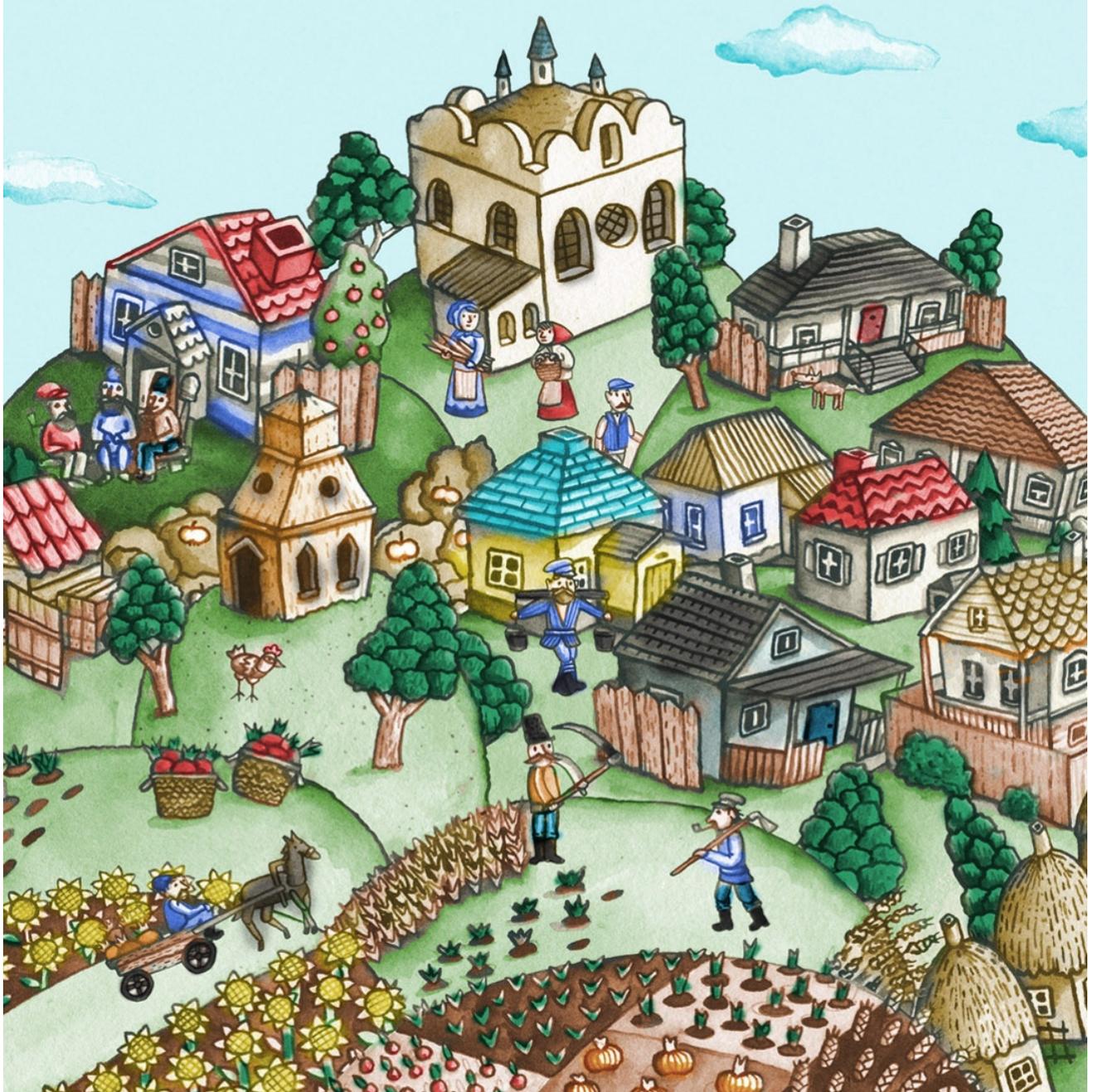




A DOCUMENTARY FILM BY Katya Ustinova

# SHTETLERS

CLOWNFISH FILM PRODUCTION PRESENTS A KATYA USTINOVA FILM SHTETLERS DIRECTOR KATYA USTINOVA PRODUCERS KATYA USTINOVA & SASHA ZAVALSHIN DIRECTORS OF PHOTOGRAPHY KATYA USTINOVA & MAXIM MUSTYAN  
COMPOSER ANNA DRUBICH EDITOR KATYA USTINOVA ANIMATION SASHKO DANYLENKO SOUND SERHII AVDIEIEV GRAPHIC DESIGN CRAIG LOWEY EXECUTIVE PRODUCER SERGEY USTINOV



