

PERSIAN LESSONS

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT (VADIM PERELMAN)

PERSIAN LESSONS has been under my skin for two years. When I first read Ilja Tsofin's screenplay, I remember being incredibly touched by its drama and poetry. The story unfolded like a piece of great music and grew in power and resonance, building to a crescendo of pure emotion. When I finished reading, I was filled with deep empathy and understanding of its main characters. In my heart, there was an absolute desire to bring this story to the screen, to share it with the world. This story is exceptional on many levels, infused with tragedy, irony, the kindling of hope, friendship in the unlikeliest circumstances in life-threatening conditions. Like a Russian doll, the script has layers of hidden treats for the viewer to discover and savour.

In 1942, Gilles Kremer, a Belgian Jew, passes himself off as a Persian, in order to save himself from being shot by the SS. This lie saves his life, but he cannot imagine what fate has in store for him. Hoping to be rewarded, German soldiers bring him to an internment camp and hand him over to Klaus Koch, the camp's cook, who dreams of going to Iran after the war to open a restaurant. He is looking for a Persian to teach him Farsi. Hearing Gilles' claim, Koch prevents Gilles from being shipped to Auschwitz with the other prisoners, and sets a rigid regimen of Persian lessons for them. Gilles is faced with an impossible task of teaching a language he doesn't know, literally inventing it so that he may survive. Every evening, exhausted from the days' physical labour, he must invent and teach Koch the meaning of four new words. On top of that, he must not forget the words he already taught. Four words a day is one hundred and twenty words a month, is almost fifteen hundred word a year. How to invent them and how to remember them all? Many pitfalls and dangers await our hero in this endeavour. Koch is suspicious of Gilles and his claim – every slip up and mistake may cost Gilles his life as he struggles to concentrate. On top of that, he is faced with deadly danger from Max, an SS soldier, who is intent on revealing the truth about Gilles at any price. Some of the other Jewish prisoners resent Gilles' situation and his life depends on whether they reveal his secret or not. But that's not all. The impressive twist of the story is that the words which Gilles teaches Koch are inspired by and based on Jewish names of the doomed prisoners, who pass through on their way to death in the extermination camps. Consider the irony and the poignancy of this – a Jew in a concentration camp teaches a Nazi a made-up language, based on the names of victims, and eventually thusly uncovers the executioner's human qualities. Conceptually and meaningfully, by using Jewish names as a basis for his language, Gilles not only saves his own life, but immortalises the names of thousands of Holocaust victims, creating a memorial for their descendants.

For the fans of thrillers and adventure stories, PERSIAN LESSONS is an absolute treat. Filled with suspense, tension, and plot turns, the film is a gripping and emotional tale of survival at any cost. Fans of psychological, personal drama will be

fascinated to observe the development of the Gilles-Koch relationship – a Jew and a German, a prisoner and a jailer, a teacher and student. As the lessons progress, the two men eventually cease to be a trembling, half-starved prisoner and a malevolent German Sturmführer and become a kind and patient teacher and his not-too-bright, earnest student. Their suspicion and fear turn into a symbiotic, co-dependent relationship, drawing them closer together in these unlikeliest of circumstances. Koch saves Gilles from starvation and protects him from being shipped to the death camps. In return, Gilles inadvertently manages to awaken Koch's dormant belief in himself. From a cruel Nazi executioner, Koch takes steps to becoming a feeling and compassionate man. You might even say that this transformation presents a subtle metaphor of post-war Germany's changed self-image. PERSIAN LESSONS is unique from other Holocaust-themed films in its tone. The story is hard-hitting and dramatic, but it miraculously finds a place for humor, hope, irony. The author finds light in even most horrific situations, adding another facet to the drama of the story and crafting a reality where laughter and tears mix elegantly and effortlessly.