

# my house without me



a documentary film by Magdalena Szymbkówna

Two women, one house.

An intimate story about a Pole and a German placed by war on enemy sides and their parallel lives accidentally brought together.

The film reflects on the concepts of invaders, victim, guilt and forgiveness. It confronts different experiences and their paradoxical similarities. It deals with the controversial subject of the post-war accountings.

The visual narration is flowing guided by memories and archives. Traditional documentation confronts experimental use of archival footage in the cinematic impression about displacement.



## production details

delivery date 2012 format HD  
length 29' languages polish german

production wajda studio (poland)  
co-producers vezfilm (uk)  
western pomeranian film fund (poland)

pr and sales wajda studio (poland)  
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[www.vezfilm.org/myhousewithoutme](http://www.vezfilm.org/myhousewithoutme)

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## synopsis

Mass deportations, expulsions and forced resettlements. Deserted houses and lost photographs. How to describe war?

In 1939, in a secret agreement, Hitler and Stalin divided Europe into German and Soviet spheres of influence. Within weeks, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union invaded their respective sides of Poland sparking World War II and the largest process of mass deportation and subsequent post-war replacements in history.

60 million of people in Europe were forced to leave their homes, among which Poles and Germans were the most numerous. The XX century came to be called the Displacement Era.

Fleeing under the threat of violence, the difficulties of adapting to the places that they were forced to move, persistent hunger and the threat of disease - these experiences are common to all of them regardless their origin or nationality.

"My house without me" confronts the experience of two women. Janina was born in an Eastern Polish town. After the Soviet invasion, she was deported to Siberia at the age of ten. Her hometown was annexed to the USSR. After

six years in exile, as a disinherited repatriate, she was relocated and settled down in the territories obtained by Poles from Germans after WWII. Her new home was now in Stettin, a city located one thousand kilometers west from her place of birth.

Annemarie was born in Stettin. At the time when Janina was deported to Siberia, she could still go to the opera house. When the war finished she experienced the consequences of the brutal Polish-Soviet occupation in the eastern part of the fallen Reich. She was forced to move to West Germany and make way for the new arrivals.

"My house without me" introduces two protagonists, two lives from the present and the past. It is a journey through their intertwined memories and recollections. The story of Janina complements the images of her everyday life, the bustle around her rural homestead. The war did not allow her keep any photo or document from her childhood. She is left with only her memories and images of exile, begging, and Siberian cold. She remembers the carriage train, which brought her to distant Siberia in 1939. A similar train brought her back to Poland in 1946. She talks about a childhood lost to the hardships of the war. She remembers the moment of confrontation with German citizens



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of Stettin, who, like her six years before, had to leave their own houses and be deported.

The new house of Annemarie situated in a picturesque German town is the scene for her story. She uses the numerous photographs, maps and family heirlooms of pre-war Stettin to recall the memories of her past. It is an opportunity to talk about how German civilians experienced the war and a chance to face the story of a young German girl confronted with post-war hate for the Nazi occupiers.



## visual content

The film revisits the documentary tradition of war testimonies. The archive footage completes the film, redefining the use of historical records giving them visual art's formal character. The present mingles with images from the past. The memories refract as the light of the archival footage projected on the walls of the house. The camera looks in the protagonists' eyes, listening to their narration.

Their stories lead from a personal to a wider picture of the war and the deprivation it brings. The detail becomes this film's language, while

experiments with archival materials become its form. The movement of the frames freezes. It moves on then again and repeats in the rhythm of the train thud. Processed sounds of electronic music lead the story to the point where the protagonists' fates meet and cross each other. This is also the moment when the third protagonist of the story – the house – comes to the foreground. The film evokes anthropological issues regarding the sense of belonging, family and home not defined by any specific space and location.

## historical context

On September 1, 1939, Nazi Germany invaded Poland. Sixteen days later the Soviets crossed the Polish eastern border. 1940 marked the beginning of mass deportations of the Polish population to Siberia, which involved around 1 million people.

The Potsdam Pact of 1945 sealed the annexation of Polish eastern lands by the Soviet Union. Poland lost 180 000 square kilometres of its territory. In compensation the western border was moved and 114 000 square kilometres of eastern German provinces became Polish. As a result the Polish border was moved 250 kilometres to the west. Around 6 million Poles were affected by expulsions.