## PRESS CONTACT

Michael Krause | Foundry Communications | (212) 586-7967 | [mkrause@foundrycomm.com](mailto:mkrause@foundrycomm.com)

## FILM MOVEMENT BOOKING CONTACTS

Maxwell Wolkin | Theatrical | (212) 941-7744 x211 | [maxwell@filmmovement.com](mailto:maxwell@filmmovement.com)  
Erin Farrell | Non-Theatrical & Festival | (212) 941-7744 x206 | [erin@filmmovement.com](mailto:erin@filmmovement.com)

# SYNOPSIS

## SHTETLERS

### Short Synopsis

For several centuries and until the fall of the Soviet Union, shtetls were inhabited by tight-knit Yiddish-speaking communities, living side by side with their non-Jewish neighbors. Now scattered around the world, Shtetlers gather and trace the remains of a lost world.

### Long Synopsis

SHTETLERS tells the secret story of small Jewish towns in the former Soviet Union. These towns, or shtetls as they were called, were once home to the largest Jewish population in the world. Only a few survived the Holocaust, and those that did were all located in the territory of the modern Ukraine and Moldova. In those small and remote towns of the Soviet interior, hidden from the world outside of the Iron Curtain, the traditional Jewish life continued for decades after it disappeared everywhere else. The tight-knit communities supported themselves by providing goods and services to their non-Jewish neighbors. The ancient religion, Yiddish language and folklore, ritualized cooking and elaborate craftsmanship were practiced, treasured and passed through the generations until very recently.

The film follows nine very different people, now scattered around the world, who once belonged to the Jewish and non-Jewish shtetl communities. Their memories are a farewell to the vanished world of shtetl, a melting pot of cultures that many nations once called their home.

## DIRECTOR BIO

### KATYA USTINOVA



Katya Ustinova is a Russian born documentary filmmaker living in New York. She has worked as a TV producer, script writer and reporter for almost ten years prior to switching over to documentary filmmaking. She got her MFA degree in Social Documentary from the School of Visual Arts in New York in 2012 along with receiving a Paula Rhodes Award for exceptional achievement in Documentary filmmaking for her thesis film.

Over the past several years she has been working on three feature length films covering very different themes, stories and characters. As the other two films are still in progress, Shtetlers is her first completed feature length documentary.

In December 2020 Shtetlers won The Laurel Branch National TV& Documentary Film Award for the best debut in Moscow, Russia.

# DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

My work with visual storytelling began back in Russia where I worked as a TV producer, script writer and correspondent for a major broadcasting company for almost 9 years. My departure from the TV format was caused by the rise of the state censorship at the company I worked for, along with my desire to switch to documentary filmmaking. After receiving the MFA degree in Social Documentary Program at the School of Visual Arts in NYC I started working on three different films. Shtetlers was the hardest to assemble and the first one to be completed.

Shtetlers is a film about Jewish life in small Soviet towns as they persevered through the turmoil of the past century. These small Jewish towns in the territory of the present day Ukraine, Moldova, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Belorus were home to the largest Jewish population in Europe up until the German invasion in 1941. The Holocaust dealt a near fatal blow to the Soviet shtetls, taking the lives of around 2 700 000 Jews. Almost miraculously, some shtetls recovered after the war upon the return of those who avoided the massacre by timely evacuation, being in the army or by just being extremely lucky. Gradually, the creeped but still recognizably Jewish life was restored there in secrecy from the antisemitic Soviet state. As time went by, the shtetl way of life, which all Soviet Jews once shared, became forgotten outside of these few places.

My family's biography illustrates this very well. My father's grandmother enthusiastically abandoned the archaic shtetl lifestyle to become an emancipated Soviet office worker. My grandfather, her son, changed our family name from Goldstein to the more Russian-sounding "Ustinov" in fear of Stalin's persecution of the Jews in the post war years. I was baptized upon my birth by my Russian mother, and my knowledge of my father's Jewish ancestry was very scarce.

My fascination with the theme of small Jewish towns started when my father, back in Moscow, created the Museum of Jewish History in Russia. Its unique collection remains the most authentic exhibit of Jewish life in Russia. When my father's team of researchers started bringing artifacts from the outskirts of the former Soviet Union - cookware, furniture, religious items and such - I discovered that there were living people behind these objects. I decided to meet them and tell the unknown story of the Jewish settlements behind the Iron Curtain.

