

Sophia Turkiewicz: Once My Mother

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Sophia tells of a hidden aspect of World War II in her very personal documentary.



Sophia Turkiewicz and her mother Helen. Image supplied.

Sophia Turkiewicz's professional working life thus far has been in drama, but with *Once My Mother*, she delved into the experiences of her own mother. Sophia had started making a documentary film on the subject when she was a student, but didn't finish it. Although she moved on with other projects, she always remained aware of this unfinished work. She never left it behind completely.

In retrospect, Sophia is very glad that she didn't make the film back then as she "didn't have the maturity." When she returned to it, she looked over the documentary material she had already collated. A

documentary seemed to be the obvious choice, due to the material and the budgetary limitations, but also because the story was like a companion piece to the feature drama *Silver City*. *Silver City* was nominated for 10 awards at the AFI's in 1984, winning three.

With *Once My Mother*, "I was still digging in that same territory," Sophia said. "It was my mother's story, and family, but I was thinking I've got to get it really right this time." *Silver City* was well received, but "it was still a glamorised version of the family story." Although she had made the film she had to make, there were some compromises made, such as the choice of English as the language. This time, with *Once My Mother*, Sophia was determined to "get it right. It had to be the authentic story. That's the story I want to tell."

Once My Mother is narrated in the second person, an uncommon choice in documentary. Sophia believes that as she came from a drama background, she wasn't constrained by the generally accepted documentary rules. "It took a long time to find the voice," she said. "I was struggling until I found it because I didn't know what the tone of the story was. I knew that I wanted something that wasn't a straight documentary, and I'm sure I was bringing my drama background into it...One day, quite late in the piece, we'd got some private money to employ [editor] Denise Haslem, who ended up doing the final film. In the early days, we got her on board to pull together a rough cut of the material we'd shot to date, of which there was absolutely miles."

While Denise was working on the edit, Sophia was working on the structure for the two strands of the story. She "went up to the attic one day to try to start on the narrative voice. At that point, the first phrase came to me – I'm losing you, I'm losing the woman who was once my mother. As soon as I said that to myself, everything just clicked. I just found the tone and the voice. From that point on, it really was a message to my mother, like a letter to her. That felt right."

Sophia's mother had Alzheimer's disease later in life, and sadly died before the film was completed. "She really was pretty proud of it towards the end," Sophia said. "I did show her bits and piece over the time we were shooting and she had no comprehension of what my job is or what I do. She was uneducated and she was pretty bemused by me wanting to make a film about her, and turning up and poking a camera at her, but delighted and proud that I was doing that." She sadly never had the opportunity to see the completed film.

The weight of family history on Sophia was heavy to bear when she was growing up. The impulse behind making the film was to resolve this situation within herself. It helped her to deal with all of the personal issues she had, and "I don't feel that in any way now," Sophie said. "In fact now, I want to tell the story myself, because now I comprehend the tragedy of her life and her story and just the fact that the historical story had just been edited out from history."

Sophia explained that "as soon as Stalin joined the Allies, the Brits and Americans knew exactly what he was up to - that he had deported nearly two million people to Siberia. They were dying, and he was a monster equal to Hitler, but once he was on the Allies side, it was politically incorrect to say 'you're as bad as the guy that we're fighting.'" Once the Cold War began, the story just became further hidden. Sophia explained that only with the fall of communism in the 1990's did the details start to emerge. Historians are now trying to rewrite the history of the Second World War, "with the balance of what Stalin was doing."

Sophia didn't realise that any of this was the case until she started researching. Although she'd grown up with her mother's stories, she had no understanding of the historical context. Fortunately, by the

time she became interested, archives had been opened. She discovered an organisation called the Kresy [Eastern borderland]-Siberia Foundation (<http://kresy-siberia.org>) which was dedicated to recording and remembering the experiences of the Poles and their families who were deported to Siberia. The founder of the organisation lives in Sydney, although it's a worldwide foundation. Once Sophia discovered this, the door was opened onto a whole world. She compared their work to the Shoah Foundation, which records the experiences of the Jews during World War Two.

