Magnitogorsk: Forging the New Man. by Pieter Jan Smit
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**FILM REVIEW**

*Magnitogorsk: Forging the New Man.* Dir. Pieter Jan Smit. First Run Icarus Films, 1996. 60 minutes. In Russian and Dutch with English subtitles. $400.00, sale. $90.00, rental.

Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens’s *Song of Heroes*, shot in Magnitogorsk in the spring of 1932, celebrates the building of socialism as reflected in the lives of enthusiastic young men and women. Pieter Jan Smit, also Dutch, opens his documentary some sixty years later in a Magnitogorsk cinema with a small group of people watching the Ivens film. Midway through Smit’s work, the narrator remarks that Ivens’s images of the first Five-Year Plan shown in Moscow and around the world in 1933, were once the only ones available. It emerges that we are being offered a corrective to procommunist propaganda, in 1996. Smit’s documentary does not pursue a broader understanding of Ivens’s motivations or of the times in which he worked, but the expose may inadvertently arouse interest in the original.

None of Ivens’s heroes, if any survive, makes an appearance. Instead, Smit cuts back and forth between four families: (1) a retired couple, after painful recollections and long silences on camera, conclude that their lives are essentially over; (2) a young boy, the son of a nurse who works at a polyclinic and a steelworker, struggles to answer a teacher’s English-language questions in inane scripted English; (3) a married woman makes soup for her multigenerational family and explains how she compensates for slow work at the sewing factory by sewing articles at home for sale, then rides in the sidecar of a motorcycle driven by a man, presumably her husband, to an unnamed destination to milk a cow from which they earn a bit more money; finally, (4) an elderly woman proudly recalls her husband’s shockwork exploits while leafing through what experts will recognize as the glossy SSSR na stroike, then reads a searing letter belatedly explaining that in 1938 her husband was sentenced, shot, and most likely buried in a mass grave; her granddaughter, having elicited the older woman’s bitter story, tells her own of poorly paid work in a bacteriological laboratory, her ambivalence about having a child in such an unhealthy environment, with no prospects of doing so, and her frustration at the newfound freedom to travel that lies beyond her financial reach. Then she begins to cry. Melodramatic music blares in and out. Many of the subjects are not identified until the final credits, and then without connecting the names to faces. Background information necessary to understand their stories does not come until halfway through, and even then is tightly rationed. Striking black-and-white clips from 1932 come and go, attended by voice-over readings from Ivens’s coauthored retrospective account of his time in Magnitogorsk, whose iconic role is made to seem a function of Ivens’s obscure film. For the undergraduate audience, the film may prove difficult to follow.

Within Smit’s limited-range tableau of disjointed scenes, some episodes do make an impression. Amid abandoned, rubble-strewn fields once home to the barracks of the euphemistically named settlement of special resettlers, the retired husband and wife deny that they were kulaks, denounce collectivization, and then recount their deportation and further hardships upon arrival in the barren steppe. What happened in the six decades since 1933 we are not told, until suddenly the man leads us on a tour of the open-hearth shops, where he evidently used to work, accompanied by the boy from English class, who seems captivated by the machines and molten metal. The documentary ends when the boy, having made a wish, blows out the candles on a cake at a party for his eleventh birthday. All goes dark. The youth’s wish goes unreported, as if it could not possibly matter. Earlier, however, his steelworker father, asked if he would like to see his son work at the steel plant, responds in the affirmative, noting the relative solidity (amid uncertainty) of the gigantic enterprise, which still seems to be in operation, though that circumstance is not pursued. A misstatement by a rehabilitation commission official that fully half of rural Tataria was expelled to Magnitogorsk is allowed to stand. A group of people pray in a mosque, whose recent construction goes unmentioned. We sense a welcome focus on non-Russians, but are not informed of it.

Close inspection of the credits reveals the subjects to be: Schalgutdinov and Fahime Gizatov, the elderly couple of dekulakized Tatar peasants; Ramil Timoergaleev, the ten-

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year-old Tatar boy with his “middle-class” parents, Nelli and Shamil; Olga Tikhonova and her Tatar family; and Emilia Bakke, widow of the executed loyal shockworker Viktor Kalmykov, with her granddaughter Oksana, who also serves as one of the film’s prompting interviewers. Viewers will note a discrepancy between the attitudes of Smit’s subjects and the filmmaker’s predilection for bleak simplification. Ironically perhaps, given Smit’s relentless debunking, the protagonists come across as heroes, of the unsung sort, resourceful and dignified, in a few cases hopeful, however hard-pressed.

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