

About the film

Letters from the Pamirs

A documentary film by Janyl Jusupjan

France - Kyrgyzstan 2016 / HD / 78' / 16:9 / color

Camera: Christian Lelong

Sound: Janyl Jusupjan

Editing: François Sculier

Sound editing & mix: Sylvain Girardeau

Production: Cinédoc Films (France), Chagaldak Production (Kyrgyzstan)

Co-production: Télé Paese & 8 Mont-Blanc

Distribution: Cinédoc Distribution (France)

Media Partners: Current TV (USA), ELTR (Kyrgyzstan), TAN TV (Kazakhstan), TOLO News (Afghanistan)

Festivals: Trace de Vies, One World Prague, One World Kyrgyzstan

Awards: Grand Prix, One World Kyrgyzstan

The story

Tajikistan's civil war (1992-1997) has its roots in the chaos and upheaval of the Soviet Union's dissolution. This film made in 2013-2016 looks into the achingly slow healing of wartime atrocities and incremental but seemingly non-stoppable growth of isolation, discrimination, and exodus of a Kyrgyz minority. The filmmaker Janyl Jusupjan left Kyrgyzstan to Europe in 1993 with her 8-year-old son, who came of age in Munich and Prague. In a reverie of reminiscence and documentary, she chronicles family and generational changes in her country and in Jerge-Tal district of Tajikistan, where most of the events of the film take place, in the context of capitalism, corruption, and Islamic radicalization. A visual essay on the uneasy nature of change and diaspora, and the timelessness of mountains, meadows, music, and mothers.

Director's Statement

In 2013, I first visited the Jerge-Tal district in newly independent Tajikistan, which experienced a bitter five-year civil war after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Encounters in Jerge-Tal brought me back to my childhood. They revived memories of family stories of tribal life in Kyrgyzstan, where people were poor by modern standards, but rich in wisdom – generous, compassionate, respectful of Nature, and united by worship of ancestral spirits.

The last almost 30 years of post-Soviet capitalism and uncontrolled materialism have left their mark in Kyrgyzstan.

We are now far-removed from an intimate relationship with Time and Nature; our knowledge of traditions is disappearing.

Families do not make beautiful tapestries, or cut and assemble colorful felts to craft sturdy, warm carpets – we do not know how; we have forgotten how to make olovo, a meal of boiled sheep's lung, filled with milk and butter.

Most importantly, we are on track to lose a sense of humanist values and social cohesion among people.

As an observer of Kyrgyzstan's society, it strikes me that this collective consciousness of our loss is faint. It is not articulated, its nascence and suddenness make it difficult to name or pinpoint.

But the feelings left as an aftertaste are profound loneliness and alienation.

When I was in Jerge-Tal, I felt as if the simplicity and sincerity of a bygone era were returned to me. At the same time, I bore witness to the intricacies, tragedy, and contradictions of life in this seemingly harmonious community.

You only have to contemplate their past to understand that these people are survivors; they are resilient with an honest sense of self-worth, not arrogance.

The annexation by tsarist Russia end of XIX Century, Bolshevik take over in 1917, forced settlements in the 1940s and civil war that followed the fall of the Soviet Empire were but some of the expressions of violence.

The recent years saw the growth in Tajik nationalism. Subtle and overt discrimination compounded by extreme poverty forced tens of thousands

among the minorities to escape to Kyrgyzstan and other countries, the Exodus which is still going on weakening this community even today at the onset of the third decade of the XXI Century.

At the same time, although nationalism in all post-Soviet countries led to violent clashes and vast changes in ethnic composition, in Jerge-Tal region it was never an open war.

The peaceful co-existence of two distinct communities – Turkic and Persian - leads us to want to learn more about its secrets.

In the face of these challenges, the Kyrgyz people in the North of Tajikistan have much to teach us, both in terms of tolerance and perseverance.

This encounter of Tajiks and Kyrgyz has given birth to a younger generation to whom the elders transmit wisdom borne of unenviable hardship. These are youth steeped in tradition: at times fascinated by modernity; at others, flabbergasted by it.

Today, most of these young men and women will leave their villages to work or study in the cities, where life seems easier. But a few will return – enriched by experiences good, bad, uncertain.

Such displacement of people is common throughout the world, of course.

In Jerge-Tal, these changes are unfolding rapidly before our eyes; it is dramatic, palpable.

The contrasts are stark: the traditions were kept so firmly, but modern forces act with astonishing speed.

I was there to try to have a sensitive observation of this transformation in this corner of the world.

To watch, to listen, to understand, and share...

Director's Biography

Janly Jusupjan was born in Kyrgyzstan in a remote village on the Chinese border. At 5 she moved with family to the capital Bishkek at that time called Frunze and populated 95% by Russians. She graduated from the University of World languages and Literature in Almaty, Kazakhstan. In 1993 Janly started to work for the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty in Munich. She was awarded an AIB Highly Commended Diploma (London) for her investigative reports on women who had been victims of sexual violence during the Kyrgyz-Uzbek ethnic war in Kyrgyzstan in June 2010.

She is widely known for her extensive reports from the Pamir region in China, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. "Letters from the Pamirs" about Kyrgyz people living in Tajikistan is her first documentary. Currently, she is working on her new film «Atirkul and her Chevaliers» and first book «Yaks, UAZ and Us».