



Scriptwriter Angel Wagenstein Remembers the Making of *Stars*

Transcript of Angel Wagenstein Remembers (USA, 2008, 20 min.), a filmed interview by Mariana Ivanova, released as bonus feature on DEFA Film Library's DVD STARS and also available on Kanopy.com

BULGARIA SCREENWRITER ANGEL WAGENSTEIN
SOFIA, BULGARIA, DECEMBER 2007

I wrote the script for *Stars* in 7 days, yet I was contemplating it for more than 77 days. During the time of [communist] persecution in Bulgaria, I fled from the Jewish community to join the partisans and became a member of the partisan brigade. During an unsuccessful secret operation, I was betrayed—paradoxically—by another Jew. One should always speak the truth without embellishment, and here are the facts. I was denounced by a Jew and was sentenced to death. So, when I say I wrote [the script] in only 7 days, don't think of it as a miracle, because I had already lived through all these events.

Several months after the end of WWII, I met three people who were the only survivors, if I am correct, from that transport of Jews depicted in the film. They were passing through Bulgaria on their way to their devastated hometowns, where they had no family left. One of the three survivors was a woman forced into prostitution at a German soldier's camp. She told me quite honestly, obviously very traumatized, about her horrible experiences of being in this brothel where German soldiers would satisfy their sexual needs. But this woman is not Ruth, my protagonist. Ruth should be viewed as an artistic construct. I envisioned her as a highly educated teacher who knew German, so she'd naturally be able to communicate with the Germans.

THE FIRST BULGARIAN-EAST GERMAN CO-PRODUCTION

I sent the script of *Stars* to the DEFA Studios in [East] Germany, and ten days later, we received a fax—everything was faxed in those days. It said, "Please send Wagenstein to Berlin." Trifon Trifonov, the Bulgarian film studio head—a remarkable, amicable person—and I went to Berlin together and signed the contracts for the co-production. It happened immediately. And then, suddenly, there was a strike. The script was initially sent to Kurt Maetzig, a well-known director at DEFA. After reading it, he declined to make the film, saying "Who is still interested in this topic? This is already dated." We are talking the end of 1957, the beginning of 1958. Maetzig said, "Who is interested in this topic? We have already made so many films about the Jewish question." I was very distressed. Here I was in Potsdam, but the person, who had received my script and was supposed to welcome me and work with me, was not at all interested in my topic. So, the script went to the dramaturge and editor, Willi Brückner, who succeeded Walter Schmidt. Willi Brückner was ready to help. He told me: "Listen, I have an idea. Don't give up yet. We will talk to Konrad Wolf. Do you know him?" I responded: "Of course, I do." Wolf was in Moscow at the time, so Brückner asked me to stay 10 more days in Potsdam and wait for his return. He was a young director, he told me, who hadn't yet worked on many projects other than *Professor Mamlock*. In fact, he'd just made *Sun Seekers*, a film that was subsequently banned in 1958. So I waited for Koni [Wolf] in Potsdam. We met and he received me very

warmly. I told him: "Koni, I have a script that you might want to read." He took the script and called me the next morning: "You and I, we will make a film!" This is how it all started.

I would like to emphasize one more thing. Koni immediately understood the emotional message of the film in a deep and authentic way. To my surprise, even after so many years, the film still resonates to my surprise with audiences. It still has that authenticity. Indeed, there are films that fade after ten years. Cinema itself is an ephemeral enterprise. A film can engage millions of viewers and then it wears off. *Stars* is a different kind of film. Koni was able to understand this very quickly. What was new in this film? I won't say that the scriptwriter or the director were geniuses. We were just young professionals. The point was that up until that day, the day in Cannes, the world on the screen had been divided between the 'bad Germans' and the 'good everybody else.' The Germans were the bad guys and all the rest of us were good people. This film was the first to break with this misconception. Later, the misconception was challenged and complicated again and again, but *Stars* was the first film to openly state: There are different types of Germans, there are different types of Bulgarians—both fascist and anti-fascist.

RECEPTION IN EAST AND WEST GERMANY

The film later became quite controversial. Perhaps for the first—and maybe last—time in my life, I experienced such a triumph. In East Germany, we received many ovations while driving in open sports cars. Sascha Kruscharska was covered in flowers. The people threw flowers at her and her car was quickly filled with them. It was an unbelievable triumph in East Germany. In West Germany—and one should account for the very strained relationship between the two Germanys—the film distribution union awarded the film with the designation "Besonders wertvoll" (particularly valuable). This ensured the film's release on all the screens in West Germany, despite the freeze in the relations between East and West. Perhaps this film was one of the first cases of reaching out and attempting to achieve a mutual understanding.

