

A Story about Literature, Revolution,  
Expulsion, War and the Joy of Life

16° Arr!

BOULEVARD  
EXELMANS

Film by GRIGORY MANYUK and Manfred Wiesner

**JURI ELPERIN**

# DER ÜBERSETZER

**THE TRANSLATOR**

LANGUAGE IS HOME



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21. Jüdisches Filmfestival  
Berlin und Potsdam 2015

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Wiesengold Productions



## 21. Jüdisches Filmfestival Berlin und Potsdam 2015

*'In this intimate documentary by directors Manfred Wiesner and Grigory Manyuk, Elperin recalls his eventful life in his unique and almost literary way of speaking. Using aesthetic black-and-white pictures and unusual montages, Wiesner and Manyuk enhance the sense of nostalgia and melancholy that surrounds Elperin's stories.'*

Jewish Film Festival Berlin & Potsdam 2015

*'It is a quiet, poetic film. The main character Juri Elperin visits together with the filmcrew the cities of his life, and casts on the audience already from the first minutes his spell - largely thanks to his very own, almost literate art of speaking.'*

Christine Schmitt, Jüdische Allgemeine, Berlin, 14 May 2015



Sheffield Doc Festival Videotheque 2015



honoured with the  
Bundesverdienstkreuz 1. Klasse  
(2015)



honoured with the Nationalpreis  
of the DDR



honoured with the ring of the writers  
union 'Die Kogge'

**TITLE**

the Translator

**LOG LINE**

Language is Homeland:

a journey through literature, revolution, expulsion, war and the joy of life

**CONTACT INFO**

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**ALIKI KYLIKA | MARKETTING**

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**TECHNICAL INFO****ORIGINAL CUT**

TRT: 61 minutes

Exhibition Format: DVD, QuickTime ProRes 422

Aspect Ratio: 1:1,78 (16:9)

Shooting Format: Digital/Video HD

Colour

German, Russian,

English Subtitles Available

**FILM LOCATIONS**

Basel, Berlin, Moscow, Paris

**FILM HISTORY**

Premiere: 13.5.2015 19:00, 21. Jüdisches Film Festival Berlin, Jüdisches Museum Berlin

[www.jffb.de](http://www.jffb.de)

Other Festivals: Sheffield Doc Videotheque, [www.sheffdocfest.com/](http://www.sheffdocfest.com/)

**BROADCAST AND DISTRIBUTION INFORMATION**

Please contact for all enquiries regarding public television stations and international broadcast. Digital sales and wholesale DVDs are not currently available.

[www.wiesengoldproductions.com](http://www.wiesengoldproductions.com)

Caught in the shifts of the 20th century in Europe, 'the Translator' Juri Elperin narrates his life story as he journeyed across countries keeping his homeland within him: his language.

Referencing Eric Hobsbawn and the 'Age of the Extremes: The Short 20th century', filmmaker and producer Manfred Wiesner depicts the historical passage from the October Revolution in Russia to today's neoliberal system, through the life of 'a true intellectual of the 20th century, with a fresh humour and a young heart and brain.'

Following the adventures of the 98 year old man, we revisit the turmoil history of Europe since 1917 when Juri was born, interwoven with the poetry and literature that kept him company throughout these years. In his 40 years of age Juri Elperin was led into a career in translating, which allowed him to become the awarded and renowned translator of over 150 German and Russian works.

“ My Fatherland is dead  
they have buried it  
in fire  
I live in my Motherland-  
Word”  
Rose Ausländer

Davos, Berlin, Paris, Moscow and again Berlin; coinciding with The Russian Revolution, the Republic of Weimar, Hitler, the Red Army, Stalin and again Berlin.

Born in Swiss Davos in 1917 to a wealthy, intellectual Jewish family, Juri Elperin spent the first years of his life in Berlin, only to move in 1933 to Paris and then the USSR. WWII finds Juri at his 24 years of age, volunteering to the Red Army against Hitler's forces and later an interrogator of German officials for the Russian intelligence service. With the end of the war, Juri starts lecturing German linguistics in the Moscow State Linguistic University.