By the time I started filming, the shtetls were almost emptied of the Jewish population. Those who did not die of old age emigrated to the West in the 1990s. I made many trips all over Ukraine and Moldova in search of the last bearers of the Yiddish culture and was fortunate to find several fascinating characters, including non-Jewish ones. Interviewing these lonely locals, be that the last rabbi with no Jewish congregation or the last hat maker in town, I kept hearing about their former neighbors, and realized that my search had to be expanded to the US and Israel. I knew this was my last chance to get a glimpse into the world that was already 99% gone.

Talking to the people I found in Israel and the US, I realized that Holocaust was still the centerpiece of their memories. The lives of the shtetl generation were divided into two parts: before and after the war. While editing my film, I followed the same structure, with the horrifying war stories becoming the watershed moment of my film. However, the war was not the main theme that I ventured to explore.

Filming a Ukrainian couple who, left with nothing but memories of their Jewish neighbors, was still making hats by the Jewish design and baking babka by the Jewish recipes, I made an unexpected discovery. The story of the shtetl had another perspective: not just the Jewish one, but also one of the non-Jewish, mainly Christian Orthodox population that lived elbow to elbow with the Jews for centuries in a tight and sometimes deadly embrace. The two ethnic groups were interacting much closer than one would imagine. Together they were shtetl, a segregated world and at the same time a melting pot that produced some highly unusual people. This dualism is what my title of Shtetlers refers to.

The film revolves around the themes of neighborhood, friendship and betrayal in the unique and surprisingly interwoven setting of the two cultures. I hope Shtetlers would attract people interested in their East European Jewish roots. After all, 75% of people identifying as Jews came from this region: this is over ten million people, half of whom live in the United States. At the same time I hope that the timeless story of different cultures living next to each other in times of war and peace would resonate even in those without direct connection to the Jewish history.

## **VOLODYA AND NADYA MALISHEVSKY**

Abandoned rickety houses, ruined synagogues, Jewish cemeteries overgrown with weeds, and a handful of locals with the memories of their past life next to the Jews – that's all that is left of the once populous and vibrant shtetl. Among these "left behind" locals are Nadya and Volodya, a loving Ukrainian couple. For many decades they lived in Shargorod, Ukraine, next to their Jewish neighbors. Their century old house on Lenin Street had once belonged to a Jewish family — there are still mezuzahs in the doorways, and ceramic jars for cooking kosher food in the attic.

The Jews of Shargorod lived in the centre of the shtetl, as craftsmen, they owned small shops and did not need to cultivate land. The Ukrainians, on the contrary, owned plots of land and worked in the fields, so they settled on the outskirts. Volodya was born into a family of farmers, but farming or herding cows wasn't exactly his calling. Instead, Volodya dreamt of becoming a tailor. Tailoring was traditionally a Jewish occupation, just like watch- and shoemaking, photography and hairdressing. While private trade and entrepreneurship were banned in the Soviet Union, small Jewish businesses continued to function because the shtetl authorities, often Jewish themselves, turned a blind eye to them.

Shargorod's hat makers guild was well known even outside of the shtetl. Their original design for caps was popular among men of all ages, who wore this kind of headwear all year round. It was a time when the so called "airdrom caps" were popular in the Soviet Union, and the tweed coppola caps (as seen in the "Godfather" movies) were popular in Sicily. Shargorod hat design of the 1960s was more of the Sicilian kind, with a flat top and a pointed brim. That was the model Volodya learned to sew from the shtetl hatters, and then kept making for the thirty years that he was in the Jewish hatters guild — and even beyond that. How Volodya-the-Ukrainian got to work with the Jewish hat makers and what happened after they emigrated is part of the "Shtetlers" story.

## **NOAH KAFMANSKY**

Noah Kafmansky, a rabbi from Chernovitz, was born into a religious Jewish family in Chernovitz in 1947. Born into a religious Jewish family in Chernovitz in 1946, Noah belongs to the post-war generation of my characters. His grandfather was a rabbi during the time when Chernovitz was part of Austro-Hungary. At the time, the Jewish population was around 45,000 people, and the Jews were highly engaged in all vocations: from traders to local university professors, heads of banks and sponsors of cultural events. With the first establishment of Soviet rule in 1940, thousands of Jews were deported to the Gulag. Noah's grandfather was among them. During the German-Romanian occupation from 1941 to 1944, two thirds of the Jewish population of Chernovitz was exterminated. When the Soviet regime came back to power in 1944, the liberators shortly banned everything Jewish.

