

FAMILY HISTORY

A true labour of love, the new documentary, *ONCE MY MOTHER*, represents a salving of old family wounds for director, SOPHIA TURKIEWICZ. BY ERIN FREE



"I'm glad that it actually took all this time, despite all the obstacles," says director, Sophia Turkiewicz, of her new documentary, *Once My Mother*. "If it had happened even a few years earlier, I don't think that I would've been ready just in terms of my perspective on the story. Gathering all of the historical material has been a real process of discovery. I didn't really know this story until I started talking to people back in 2007." The story is one incredibly close to Sophia Turkiewicz' heart; as the film's title suggests, it's about the director's mother, her incredibly tough life, and the effect that her often cruel hardships would have on her daughter. Sophia's mother, Helen, was an orphan and eventual "street kid" (decades before the term was even coined), scratching out a bleak existence in Poland. When Stalin's tanks rolled into the eastern half of the country in 1939, she was herded into a Siberian gulag. Freed when Hitler invaded Russia, Helen then formed part of a mass exodus of Poles who travelled thousands of miles to Uzbekistan, and then Persia. From there, she was sent to a refugee camp in Africa, before finally arriving in Australia as a single mother, with baby, Sophia, in tow. Broke, unable to speak English, and with no options, Helen placed her daughter into an orphanage, an act that would eventually have major ramifications for them both.

The story is a truly extraordinary one, but for many years, Sophia Turkiewicz wasn't interested. "By the time that I had some sort of maturity, I would've thought that I would've asked, but you know how family stories are —

you don't even think about the detail of them; they're just rehearsed speeches." Though her mother's life obviously affected and interested her (Turkiewicz' acclaimed 1984 drama, *Silver City*, was based in part upon her experiences as a refugee), the director simmered with a sense of biting ambivalence about Helen, who she felt had abandoned her. Nor had Helen ever been too enthused about her daughter's chosen profession. "I had been a teacher before I got into film," Turkiewicz tells FilmInk. "That was my first job, and she was so proud of that. But once I started getting interested in film, she was so disappointed. She thought that teaching was just the best thing that I could've achieved... and then I started doing all this weird film stuff."

Though she originally intended to make a documentary about her mother back in the seventies, Turkiewicz dropped the project, largely due to the resentment that still bubbled away inside her. Fascinatingly, that old black-and-white footage has been incorporated into *Once My Mother*. "When I opened the can, it had mould growing all over it," Turkiewicz laughs of the old reels of film that had been collecting dust in her attic. After a complex reparation process, the old footage was ready to be used again. "She couldn't understand why anyone would want to make a film about her, being such an ordinary person," Turkiewicz says of her exasperated mother in the old footage. "She would just be bemused by me coming and poking a camera at her and forcing her to talk. She was very good natured about it, but it became a sort of back-and-forth between us."

It also meant, however, that Turkiewicz' own role in the film would be expanded. "As we started developing it, it became clear that it was as much about me as her, and the repercussions of her life on me growing up," the director explains. "I felt that that was my emotional drive to make sense of that. I knew that I had to be in it, but I found it really hard to put myself into the picture. I also just didn't know the balance of the two stories, because I knew that in comparison to her story, mine is so trivial! So it was a torturous process to actually get myself on screen. At a certain point, I just thought, 'If I'm gonna do it, I may as well do it as authentically as I can!' I didn't want to hide anything, because I was exposing her life, and I felt that I had to be just as honest with my own. And in fact, once I made that decision, it was fine. People have asked me, 'How can you be there on the screen? How do you feel about being there?' It doesn't bother me at all. In a way, it's not me up on the screen, it's this *character* called Sophia, who's got an emotional journey that I'm tracking and constructing. I'm detached from myself in that way, so it's fine."

This, however, was one of the film's lesser hurdles for Turkiewicz to jump. The first problem, as always, was the money. "We kept applying to all the funding bodies, and to the broadcasters, and we just kept getting knock-back after knock-back," the director says. "Despite that, we found ways of keeping shooting." That meant taking any opportunity to get footage shot and research done, and scraping together whatever finances she could. Though