'Hitler's regime has taken a lot from me, but not the language, which is to me the embodiment of Germany; this, he could not take.'

When Stalin's anti-cosmopolitan campaign forces him to retreat to the 'writer's village' of Peredelkino, he starts translating.

'His persistence to make the best of his situation turned the restrictions of his life into his greatest success and at close to 40 years of age he was able to start a new career.'

*'In this intimate documentary by directors Manfred Wiesner and Grigory Manyuk, Elperin recalls his eventful life in his unique and almost literary way of speaking. Using aesthetic black-and-white pictures and unusual montages, Wiesner and Manyuk enhance the sense of nostalgia and melancholy that surrounds Elperin's stories.'* (Jewish Film Festival Belrin & Potsdam 2015)

A highly reputable network of friends surround Juri's life in Berlin and Russia, revisited in the film through anecdotal stories and old memories: amongst them are the pioneering theatre director Max Reinhardt, the influential linguist Roman Jakobson, the notable writer of 'Dr. Schiwago' Boris Pasternak and the feisty journalist Elfie Siegel.

Juri today lives in Berlin. From his sunny apartment he shares his story with us.

It is the story of a man who has always looked forward, viewing the future with optimism and determination; A biographical documentary that will inspire you and stay in your heart.

**Synopsis Short**

The turbulent history of 20th century Europe is inextricably interwoven with the lifestory of Juri Elperin, the awarded literary translator, who found homeland in language: Davos, Berlin, Paris, Moscow and again Berlin // The Russian Revolution, the Republic of Weimar, Hitler, the Red Army, Stalin...and the joy of life.

**Synopsis Medium**

Born in Davos in 1917 to a Jewish intellectual family, "the Translator" Juri Elperin revisits today his life story as he journeyed from Berlin to Paris, Moscow and back to Berlin during the historical events of the 20th century. In his adventures, the German language, literature and a renowned cultural circle proved an invaluable company. During Stalin's anti-Cosmopolitan campaign, Juri settles in the secluded literary village of Peredelkino, and he starts translating. Over 150 Russian modern and classical works find a German audience through the writings of Juri, gaining him the national prize and a great fame amongst literary circles.

**Synopsis Long**

Born in Swiss Davos in 1917 to a wealthy, intellectual Jewish family, 'the Translator' Juri Elperin revisits today his life story as he journeyed across Europe during the historical events of the 20th century. Due to the Revolution in Russia, Juri spends his forming years with his family in the thriving city of Berlin during the Republic of Weimar. The pioneering theatre director Max Reinhardt, amongst other cultural friends of his parents, is an inspirational figure for the young boy. The Third Reich was firmly established in 1933, and the family fled to Paris, where Juri attended High school, soon to move again to the USSR where they remained.

The WWII erupts, during which the 24 year old Juri interrogated German officials for the Russian intelligence service at the special camp of Krasnogorsk. Yearning for his tormented country, Juri found homeland in language:

*'Hitler's regime has taken a lot from me, but not the language, which is to me the embodiment of Germany; this, he could not take.'*

With the end of the war, he started teaching German linguistics at the Moscow State Linguistic University.

Stalin's "rootless" anti-cosmopolitan campaign takes off, whereupon highly decorated Juri, together with other Jewish and western-oriented intellectuals, withdrew to the literary village of Peredelkino. From this small village and having no other resources, Juri Elperin, close to 40 years old, started translating. Over 150 Russian modern and classical works find a German audience through the writings of Juri, gaining him the national prize and a great fame amongst literary circles.

The Elperins set up a lively home in Peredelkino, where the family grew in the company of their cultural, intellectual and cosmopolitan friends. Amongst them were 'Dr. Schiwago' writer Boris Pasternak and the feisty journalist Elfie Siegel, whom we meet later in the film. Juri's daughter also admits: *'Outside of this house, we always felt strangers in Russia.'* When in 2000 the house was burned down the family left Russia to return to Berlin.

Old personal pictures are merged with readings from Juri Elperin's translated work throughout the film. We follow his honorary visit to University Basel in 2010, and in working with his colleague on a new book. Anecdotal stories from the translator's circles provide an insight into his working life.