The synagogues were the first to close down, their buildings being appropriated as cinema theaters and sports clubs. Just a single synagogue avoided the closures – the one which Noah had been the head of for the past twenty years. Chernovitz synagogue functioned through the entire Soviet period and was one of the few open to the public in the USSR. The Jews who survived the war gushed into Chernovitz from all over Ukraine, making the town Jewish again. Despite religious bans and persecutions, the sole synagogue was always crowded, especially during big Jewish holidays. By the 1990's Chernovitz shared the same fate of the small shtetls: the majority of the Jewish population emigrated, and the Jewish community dwindled to several hundred.

When we first met with Noah, his congregation consisted of a few ancient old men. The rest of the shrunken community chose a different synagogue that had a young rabbi from Israel. Like in that anecdote about a Jew who built two synagogues on an uninhabited island – in one he prays, in the other he never sets foot – Noah's synagogue was the latter. It became notoriously known as "non-kosher" behind his back because of the pilgrimage that he encouraged among the locals. For a small fee, Noah would see people who came to ask for advice and blessings. What made it "non-kosher" was the fact that these people were not Jewish – they were Christian. Over the course of years, these daily appointments turned into some sort of pilgrimage to a rabbi who became considered a miracle worker. I remember how a rural old woman came out of Noah's door and told me that "Jewish God helps better".

A separate short film could have been made about Noah and the miracles he was performing if not for his habit of mumbling through, and even almost rewinding, the words in the most interesting moments of his speech. This peculiarity came in handy whenever he spoke with his timid Ukrainian congregation, who wouldn't dare interrupt the rabbi to ask on which day their long awaited miracle would finally happen.

## **ISAAC VAINSELBOUM**

Isaac has got a rare and poetic family name - Vainshelboum, which means "cherry tree" in Yiddish. He was born in Ukraine in a shtetl called Starokonstantinov, which on the eve of World War II was inhabited by 25.000 Jews. Isaac was only nineteen when the war broke out, and he went straight to the frontlines from the military college that he was attending as a junior officer. He commanded a platoon, then a company and finally, at the age of twenty-two, an infantry battalion of eight hundred soldiers. Isaac found it embarrassing that the attack that left him gravely wounded was led by him shouting "For Stalin! For Motherland!" like in a bad war novel. His battalion was reduced from 800 to 140 men in that attack, and Isaac himself was carried away with a head injury that had him lose the ability to speak for months. Eventually, he regained his speech and became a well known lawyer in his hometown.

Isaac was a second generation Jew fighting in the war. His father Abram Vainshelboum served at the same front. He was a soldier in the third generation - Isaac's grandfather Tevie along with his brother Shima became Jewish conscripts in the Imperial Russian Army at the age of twelve. After the mandatory 25 years of military service they used the money that they saved to build a synagogue in their hometown, naming it Soldier's Synagogue. When Isaac was a Soviet schoolboy, grandfather Tevie would take him to his synagogue, risking to bring the displeasure of the authorities on their heads. By that time, all religious activity was banned, and the Soldier's synagogue was soon shut down, sharing the fate of other shtetl synagogues in the Soviet Union.

After emigrating from Ukraine to the United States in the 1990-s, Isaac settled down in "Little Odessa" among the Jewish expatriots living a quiet life on the ocean-facing benches of Brighton Beach. Isaac was a different type of a retiree though. He was ninety four when we first met, and could hardly find time for our meetings in his busy schedule. At his old age he developed a passion for painting and writing, and after hours behind the easel would sit down by his old computer typing short stories and memoirs, and after that would go back to painting.

The path from his writer's study to the artist's studio led through the living room where his wife Zina was lying in bed terminally ill for the past five years out of sixty that she and Isaac were married. Isaac took refuge from his misery in the works in which he reconstructed the life they lived in the small Jewish town in Ukraine, where his grandfather Tevie got killed during the war, where Isaac returned to work as a lawyer after graduating from Moscow law school, where he first met his wife, got married, and had children.