Most of them, who were deported from the territories annexed to the USSR were resettled in the "Regained Territories", embracing East Prussia, part of the Province of Brandenburg, Western Pomerania and Silesia. Around 4 million German inhabitants were expelled and resettled, among them 200 000 were sent to Soviet working camps. Censorship in Russia, Poland and East Germany

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prevented open discussion of the massive displacements and the experience of civil deportations in these territories during and after the war. Requests for compensation on both sides of the border are based on one-sided understandings of the historical events. How do the very people who were deported feel about these claims? How do two women face the question of guilt,



reconciliation and of being a victim or an invader?

## director

Magdalena Szymków, journalist and filmmaker, graduated from the Andrzej Wajda Master School of Film Directing in Warsaw. She is a co-founder of the production company Vezfilm. She has worked for Polish channels TVP and TVN, as well as ARTE/WDR and RAI. For her reportage about immigrants' condition in Italy she was nominated for the Polish Grand Press Award 2007. She was a close collaborator of Ryszard Kapuscinski, Polish reporter and writer, the author of books which now stand in the canon of literary non-fiction. She is a curator of Kapuscinski's photo-exhibitions since 2003. Currently she is working

on development of MEDIA supported project "You have to be there", a coproduction of Vezfilm and Otter Films (Oscar nominated for "Rabbit à la Berlin" in 2010).

## producers

Wajda School was founded in Warsaw by Andrzej Wajda and Wojciech Marczewski. It's based on film groups tradition and experience – method of group working and co-operation of different generations. It offers a unique combination of production and education for film professionals. Since 2011 Wajda and Marczewski have also started the production company - Wajda Studio. It focuses on development stage and support directors with artistic supervision from the best Polish and European filmmakers. It looks for author-driven feature, documentary and short film projects which bring up contemporary issues. It is concentrated on international cooperation and co-productions. The main Studio's and School's mission is to search for new talents among debutants. Its filmography has more than 50 documentaries and short fictions screened and awarded at Berlinale, San Sebastian, Karlovy Vary, Hot Docs, IDFA and DokLeipzig. Wajda Studio's documentary 'Paparazzi' was nominated for European Film Awards.

Vezfilm is a production company based in London. It focuses on documentary films and innovative communication media, with an emphasis on topics of high social and political relevance. The company has worked in productions for the Al Jazeera Documentary Channel in 2008-2009 and cross-platform project for the EU-Funded Programme and coordinated by King's College London (2009-2010). Vezfilm is currently producing "The Al Qaeda Manual"; "Train to Moscow" with



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Kine (Italy) and "You Have to Be There" with Otter Films (Poland). Vezfilm was a participant of the Discovery Campus Masterschool, IDFAcademy Summer School and Baltic Sea Forum workshops.

Western Pomeranian Film Fund was founded on the initiative of the Marshal of Westpomeranian Province, President of Szczecin and Koszalin on April 17th 2009. The main aim of Pomerania Film is to fund film production connected with the promotion of the Westpomeranian Province. It aims at promoting the province's landscapes, history, and people as well as supporting the creative and productive talents of its film industry.

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Krakow Film Foundation



## credits

director: Magdalena Szymków  
screenplay: Magdalena Szymków  
based on an idea of: Magdalena Szymków  
and Karl Hoffmann  
cinematography: Paweł Chorzępa, Kurt Moser  
editing: Stefan Paruch  
music: Tomasz Wieczorek  
sound: Dominika Czakon  
sound design: Tomasz Wieczorek  
color correction: Anna Sujka, Rafał Wieczorek  
production manager: Alicja Kizińska  
co-producer: Francesco Ragazzi  
executive producer: Adam Ślesicki



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## press credits

"This is both a very personal film and the story of thousands of people whose world crumbled due to the war. It is very rare in cinema that one finds such an exquisite combination of sensitivity and formal discipline. I found the gentleness of this film moving."

### **Marcel Łoziński**

Oscar nominated and European Film Award winner  
film director

"The singular memories of the two women contextualized by archive footage that represents a collective memory together tell a larger story: the story of war, of occupation and eviction, of home and displacement."

### **Willemien Sanders**

DOX Magazine

"My House Without Me is one of the most promising cinema debuts of recent years. Writer-director Magdalena Szymków's name should go straight into every cinephile's notebook. Her strikingly mature and quietly assured film interviews two elderly women about the house in which both have lived, examining the upheavals and ironies of occupation and displacement. Experimentally processed archive footage adds a haunting extra dimension to this searching, spellbinding exploration of history's paradoxes."

### **Neil Young**

Bradford International Film Festival director