As we see Juri drinking tea with his wife of many years, we come to realise that the film is finally about old age. It is a documentary about an old man, who looks back to his life in full and celebrates it. An inspirational story about a man who always looked forward and never stopped working. In the closing of the film Juri confesses:

*'Only when you get older you learn to appreciate time; when it is already over.*

*But that doesn't mean that one should not use the time that still remains. One should: every day and every year. We should enjoy the light, enjoy life and that everything goes on and on...'*

**1. What was your inspiration for making this documentary?**

A few years ago I met Juri Elperin and we had one of those long and rich conversations, that inevitably lead to the forming of a strong friendship. At the time, I was in Berlin, a city that is deeply marked by history, and was looking for a story for my first film. I've always been interested in history and especially in the 20th century and the political restructuring that took place. I was reading 'The Age of Extremes' by Eric Hobsbawm, a wonderful book that has been a great reference for this film: It seemed to me that Juri in his life has indeed experienced the political clashes described in the book, the passage from the October revolution to the new millennium – the rise, decline and fall of the regimes. Juri gave a personal narrative to the subject I wished to address. I realised, I had my story...

**2. What is your relationship with Juri Elperin? How did you meet him?**

I knew Juri very little before I decided to film his biography, but I was fascinated by his character and his charisma in storytelling. Making the film together, brought us very close and bonded us as friends, a process that gave heart to our film. I felt honoured to travel with Juri to Paris for the first time again after 78 years, since 1936. We were ending the filming days with great conversations and a few cognacs at the bar in the 7th arrondissement at late midnight, and yet every morning at 9am, like a very punctual German, he would wait for me at the reception ready to start work. I feel lucky to have befriended and worked with a true intellectual of the 20th century, an inspiring man with a fresh humour and a young heart and brain. We still see each other regularly.

**3. Why did you decide to film in different locations and how has revisiting these places with Juri affected the outcome of the film?**

The best way to describe a journeyed life like the one that Juri lived is by following the traces of each step: being born and growing up, maturing, falling in love and becoming an adult, a family man and a professional. In this film I was interested to show the passage of history from the beginning of the 20th century to today through the personal story of Juri. The juxtaposition of images and stories from the past with the live filming of the exact same locations today, have powerfully allowed this time passing to emerge.

All the locations in the film were extremely relevant to Juri's biography, and the memories in each evoked different feelings that informed the film in multiple ways. Unable to spot today the house where he grew up in Berlin, Juri gave us a powerful confession encapsulating the whole film.

**4. How long did the project take?**

I met Juri in 2011 and almost immediately we started researching for the film. We started filming at the end of 2011 and finished around the end of 2013. Near the end of 2014 we finished the editing. Our budget was limited, and the crew worked for very little money, which meant that we had to work around everyone's schedule in order to make it. It was a long process, but a valuable one.

**5. Why did you decide to include in the film the lecture of Juri in the Basel University for Slavic languages? How did this inform the film?**

The Basel University for Slavic languages is one of the most important and respected universities for the Russian language in Europe. They invited Juri to lecture about his work, and I consider this a very important fact. Even in this late age, Juri is still relevant amongst the European Universities and an active academic, attracting a good crowd whenever he is invited to speak. I wanted to capture this teaching session of Juri that exemplifies his wit, intellect and passion for literature and languages. It gave a perspective of his professional life and justifies the high regard he celebrates from his fellow academics.

**6. What was the most interesting subject of the film for you personally?**

The 20th century has staged some of the most important political battles for humanity. In it we see the historical passage from the October Revolution that marked the end of the old regimes to today's neoliberal system. During this period we have experienced the rise, decline and fall of communism as an alternative to capitalism. In Russian literature and history one can grasp the harm and distress that Stalinism affected to the hopes of the Russian intelligentsia for a more humane system, voices that still echo today. I hope to have enlightened some of these issues in the film. Capturing Juri and Elfie Siegel criticizing Putin's politics today I feel gives us a glimpse of the efforts of this intelligentsia for political and social sustainability.