### **EMILY KESSLER**

Emily Kessler was well over 90 but has lost none of her energy. She lived at Columbus Avenue in a spacious one-bedroom apartment in New York and knew how to navigate her neighborhood pretty well: she would take a bus to the 74th Street to buy her organic-only groceries at Fairway, or head in a cab to the concerts and shows at Lincoln Center or Carnegie Hall. Looking as a typical Upper Manhattan old lady, she spoke a very decent English as well - a rare skill for her generation of Russian-speaking emigrants from the Soviet Union. Her friends were mainly Americans, often of a much younger age, and twenty years ago she was even married to one.

Emily was born in 1917 in a small Jewish town called Khmelnik in Soviet Ukraine. As the war broke out in 1941 she was already twenty four and married. When the Germans invaded Khmelnik her husband was at the front with the Red Army while she stayed at home with their little son, her parents and a disabled brother.

On January 9, 1942 Ukrainian police along with the SS troops pulled all Jewish families of Khmelnik out of their houses into the freezing streets. At dawn, a column of old people, women and children was led to the freshly-dug graves in the woods two miles away. Emily was in that column with her two year old son. In the "Black book of Soviet Jewry", a detailed account of the genocide by the Nazis, there is a letter written in 1944 from Bluma Bronfin to the book's editor Ilya Ehrenburg, a famous Soviet writer. The woman's account of the freezing day of January 9 in Khmelnik is identical to what Emilia remembered. 6000 Khmelnik Jews were killed on that day.

The memories of the day when she stood in the execution line with her son in her arms, and of the time on the run and in the ghetto haunted Emily till the end of her life. Recalling these days, she kept wondering why she was let to survive and live up to almost a hundred years (she died six months before her centenary) while all of her family and almost the entire town were exterminated. She tried to silence these thoughts by singing in Yiddish, the family tongue she had near- forgotten in the post war Soviet years. Through Yiddish came back the memories of the good times.

At the age of 96 Emily broke her rib after slipping at Carnegie Hall. She did not let this slow her down, and soon after the surgery could be seen running - now with a walker - through Manhattan doing things like wiring money to the offsprings of the Ukrainian neighbor who rescued her 70 years ago, or taking her mandolin to the Jewish community center to perform new songs.

### **VLADIMIR GORBULSKY**

Vladimir is a Jewish Orthodox living in the West Bank territories, but his neighbors call him Goyim. Years after his mother saved dozens of shtetl Jews from the Nazis, Vladimir converted his family of Soviet Ukrainians to Judaism and immigrated to Israel. He feels very much at home there.

### **SLAVA FARBER**

Slava is a traveling Yiddish folk singer. His lifelong occupation dates back to his childhood, when he took part in the secretly held Jewish holidays. Fifty years later, his audience is an aging Moldovan couple, and his family house is a ruin, with his father's felt hat abandoned on the window sill.

# FESTIVALS & CREDITS



## SHTETLERS

Director	Katya Ustinova
Producers	Katya Ustinova, Sasha Zavalishin
Production	Clownfish Film Production
Country	USA, Russia
Genre	Documentary, First Film, Human, Society, History, Work, Jewish, Rural, Urbanism, Ethno

## FESTIVALS

2020 Rhode Island International Film Festival, World Premiere  
2020 Calgary International Film Festival, Canadian Premiere  
2020-2021 December-March, theatrical release, Russia 2021  
2021 Russian Film Week USA  
2021 Artdocfest, Russia  
2021 Miami Jewish Film Festival  
2021 Philadelphia Gershman Jewish Film Festival Lindy CineMondays  
2021 Sarasota Film Festival  
2021 Krakow Film Festival, Poland

## AWARDS

Jewish Spotlight First Prize  
Rhode Island International Film Festival  
The Laurel Branch National TV & Documentary  
Film Award for the Best Debut,  
Artdocfest, Russia

## CAST

Volodya Malishevsky  
Vladimir Gorbulsky  
Isaac Vainshelboum  
Emilia Kessler  
Noikh Kafmansky

## CREW

	Name
Screenplay	Katya Ustinova
Producer	Katya Ustinova, Sasha Zavalishin
Director	Katya Ustinova
Director of Photography	Katya Ustinova, Maxim Musiyan Serhii Avdieiev
Editor	Katya Ustinova
Sound	Serhii Avdieiev
Music	Anna Drubich, Amit Cohen
Locations	Ukraine, Moldova, Israel, United States
Running Time	80 minutes
Shooting Format	Digital HD
Sound	2.0 Stereo
Animation Techniques	Aquarel Animation
Aspect Ratio	16:9
Language / Subtitles	Russian, Ukrainian, English, Yiddish / English