Sophia became involved in recording many of the survivor interviews for the Kresy-Siberia Foundation, included in their virtual museum. She explained that "this became the real impetus for me to tell the story. It wasn't just a personal story. I knew that there was this incredible, epic story that no-one knew about in the West, or very few people. My objective has been to tell that story. I think it's important. If I can contribute in any way to that story being known, I want my film to do that."

The first time Sophie visited Eastern Europe was a visit to Poland while she was at film school. Her mother's village is now in Ukraine, which at the time was still a part of the communist regime and tourists weren't permitted to visit. As a result, it didn't even occur to her to visit. Although she spent six months in Poland, it wasn't linked to any personal curiosity about her mother as "it just seemed like there was no possibility of even pursuing it."

In 2007, she was invited to Poland again, when her film *Silver City* was part of a retrospective at a film festival. Sophia went with her husband, who's unconnected to the film industry. This time, with the fall of communism, she was able to cross the border into Ukraine. They decided to find the village. She knew the Polish name of the village, but was unable to find it on Google Maps, even a week before they left Australia. The situation was resolved when she managed to speak to a Polish librarian in Western Sydney. She emailed Sophia with the new name of the village, as the name had changed when it became part of Ukraine.

When they arrived, they met a number of people who remembered her mother and her family. Sophia thrust the camera into her husband's hands and told him to shoot. If they didn't get the footage now, they never would. She described how the whole film was accidental. By the time they got the film funded via Screen Australia, they'd already shot all of the footage. The funding ended up being for the archival material and post-production.

When Rod Freedman came on board as the producer of the documentary in 2009, they went back to Poland again and shot

some of the recreations, as well as returning to the village for additional material.

The film was a jigsaw puzzle to put together, with a detective story thrown in. Sophie began working on the film in 2007 and continued trying to get it funded until 2012 while still shooting. In 2010, they raised enough private funding to employ the editor. This helped Sophie to understand what she had and where the gaps were, including of her mother's first-hand accounts. She also didn't know how much archival material she'd be able to find. Their archival researcher trawled through obscure archival institutions in Eastern Europe in order to find the material required.

They shot recreations to fill gaps, in case they needed them. On the second trip, she went with Rod to visit a church where they explained what they were doing and asked the villagers to be extras. The villagers were keen to help, and came along wearing their oldest clothes as instructed. Sophia said that she then "pulled up with a bootload of gulag attire and dressed them and marched them around the village to create some of the exodus out of Siberia scenes where you see them walking around. Those villagers had no idea what we were doing." She then marched the villagers into a derelict building on the outskirts of town and made them lie down on the straw and then marched them out again." Although they were making it up as they went along, and it's not the way it would have been done if they had a budget, the recreations worked very well in the film.

They didn't face any political challenges while they were filming, but they did keep what they were doing pretty quiet. It was also prior to the political situation which the Ukraine now faces.

Once My Mother has been very well received on the festival circuit. It's won three Audience Awards (Adelaide, Canberra and Krakow) and won the ADG Award for Best Feature Documentary. It will also be screened at the Rhode Island Film Festival in August.

Sophia's very excited about the film getting a national cinema release, a relatively uncommon thing for a feature documentary. It will be available in every capital city apart from Darwin. The film is being self-distributed (with Ronin distributing only for the educational market), and they're finding that the main challenge is in countering the large marketing budgets of other films. They're relying on social media and word of mouth. "If you don't get the word out, people aren't going to come," she said.

She's hoping that the two week season will be extended on the basis of word of mouth – but this is something which takes time to build.

They're aiming to follow the capital city release with selected regional areas. They also have a European sales agent on board, and they're hoping that they'll obtain sales in Europe and America, based on the large Polish communities.

During the lull between finishing *Once My Mother* and working on the marketing, Sophia had decided that she wasn't just going to rush into another project, however in the last six weeks or so, another documentary project has been percolating in her subconscious. She's looking forward to spending more time on it. Although it does have a family resonance or connection, it will be on a completely different subject to her previous films. "I've well and truly done that part of family," she said. She's put the ghosts behind her and "I'm done with that story."

Once My Mother is released in cinemas on Thursday 24th July.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anne Richey is ScreenHub's productions editor.