

STATELESS

Written and Directed by Michael Drob

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86 mins • 2014 • USA • Digital, DVD, DVD Blu-Ray • Russian/English Subtitles

Facebook

www.facebook.com/statelessdoc

Webpage

www.stateless.us

What others are saying about Stateless

“..... no one had ever asked about the process, then along came Michael....this film is as close as I’ve ever seen to what actually happened....”

- David Harris, Executive Director, AJC Global Jewish Advocacy

“....It is a powerful, moving portrayal of what is, for many of us, the most important event of our lives.”

-Lea Zeltserman, Tablet Magazine



3 Line Synopsis

Stateless chronicles the immigration of Soviet Jews to the US in the late 1980's. The film focuses on the question of why so many were denied refugee status at that time and how this was resolved.

125 Word Synopsis

In the late 1980's Soviet Jews were once again given permission to leave the USSR. Unlike their 'refusenik' predecessors, those coming to the US were now burdened with having to prove "reasonable fear of persecution," a concept simply not understood by those born into maltreatment. Because of this, thousands had their applications for refugee status denied, leaving them in Italy -- Stateless. This is the first documentary film that guides us through this experience as recalled by the emigres themselves and with political context by representatives of HIAS, NYANA, AJC and others.

Synopsis

History

Events in Stateless take place during the politically charged climate of the late 1980's. At that time the USSR was home to the largest population of Jews in Europe. Under pressure from various political sources, including that of U.S. Jewry, the Soviet government opened the borders and allowed its Jewish population to leave the country. This time the migrants would have the freedom to choose their destination, but those who hoped to make the United States their home now had to prove "a reasonable fear of persecution." For those born into a climate where anti-semitism was the norm, this was difficult, and without any information or a political voice they were denied refugee status in ever increasing numbers. This left thousands stranded in Italy -- Stateless.

Personal stories

The narrative in the film is unfolded through first hand accounts by emigre's themselves. It starts by explaining the agonizing weight of the decision to leave, highlighted by stories of discrimination both subtle and overt, and the possible social repercussions of this choice. Even in the time of "Perestroika," such a leap of faith meant a forfeit of citizenship and all personal property, and in the case of refusal, still carried with it social and career suicide.

Despite this, in a matter of months, thousands pursued this course at the price of bullying, extortion and bribery. Finally, with their belongings condensed into a few suitcases and with a meager allowance of several hundred dollars *per family*, emigres said their last goodbye to friends and family and left the only home they've ever known.

Vienna-Rome Pipeline

Vienna, was the first stopping point on the immigration journey, as part of the infamous Vienna-Rome pipeline used in previous migrations. Stateless provides the viewer with a unique glimpse of it through the eyes of those seeing the Western world for the first time. A deeply emotional resonance from people who have only experienced the West through the filter of communist propaganda. For many this is a bittersweet validation of their decision to leave.

US bound families moved on to Italy, the next stop in the journey and the place where they petitioned the U.S. embassy for acceptance into the country. The film includes archival footage of this harried arrival in the chaos of suitcases and people. Here, close to 40% of families seeking asylum had their applications denied seemingly without reason. For them, it was an everyday struggle to make ends meet and shouldering the hopelessness that came from not knowing what will happen next.

American Perspective

The director also included an important perspective of those on the other side of this experience, the agency workers, volunteers, and Jewish political leaders. People like David Harris from the American Jewish Committee and Mark Hetfield from HIAS, who ushered immigrants into their new life despite cultural and language barriers. Standing witness as the emigres found their voice and began to regain a connection to the Jewish people; something that was almost completely severed by years of communist repression. Leadership from NYANA and JOINT provided the last critical part of the triad, the political commentary, explaining the gears and cogs that kept this process moving forward.

As all the stories are tied together a multifaceted picture emerges.

In the end, 25 years later, there is an answer for those wondering "Why was I denied?" through a story told in the voices of those who lived it.

Credit List

Director, Writer, Producer: Michael Drob
Editor: Michael Drob and Victoria Drob
Original Music: Aaron Guralnik

Bios

Director:

Michael Drob emigrated from Riga, Latvia, in 1988 at the age of 10. His family was denied refugee status by the United States and remained stranded in Italy for ten months. Deeply affected by this experience, even as a child, Michael wanted to find out the “Why?” behind the denials. His quest, along with support from COJECO’s BluePrint Fellowship, resulted in this deeply moving film. He hopes it will serve as a tool to educate future generations about this part of Jewish history and provide answers for thousands of immigrants who shared his family’s fate.

Michael studied filmmaking at Rutgers University under the tutelage of Oscar winning director Ross Kauffman and has operated his own video production company, Story Tailors, since 2005. Stateless is his first foray into documentary filmmaking.

Composer:

The original score for Stateless was composed by Aaron Guralnik. The Guralnik family immigrated to Israel, from Khabarovsk, Russia, in 1990. Aaron has studied music and classical piano since age 8 and while studying in the United States from 2004 to 2010, has composed and performed as part of a progressive rock band - Seven Ways Out. Their eponymous debut album can be found on iTunes and other digital music stores.