with Mohawks were no longer arrested and he could play his music freely. For Lyuba, a self-described conformist, “I only felt the changes when I was told, ‘Lyuba, look around! Everything isn’t what you were taught!’” When Communist hardliners deposed Gorbachev in 1991 and tried to re-impose Soviet dictatorship, Borya and Lyuba rallied along with thousands to support Boris Yeltsin’s call to save democracy. But in the troubled Yeltsin years and under the increasingly autocratic regime of Vladimir Putin, Russia has not had the future the couple imagined.

One of the fascinating things about viewing **My Perestroika** is seeing how five different temperaments, revealed first in Soviet times, evolved as the Iron Curtain lifted. Lyuba and Borya, both history teachers at Moscow School No. 57, are married with a precocious child. They tell stories of two very different childhoods: Lyuba, the follower, once saluted the television when the Soviet anthem played, while Borya, who still sports a beard and ponytail, preferred to subvert the system whenever possible. Their political paths came together just as their lives as idealistic college students did, but they are both dismayed as their hopes for a genuinely democratic and just society have been dashed.

Single mother Olga, who was the prettiest girl in the class, lives in her childhood apartment with her sister and their adult children. She works for a company that rents out billiard tables to Moscow clubs, and though many of her friends have “fancier” homes, she’s surprised to learn that officially she and her sister rank just above the official poverty line. Andrei has been successful in the new Russia. He just opened his 17th store selling exclusive French men’s shirts and ties. Living with his wife and children in a luxury condo, he is the only one of the group who moved out of his childhood home. But he, too, is frustrated by the country’s regressive turn, and is impatient with the fact that Russia has not yet become a Western, European-style society.

For Ruslan, whose own sensitive, poetry-writing 8-year-old son is following in his footsteps, life has taken more than one surprising turn. In the 1990s, he rose to fame as a member of the wildly popular punk rock group NAIV. But as the music world became dependent on consumer culture, he quit the group in disgust at what he felt was its commercialization. “How can you play music just for the money?” he asks. These days, he gives banjo lessons and plays in the Moscow metro to make a living.

“What we had before — that was beyond the pale, beyond good and evil. It needed to be destroyed, and thank God it was,” says Borya. Looking at his son, he remarks, “Of course these kids don’t understand that — and thank God they don’t . . . I don’t know what’s going to happen, but with the Internet, it’s impossible to have a monopoly on information. And information means a lot.”

“I’ve been curious about the Soviet Union and Russia for as long as I can remember,” says director Robin Hessman. “Growing up in America in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was impossible to ignore the fact that the USSR was considered our mortal enemy and supposedly plotting to destroy the planet with their nuclear weapons. I was a bit skeptical that an entire country could be filled with only ‘evil’ people.

“At age 10, I convinced my parents to let me subscribe to *Soviet Life* magazine so I could learn more. I began reading Russian history and literature later as well, and I was fascinated by this complicated and culturally rich country. In my senior year of high school, the Berlin Wall fell. Meanwhile, in the USSR everything was changing so rapidly under Gorbachev that I wanted to go right away and experience it for myself. So at age 18, in my freshman year of college, I went off to Leningrad. That was January 1991. I wound up living in Russia for almost the entire 1990s.

“When I returned to the U.S. in late 1999, I began thinking about how to tell the story of my generation of Russians,” Hessman continues. “They are a key transition generation — from Soviet childhoods to adolescence during Perestroika to becoming adults in the newly democratic Russia. They straddle such different worlds. My hope is that the film brings the audience into the homes, the kitchens and the memories of these five people — to share the complexities of their experiences, their triumphs, their dreams and their disillusionment.”

My Perestroika is a co-production of Red Square Productions, Bungalow Town Productions and ITVS International in association with American Documentary | POV and YLE.

About the Filmmaker:

Robin Hessman (Director, Producer, Cinematographer)

A graduate of Brown University with a dual degree in Russian and film, Robin Hessman received her graduate degree in film directing from the All-Russian State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow (with a “red diploma” of honors). She received a Student Academy Award in 1994, with co-director James Longley, for their film, “Portrait of Boy with Dog.” During eight years in Russia, Hessman worked for the Children’s Television Workshop (now Sesame Workshop) as the on-site producer of *Ulitsa Sezam*, the Russian-language *Sesame Street*.

In the United States, Hessman co-produced the Peabody Award-winning documentary “Tupperware!” She also co-produced the PBS biography of Julia Child, “Julia! America’s Favorite Chef.” In 2004, Hessman founded Red Square Productions and was granted the position of filmmaker in residence at PBS station WGBH Boston to develop **My Perestroika**.

Hessman is an associate of Harvard University’s Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies and is a term member of the Council on Foreign Relations. Since 2006, she has served as the director of documentary programming for Amfest, the American Film Festival in Moscow. She currently divides her time between Brooklyn, Boston and Moscow.

Credits:

Director/ Cinematographer:	Robin Hessman
Producers:	Robin Hessman, Rachel Wexler
Editors:	Alla Kovgan, Garret Savage
Running Time:	86:46

POV Series Credits:

Executive Producer:	Simon Kilmurry
Co-Executive Producer:	Cynthia López
Director of Production and Programming:	Chris White
Series Producer:	Yance Ford

Awards and Festivals:

- Winner, Filmmaker Award, Full Frame Documentary Film Festival 2010
- Winner, Special Jury Award, Silverdocs 2010
- Official Selection, Sundance Film Festival 2010, U.S. Documentary Competition
- Official Selection, International Film Festival Rotterdam 2011, Audience Top 20
- Official Selection, New Directors/New Films, MoMA and Lincoln Center, New York 2010

(For a complete list of awards and festivals, visit <http://myperestroika.com/>)



ITVS International is a division of the Independent Television Service that runs the Global Perspectives Project (GPP), an international exchange of documentary films made by independent producers, bringing international voices to U.S. audiences and American stories to audiences abroad. ITVS receives core funding from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people. The GPP is made possible through the support of the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Ford Foundation, and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.



Produced by American Documentary, Inc. and now in its 24th season on PBS, the award-winning POV series is the longest-running showcase on American television to feature the work of today's best independent documentary filmmakers. Airing June through September with primetime specials during the year, POV has brought more than 300 documentaries to millions nationwide and has a Webby Award-winning online series, *POV's Borders*. Since 1988, POV has pioneered the art of presentation and outreach using independent nonfiction media to build new communities in conversation about today's most pressing social issues. Visit www.pbs.org/pov.

POV Interactive (www.pbs.org/pov)

POV's award-winning website extends the life of our films with interactive features, interviews, updates, video and educational content, as well as listings for television broadcasts, community screenings and films available online. The *POV Blog* is a gathering place for documentary fans and filmmakers to discuss their favorite films and get the latest news.

POV Community Engagement and Education

POV films can be seen at more than 450 events across the country every year. Together with schools, organizations and local PBS stations, POV facilitates free community screenings and produces free resources, including discussion guides and curriculum-based lesson plans, to accompany our films. With our community partners, we inspire dialogue around the most important social issues of our time.

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