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NIKITA KINO (2002)



In 1960, the father of experimental film maker, Vivian Ostrovsky, discovered that his siblings were still alive and living in Moscow. It had been forty years since they had last met. Although one died soon after the initial visit, a routine of annual travel was put in place where he would take his family from “carnival-crazy Brazil” to Russia to visit the extended family. It could only have been that way as the Russians were forbidden to leave the Soviet Union. *Nikita Kino* (2002, 40 mins) gathers together Ostrovsky’s collection of 8mm film footage of those visits and

mixes it with other film media to create a video collage that's somewhere between a memoir and a travelogue.

Her old footage is not that interesting. People sit on benches and chat; take food from the oven; or sit about on grass, smiling at the camera. We never know who is who, and it doesn't really matter as Ostrovsky instead elects to provide a voiceover narrating what was going on at the time. Early on, as she describes how the relatives' warmth helped extinguish the sense of claustrophobia and paranoia the situation created, we see the first instance of other footage enhancing the narrative. Tape reels recording and a room of women listening in on headphones and scribbling away. And Ostrovsky's recollection of "a raincoat man" tailing them shows that, though not entirely noticeable, surveillance was happening.

The breadth of surplus footage used is impressive. Films, news reels, documentary, music, propaganda, and other found footage. The extensive use hides that there likely wasn't much family footage, but it is cleverly used to either riff on a theme from Ostrovsky's narrative or to slyly undercut it with contradictions. In a country *sans* advertising but replete with propaganda, we see what we are meant to see. In a clip from a Soviet movie, we are allowed to see its players dressed up to echo western cinema, albeit showing off how Soviet ideals make the more utopian society. But this propaganda is swept away ("The outside was never like the inside. What you saw in the shop window could never be found inside.") to show us what lay underneath the falsehoods.

Beginning with ramshackle Soviet housing, *Nikita Kino* continues lifting the veil on Soviet society — restaurants, dance halls, and industry — with supplementary footage and recollections. The contemporary space race is seen, and it's sometimes a wonder how they got a man into space with all the parading that had to be done, both military and athletics. And while there are positives about the society — women being able to work any career; to divorce and have abortions — there are darker elements too, most notably that Ostrovsky's family passports carried 'Jewish' as a nationality and, two decades on from the Holocaust, segregation was still a way of life:

Jews had to be smart to get into kindergarten. Bright to get into the best schools. Brilliant to get into the right universities. And supermen to be allowed a military career.

Throughout the short film, the accompanying music flirts with various styles, with gypsy music blending into the martial. While sometimes comical it can turn the mood to solemn in a beat, and this, in the same way the found footage does, helps enhance the experience and the storytelling. For all its linearity — the narrative spans 1960 to Ostrovsky's father's death twenty years later — the delivery is nicely abstract and plays with the arrow of time so as not to be episodic. Ostrovsky jumps around, from one theme to the next, meandering into the paradoxes of Soviet life where everyone is individually unhappy but happy as a whole. At one point a young man in Yerevan waves to the camera; footage of Nikita Krushchev smiles and waves back.