



REPENTANCE

By Karen Rosenberg

MOSCOW

IN 1946, SERGEI EISENSTEIN RECEIVED a letter from Tengiz Abuladze and Revaz (Rezo) Chkheidze, two young men from the Soviet republic of Georgia who had decided to become directors after seeing Eisenstein's work and who longed to study filmmaking at his feet. It was not a good moment for the man who'd made *Battleship Potemkin* and *Ten Days That Shook the World*. The revolution that Eisenstein had embraced had given way to Stalin's terror, which the arts were supposed to cheerfully ignore or sweetly praise. In *Ivan the Terrible, Part II*, Eisenstein strongly hinted that he despised paranoid, brutal dictators like Stalin, and he must have known that criticism of his work was inevitable.

In the hospital, recovering from a heart attack (later, another would kill him), he wrote his admirers that he was glad that young people were interested in the great art that film sometimes can be. But they should know, he said, that the filmmaker's work is hard, the hardest of all the arts. Think hard, he cautioned, before you take it up.

Getting to *Repentance*: Tengiz Abuladze, whose film, *Repentance*, about a paranoid, brutal director was banned from 1984 to 1986, has not forgotten this letter. He recited parts of it to me during my recent visit to Moscow. Having decided to become a director, he learned fast how right his idol had been. Later in 1946, Eisenstein was viciously

attacked by the Central Committee of the Communist Party for *Ivan the Terrible, Part II*. And after Abuladze's first year at the Moscow film school, his professor, director Sergie Yutkevich, was fired for "cosmopolitanism," the euphemism for Jewishness.

"What we didn't see in our lives..." the 64-year-old director said, quietly. "And I have to tell you," he added later, "that no people suffered as much as mine. I emphasize this because some think that since Stalin was from Georgia he spared the Georgians and didn't arrest anyone, but protected them. Nothing of the kind."

As perhaps the most popular of the arts, film was tightly controlled in the U.S.S.R., even after Stalin. Some directors stopped making films rather than produce rot; others compromised their talent and fell into deep depression. For years, Abuladze was lucky to find a relatively liberal atmosphere in Gruziafilm, the Georgian film studio. There, for instance, he made two feature films about tyranny: *A Plea* (1968) and *The Wishing Tree* (1977). At the end of 1982, he finished the scenario for *Repentance*, which was to be the last in this trilogy about the victimization of innocent people. He says he was encouraged to write the screenplay

by Eduard Shevardnadze, then first secretary of the Georgian Communist Party, and now (under Gorbachov) the Soviet foreign minister. **Evading the censors:** But Abuladze feared the Soviet film agency Goskino would not approve the script, so he took the advice of his old friend Rezo Chkheidze, who had become the head of the Gruziafilm studio, and produced the film for Georgian television. There was a two-hour time slot over which the republic station had control. Moscow had to know only the theme of the program and the director.

"We sent a telegram to the central television station in Moscow saying that the director Abuladze, winner of a People's Artist award, would shoot a film on a moral/ethical theme. They were delighted that Abuladze had finally decided to work in television and gave us permission."

What made the script of *Repentance* so controversial were details of the Stalin era that had long been covered up in public in the U.S.S.R. "We interviewed many people—in fact, they wrote most of the scenario," Abuladze said.

The scene where children and adults examine a pile of logs to see if prisoners they know had scratched their names or addresses on them is based on fact. "It would

be impossible to think up such an episode. We were told about it." And history suggested the music from René Clair's film of the '30s *Under the Roofs of Paris* that can be heard as a long line waits to deliver parcels and letters to prison authorities. In Georgia, Abuladze noted, there was a prison with a movie theater next door. They shared a common wall, and you can imagine the contrast of sounds....

Tunnelling to Istanbul: And then there's the man in *Repentance* who confesses to being a spy and says that his mission was to dig a tunnel from Bombay to London. Clearly absurd. But, says Abuladze, the secretary of one regional Communist Party committee actually confessed that he was supposed to build a tunnel from the Black Sea Georgian city of Batumi to Istanbul.

Now, under Gorbachov, Soviets like Abuladze can say openly how some such confessions were obtained: "People were beaten till they lost consciousness, and when they came to, they were asked, 'Well, are you going to sign?' They signed, and if they didn't they were beaten again, until they signed because there was no point in resisting further."

Yet *Repentance* does not include such scenes of beatings. The interrogation in the film is highly stylized, even surrealistic. (It's set in a garden where there's a white grand piano.) "I've overheard people say that this is a very beautiful film—and they consider

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SOVIET FILMMAKER TENGIZ ABULADZE:
A GREAT DIRECTOR CONFRONTS A GREAT DICTATOR