

NEITHER MEMORY NOR MAGIC

A DOCUMENTARY DIRECTED BY Hugo Perez
EXECUTIVE PRODUCED BY Greg Carr AND Noble Smith

Synopsis

*"I lived but, always being unskilled in life, I knew
Right from the start that in the end they'd bury me—
That year silted on year, clod followed clod, stone stone,
And that, down there, the bones in cool, worm-ridden gloom
Would shiver in nakedness, when the body had overflowed.
That up there, time would blunder about my work with a drone
As I sank deeper in the earth and into darkness . . .
All this I knew. But the work: will it have lasted?"*

—Miklos Radnoti, 1938



In the spring of 1946, a mass grave was unearthed in the Hungarian village of Abda. Twenty-two decayed bodies were found sprawled in the pit. One of the bodies found in the grave was that of the poet Miklos Radnoti, shot into the grave by Hungarian fascists eighteen months earlier. Found in the front pocket of his coat was a small notebook soaked in his bodily fluids. It was laid out to dry in the sunlight and when examined later revealed the poet's last poems carefully handwritten onto the ruled lines of the notebook. In the so-called Bor Notebook, Radnoti, through poetry, told the story of the last six months of his life, months spent first as slave labor in a Nazi labor camp in Bor, Serbia, and then on a three-month forced march from Serbia to the small village of Abda where he was killed when he was too weak to continue.

Radnoti's final poems serve as the backbone of the narrative of NEITHER MEMORY NOR MAGIC to reveal the story of a poet who continued to write poetry even as he faced almost certain death. Through the use of evocative and lyrical Super8 footage, readings of the poems to represent Radnoti's account of his life, and interviews with some of those who knew him best and who got to know him in his last days, NEITHER MEMORY NOR MAGIC tells the story of one poet's triumph over the inhumanity of his age—a story previously untold outside of Hungary.

NEITHER MEMORY NOR MAGIC is the feature documentary directorial debut for award winning filmmaker Hugo Perez whose work has been featured on HBO, Showtime, and PBS. Neither Memory Nor Magic is narrated by ACADEMY AWARD® Nominated actress Patricia Clarkson, edited by ACADEMY AWARD® Nominated filmmaker Francisco Bello and Co-Edited by ACADEMY AWARD® Nominated filmmaker Tim Sternberg. The Executive Producers Greg Carr and Noble Smith most recently executive produced Jessica Yu's celebrated documentary feature PROTAGONIST.

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Artistic Statement

HUGO PEREZ, DIRECTOR/PRODUCER

What first struck me about Miklos Radnoti's work is that he continued to write poetry under dark, humiliating, and ultimately fatal circumstances. In a labor camp in Serbia, after a full day of backbreaking slave labor, he would manage somehow to find the energy to work on a few lines of poetry. During a three month long forced march when people beside him were dying of exhaustion and being shot to death, he somehow managed to focus on finding words that bore witness to his experience. From the late thirties on, he had lived with the feeling that he would die a lonely death, a victim of the rising tide of anti-semitism and fascism. Instead of giving in to despair, he chose to give himself up wholeheartedly to his poetry, leaving behind a remarkable body of work documenting his life in the increasingly dark years of 1938 to 1944. In the final weeks of his life, when he must have known he would die soon and that there was very little chance that anyone would ever read his final poems, he continued to write with the conviction that somehow even if he did not survive, his poems would. His life and work are a testament to an artist who overcame the inhumanity of his age through his art.



Director Hugo Perez visits the site of the Bor Labor Camp with Bor Survivor Ferenc Andai.



The other remarkable thing to me about the work of Radnoti was how scarily contemporary it felt despite having been written in 1944 during the Holocaust. In the poem 'Peace, Dread' (1938), he describes the feeling of walking out of his house and observing his neighbors going about their normal business oblivious to the dark clouds of the cataclysm that he sees will soon befall them. It is a feeling that strikes a chord with me at a time when it seems as if most people around me are blind, intentionally or not, to the serious issues and challenges that the world today faces.

As much as Radnoti seems to say with his poem that if you do nothing else open your eyes and really look at the world around you, I hope that my film 'Neither Memory Nor Magic' will make people realize that the Holocaust in 1944 was not an isolated moment in history unconnected from our present. Genocides, wars, and general inhumanity continually plague our world and if we are to do anything about them we first have to acknowledge that they are happening before our eyes.