**7. How were you able to fund the project?**

I, as a producer, was in a rush to start filming also due to the age of Juri. His health is still in a good shape but I was worried that if we try to get funding it might take too long and not allow us to get the film done. So we self-funded a big part of the film. We had a great story to tell and a fascinating and charismatic person to say it, so we managed to gather an inspired crew that worked for very little money. Based on the positive feedback we have as yet received from the selected few that have seen the work, we hope that we can get some of this money back in the next period and be able to raise funding for future projects.

**8. What would you like the audience to take with after watching the film?**

This is a film about European history and politics and especially about the impact of Russian history on the lives and hopes of people across Europe. It is also a film about literature and culture, exemplifying their ability to give people hope and strength; how intellect and willpower can allow for a better life even under difficult conditions. Finally, it is about old age, urging us to look forward towards the future and celebrate what we already have, which is of course life itself. I hope with this film to inspire to people a curiosity for history and optimism for the future, knowledge of the past that feeds the present and allows us to walk joyfully ahead. It remains for our audience to respond to our message.

## ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

### **Producer - Filmmaker's Statement: Manfred Wiesner**

My greatest interest in documentaries is based on their power to present the art of life in its uttermost strength: 'Life itself caught in the act'. I am looking for stories that inspire, speak of ideas and give a perspective, stories that connect to history.



Meeting Juri and hearing his story left me with no other wish than to turn it into a film for a wider audience. The back-ground of the dramatic history of the 20th century gives the story a political perspective, in which the human character of Juri carries the warmth of optimism. He is a true intellectual of the 20th century, with a fresh humour and a young heart and brain. His persistence to make the best of his situation turned the restrictions of his life into his greatest success and at close to 40 years of age he was able to start a new career. In this story I found the proof that language and culture stay always with you and can provide for a better quality of life: In Juri's case his language provided for a home when he was left with none.

I asked Juri to revisit his life from one place to the next and embark with me on the same journey after all these years. In respect to the generosity of Juri who accepted to take part in this, I did everything I could to make it an honest film that remains true to its subject. With a very small budget, but a true passion to make this story known, we managed to make a film that stays in your heart.



### **Camera - Filmmaker's Statement: Grigory Manyuk**

I have dedicated my career in creating documentary films that present the life, customs and history of Jewish people around the world. However in this film I got the chance to working in something different: to make a story about someone who overcomes his religious origins and stands as an individual in society. Juri never really saw himself as Jewish, but as German, shaped with the great liberal traditions of the Weimar Republic. As he once remarked: 'Religion is something fundamentally medieval to me. I cannot relate to it.' Despite this fact, he like so many other secular Jews in Europe, was a victim of the deadly anti-Semitism in Nazi-Germany and even later of Stalin's anti-cosmopolitan campaign. I find this overwhelming.

When Manfred approached me for this film, I accepted with no hesitation. Not only was I thrilled to meet this wonderful writer, but his story offered a unique chance to make a film about the tumultuous times of the 20th century from a human perspective. This is a film that allows the audience to see an inspiring story that connects history with life and exemplifies the power that culture has to keep us going: Language and literature is therefore the determining aspect for the translator Juri Elperin, and this is a powerful message to share.

