

Leningrad Siege Survivors Praise Dutch Filmmaker with Medal

By [Eradzh Nidoev](#)

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The late painter Lenina Dmitrievna translated her memory of eating a pet cat during the siege into her artwork.

Dutch filmmaker Jessica Gorter doesn't have relatives who had to endure the siege of Leningrad. She hasn't lived in St. Petersburg, and she grew up speaking what locals might consider an obscure language.

But what Gorter does have practically makes her an honorary St. Petersburg resident: a wartime medal from one of the siege's survivors, all thanks to her emotional documentary about one of the most tragic periods in the city's history.

"900 Days: Myths & Reality of the Leningrad Blockade," which opens in St. Petersburg and Moscow this week, presents some of the survivors of the infamous siege, their personal memories of the war and their struggles in dealing with these memories.

Gorter first came to St. Petersburg in 1989, when she was 18 years old. She was fascinated by the silent perestroika revolution taking place and later decided to focus her filmmaking career on post-Soviet Russia.

Some of her previous projects include "Piter," a documentary about seven residents from Russia's cultural capital, and "Ferryman across the Volga."

The Moscow Times sat down with Gorter to talk about her impressions on filming "900 Days" and the honor local residents bestowed on her for her work.

Q: Why did you decide to shoot a documentary about the Leningrad siege?

A: If you come to St. Petersburg, it is impossible to go there without hearing a lot about it. Every family in St. Petersburg is connected to this tragedy and history. There are a lot of places in the city that remind you of it. It is everywhere, and if come more often you will also see it more clearly. At some point, I was making my previous film, "Piter," a history of St. Petersburg and seven of its inhabitants in days of historic transition. There was an old woman in my film. She told me about the blockade. She was around 18 years old then and she was walking on the street. It was around minus 30 degrees Celsius, and she ran into an apartment building to take shelter from the cold. She entered the apartment, and there she saw a whole family sitting around the table. They had starved to death and were frozen. This image really was etched into my consciousness. Despite being 90 years old, she had never told anyone about this, and I was really shocked. What actually happened here? Why did I know so little about it?

Q: Was this woman one of the main characters in the movie about the siege?

A: No, unfortunately she died right after I made my previous film.

Q: What did you want to show in your new film?

A: There are a lot of films about the siege in Russia and a few of them in the West, but not that many. The siege of Leningrad is not very well known in the West and is often mistaken for the battle of Stalingrad. I did not want to make a film explaining what happened day to day. That has been done. I did not want to make a film that uncovers new facts. All the information in my film is known right now. But what I did want to do is to make a film about the blokadniki (siege victims) themselves, about their memories and the way they deal with these memories today. That was really important for me.

Q: How did you find all these people?

A: I have visited Russia many times. I had a very good network; people really helped me. There were different ways I found people. I found one of the subjects, Lenina Dmitrievna, the cat lady, when I was working on another film. I was driving around with a photographer, and I told him I was also working on a film about the blockade. He told me that about 10 years prior there had been an exhibition of unofficial artists in St. Petersburg. There he saw the most incredible painting about the siege. The painter was already an old woman, and he feared that she would have died by then. But she was alive and still very able to tell her story.

Also, I went to the organization of the survivors of the siege of Leningrad. It seemed like

a logical thing to do. All in all, the research and finding the protagonists took a long time because you cannot just start talking about the siege. It's such a painful subject. I visited the people shown in the film. We talked a lot, sometimes about the siege, often about other things. But once we started filming, I had a feeling that most of them really wanted to tell their story even though it was really hard.

Q: In the end, one of your heroes gave you a medal. How did that make you feel?

A: I was very confused, a little bit shocked. I did not expect it. I did not know what to do. I did not think I could take it because I think they should give it to their children or grandchildren. But they insisted that I take it, so I did. I felt honored. I feel as if I am the keeper of the medal. If someone in their family wants the medal, I will give it back. It's their family history.

Q: Why do you think the characters were not proud of these medals?

A: I think in the film they make it clear themselves why they don't like to have medals. They don't like Stalin and the way he won the war. They do not like to be treated as heroes. For them, there is a whole other side to this history that should be looked at, but you should see the film if you want to know more about it.

"[900 Days: Myths & Reality of the Leningrad Blockade](#)" plays Jan. 28 at 7 p.m. at Dom Kino, 13/1 Ulitsa Vasiliyevskaya. It will also be shown Jan. 29 at 7 p.m. at Muzei Kino, 18 Perevedenovsky Pereulok.

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