CENSORSHIP IN BULGARIA

A large DEFA delegation came to Sofia for the film's premiere in Bulgaria. I repeat: the film hadn't yet been screened at Cannes and there was still discussion about whether or not the film was actually good. The head of that delegation was the director of DEFA himself, Prof. Dr. Wilkening. He was an extraordinary man. He had raised a respectable European film studio from the ruins of the former German film studios Babelsberg, UFA. DEFA established itself from the very beginning as a significant cinematic presence in the artistic life of Europe. Led by Wilkening, the delegation consisted of director Konrad Wolf, dramaturg Willi Brückner, and the head of the Babelsberg Artistic Production Group, Dieter Wolf. We were all good friends. The Bulgarian side was represented by the director of the Boyana Film Studios, the director of the Bulgarian Cinematography Union and others. So, the screening took place. The Germans celebrated the film; I was hovering on the clouds of the success.

Afterwards, we were invited to the Bulgarian cinematography director's office, where we were served coffee and cognac. Then the director said: "Well, we saw the film. Actually, we had already seen it. First of all, welcome to our German friends. But we want to inform you that we are banning the film and it will not be released in the Bulgarian theaters. We can't allow it." The Germans were perplexed. And as for my part—I had been through so much when I was young—but never experienced such distress. I'd heard my death sentence pronounced and was prohibited from seeing my parents by my executioners, because I had laughed out loud in court. Well, my laughter was a pose back then, in order to tell the fascists: We are not afraid of the noose! At that young age—I was only 21—it was an expression of my idealism. And even though I had laughed at my own death sentence, later in 1959, when I was told the film would be banned,

my lip burst, and blood ran down my chin onto my shirt. Never before and never again had I experienced such terror, tension and stress. But why did they want to ban the film? Because they saw the film as an embodiment of “abstract humanism.” During the Stalinist era, there was this idiotic definition of “abstract humanism.” I still don’t know the difference between an ‘abstract’ and a ‘concrete’ humanism. Anyway, Prof. Wilkening went completely pale and said: “Please make the necessary arrangements. We are returning to the GDR tomorrow morning.” No more comments. The German delegation left the following morning. Nobody said anything else.

However, a correspondence between the Central Committees of the East German SED and the Bulgarian BKP (Communist Party) was initiated: “Dear Comrades, how shall we handle this situation? The film was an absolute success in Germany. We would like to submit it to international festivals.” In the late 50s, the GDR was not yet officially recognized by the West, therefore the film could be only submitted to festivals as a Bulgarian film. Yet Bulgaria banned the film. The Germans were totally puzzled by this decision. The case was finally taken to the Bulgarian Minister of Culture, Zhivko Zhivkov, not to be confused with the General Secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party, Todor Zhivkov. The minister, also a member of the Politburo and esteemed communist, was commissioned with the important task to organize a new discussion of the film. Once again, *Stars* was specially screened for political functionaries, half of whom were dummies and bureaucrats who did not have the least idea about filmmaking and art.

At the end of the film, the minister said: “Look, comrades, I don’t find the film harmful. We might as well show it. But I turn to you, Wagenstein: what is your message? You haven’t shown the difference between Jewish proletariat and bourgeoisie. I see no difference! In the film, everybody is just Jewish!” To that I responded: “Look, when a child was thrown in the crematoria or the gas chambers, I don’t care if this was the child of the proletarians or the bourgeois.” He pointed at me: “Just look at them, our intelligentsia! Their heads messed up! All confused! For them, it was all the same, if the child was bourgeois or proletarian.” Today I say: They were the idiots. Today, this story sounds improbable. Despite their disagreement, however, the Bulgarian officials granted the film their ‘generous consent’ so it could be screened at festivals. The film later received the Special Jury Prize at Cannes. You should know that this prize is in recognition of art film, while the Golden Palm is a trademark, a commercial vehicle. I can still remember the film awarded the Golden Palm. The Golden Palm was awarded to *Orfeu Negro* (*The Black Orpheus*), a film that perhaps few will remember today. It was just another comedy picture... It was set in Brazil during the Carnival in Rio de Janeiro. It was a commercial film with a great financial investment, and that influenced the jury members. At the same time, *Stars* got reviews in at least 70 French journals and magazines, mostly raving about the female lead, Sasha Kruscharska. She was invited to go to France, but she could not attend the festival because Bulgaria wasn’t willing to invest 10 francs in her trip. The film’s star was not at the festival! But after the festival, France invited her to visit Paris. A headline from *Le Monde* at the time, for example, read: “The two K’s in Paris: Kruscharska and Khrushchev.” Khrushchev was suddenly in second place to Kruscharska. This was such a triumph for this girl, a junior student at the Film and Theater Academy in Sofia.

After that, the film was released in Bulgarian theaters, but only for a short period of time. In fact, for 20 years, the greater Bulgarian audiences were not familiar with the film. It wasn’t until the mid-1980s—maybe 1983 or 84—when I was called by Prof. Alexander Grozev and he informed me that *Stars* would be shown on the Bulgarian state TV channel. “You need to watch it,” he told me, which I did. Grozev spoke for ten minutes before the film about its international success. I was happy the film was finally released in Bulgaria.

Note from the DEFA Film Library: Stars was released in East Germany on March 27, 1959; it screened in Cannes on May 6, 1959. After the West German official FSK film approval and rating dated March 23, 1960, the film was released in West Germany on June 3, 1960 (see imdb.com and filmportal.de).