## CREDITS

## CREDITS

|                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| Filmmaker               | <b>GRIGORY MANYUK</b>                                 |
| Filmmaker               | <b>MANFRED WIESNER</b>                                |
| Producer                | <b>MANFRED WIESNER</b>                                |
| Production Assistance   | <b>ALIKI KYLIKA</b>                                   |
| Director of Photography | <b>GRIGORY MANYUK</b>                                 |
| Camera                  | <b>GRIGORY MANYUK</b>                                 |
|                         | <b>STEFAN LASSONCZYK</b>                              |
| 2nd Unit Camera         | <b>MANFRED WIESNER</b>                                |
|                         | <b>NATALIA KUZNYETSOVA</b>                            |
| Editor                  | <b>PHILIPP GROMOV</b>                                 |
| Composer                | <b>DANIEL SARKISOV</b>                                |
| Voiceover               | <b>ROMANUS FUHRMANN</b>                               |
| Sound Designer & mix    | <b>JOHANNES HAMPEL</b>                                |
| Sound recording         | <b>JÜRGEN SCHLAG</b>                                  |
| Color grading           | <b>PHILIPP GROMOV</b>                                 |
|                         | <b>SERGEY KOVYNEV</b>                                 |
| Translation             | <b>MARION FOHRER</b>                                  |
|                         | <b>ANIKA MEIER</b>                                    |
|                         | <b>MICHAIL VOROBIOV</b>                               |
|                         | <b>ALICE RUSTE</b>                                    |
|                         | <b>IRENA ROZENFELD</b>                                |
|                         | <b>MATHIAS KINDLER</b>                                |
| Acknowledgments         | <b>OKSANA PULLACH</b>                                 |
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|                         | <b>SCHUHMACHEREI OLAF SCHERLER</b>                    |
|                         | <b>REGINA &amp; WOLFGANG SCHÜTT "UHR-ALTE-ZEITEN"</b> |



filmmaker Manfred Wiesner with Juri Elperin



Juri Elperin with film crew during shooting



Juri Elperin , a young man



teaching at the Basel University for Slavic languages



Juri Elperin with his father in Berlin (around 1922)



**Manfred Wiesner | Filmmaker**

Born in 1975 in Salzburg, Austria. He attended film production and directing courses at Raindance in London, specialized in documentaries at News-On-Video in Vienna, and followed Daniel Meyers in camera tutorials in Paris. In 2012 he met Juri Elperin and inspired by his story he decided to turn it into a film. 'The Translator' is his first feature documentary. Manfred currently lives in London.



**Grigory Manyuk | Filmmaker**

Born in 1947 in Odessa, he studied filmmaking in the Moscow College for Cinematography. Since 1992 he's been working as a documentary director and cameraman in Moscow and Berlin for independent films as well as the tv (WDR, RTVI, DW, ARTE). Works include: 'Nathan, the Sage, 300 years after' (2001: 30min), 'Flashback' (2003: cameraman, director Herz Frank: first prize winner NICA 2004 Russia and ARTE 2003), 'German lessons' (2011) an autobiographical film.



**Philipp Gromov | Editor**

Philipp Gromov lives and works as a freelance editor in Berlin. He studied music in the HfM in Detmold. His main interest lie in documentary and music productions. Works include: 'Make Love' (2013-14, TV Series), 'Zelim's Confession' (2013, director: Natalia Mikhaylova), 'The other Chelsea' (2011, director: Jakob Preuss). [www.philipp-gromov.com/](http://www.philipp-gromov.com/)



**Johannes Hampel | Sound designer**

Johannes Hampel is a sound designer who currently lives and works in Berlin. He studied sound in HFF Potsdam. Works include: 'Make Love II' (2014, director: Tristan Ferland Milewski ), 'Breaking Horizons' (2012, director: Pola Beck), 'My Prince. My King' (2011, director: Ciril Braem).



**Romanus Fuhrmann | Voice Actor**

Romanus Fuhrmann is a Berlin based actor working in film, TV, theatre and the opera and provides voices for the radio and audio books in German. He studied in 1990 in Wien at the MW Max Reinhardt Seminar. He has performed in various roles including 'Smith' ('the Threepenny Opera', director: Klaus Maria Brandauer, 2006) and 'Mayor Domo' (R. Strauss 'Ariadne in Naxos', Teatro Municipal Santiago de Chile, 2011). <http://www.romanus-fuhrmann.de>



**Stefan Lassonczyk | Camera Assistant**

Stefan Lassonczyk studied electronic media in 'Hochschule der Medien' (HdM) in Stuttgart. His school project 'Gleis 9' (director: Raphaela Nitz , 2012), under the supervision prof. Stuart Marlow ,reached first place in the U.F.O. competition for Shortfilms & Advertisement in Leipzig. Previous filmographie includes: 'Politisch Korrekt' (short film, director Dejan Simonovic, 2012).

