

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT

| | | |
|-------------------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| Mary Lugo | 770/623-8190 | lugo@negia.net |
| Cara White | 843/881-1480 | carapub@aol.com |
| Randall Cole | 415/356-8383 x254 | randall_cole@itvs.org |
| Desiree Gutierrez | 415/356-8383 x244 | desiree_gutierrez@itvs.org |

Pressroom for more information and/or downloadable images:

www.itvs.org/pressroom/photos

Program companion website: www.pbs.org/lastletter



**“THE LAST LETTER” TO AIR NATIONALLY
ON ACCLAIMED PBS SERIES INDEPENDENT
LENS**

Famed Documentarian Frederick Wiseman’s First-Ever Fiction Feature—a Haunting Tour-De-Force, in Which a Woman about to Die at the Hands of the Nazis Recounts Her Life in a ‘Last Letter’ to Her Beloved Son

Tuesday, May 3, 2005 at 10:00 P.M. (check local listings)

“Unlike Holocaust films that dwell on the horrific spectacle, Frederick Wiseman’s portrait of a doomed mother dictating final words to her son is shattering in its simplicity.”

– Peter Rainer, New York Magazine

(San Francisco) — The Independent Television Service (ITVS) presents the broadcast premier of **THE LAST LETTER**, the first feature film of renowned documentary filmmaker Frederick Wiseman. Adapted from a chapter of Russian novelist Vasily Grossman’s autobiographical work *Life and Fate*, **THE LAST LETTER** features an unforgettable performance by Catherine Samie, the Doyenne of the Comédie-Française. **THE LAST LETTER** will air nationally on the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens*, hosted by Susan Sarandon, on Tuesday, May 3, 2005 at 10 P.M. (check local listings), in conjunction with Holocaust Remembrance Day.

THE LAST LETTER is the story of a Russian Jewish doctor living in the Ukraine just after the German occupation in 1941. Knowing that she and the other Jews in the city will be killed, she writes a last letter to her son who is safe

behind enemy lines. She describes her love for him and recalls memories of his childhood. She revisits her youth and her student life in Paris. She also reacts to the horrors and brutality of the occupation -- the kind-



ness and generosity of some neighbors, the cruelty and indifference of others. The letter, with its detailed observations of life in the ghetto, reveals the fear, courage, frailty, compassion and dignity of one woman as she remembers her life and faces her death.

Airing with **THE LAST LETTER** are two short films by Elida Schogt—**ZYLON PORTRAIT** and **THE WALNUT TREE**. The program's interactive companion website (www.pbs.org/lastletter) features detailed information on the film, including an inter-

view with Frederick Wiseman, cast and crew bios as well as links and resources pertaining to the film's subject matter. The site also features a "Talkback" section for viewers to share their ideas and opinions, preview clips of the film and more.

THE LAST LETTER Credits

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| DIRECTOR/EDITOR | FREDERICK WISEMAN |
| WITH | CATHERINE SAMIE SOCIÉTAIRE DE LA COMÉDIE FRANÇAISE AS ANNA SEMIONOVNA |
| FROM THE NOVEL | LIFE AND FATE BY VASILY GROSSMAN PUBLISHED BY EDITIONS L'ÂGE D'HOMME TRANSLATOR ALEXIS BERELOWITCH |
| PRODUCED BY | PIERRE-OLIVIER BARDET – IDÉALE AUDIENCE AND ZIPPORAH FILMS IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE COMÉDIE-FRANÇAISE |
| CO-PRODUCED BY | ARTE FRANCE CINÉMA WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF CANAL + AND THE CENTRE NATIONAL DE LA CINÉMATOGRAPHIE |
| PHOTOGRAPHY | YORGOS ARVANTIS A.E.C. |
| ASSISTANT DIRECTOR | VÉRONIQUE AUBOUY |
| SOUND | FRANÇOIS WALEDISCH |
| SCRIPT SUPERVISOR | CLAUDE LUGUET |
| MIX | WILLIAM FLAGEOLET |
| PRODUCTION MANAGER | STELLA GREGORZ-QUEF |



ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

FREDERICK WISEMAN (Director, Editor)

Frederick Wiseman has made 34 documentary films about American institutions. Among his films are *Titicut Follies*, *High School*, *Basic Training*, *Welfare*, *Model*, *Central Park*, *Public Housing* and *Near Death*. His most recent work, *Domestic Violence* was broadcast on public television in March 2003.

Mr. Wiseman's theater work includes directing a stage version of "The Last Letter" (La Dernière Lettre) at the Comédie Française in 2000, and a North American tour of the play in 2001. He directed an English-language

version starring Kathleen Chalfant in New York in December 2003. "Welfare: The Opera," based on his documentary film *Welfare* (with music by Lenny Pickett, libretto by David Slavitt and directed by Mr. Wiseman) was staged at the American Music Theater Festival in Philadelphia in 1992 and St. Anne's Center for Restoration and the Arts in Brooklyn in 1998. A new production of "Welfare: The Opera" was presented by American Opera Projects in New York at the Dance Theater Workshop in May and June 2004.

Mr. Wiseman has received a MacArthur Prize Fellowship, a Guggenheim, the Dan David Prize for 2003 and the Irene Diamond Lifetime Achievement Award from Human Rights Watch. He has won three Emmy Awards and three A.I. duPont-Columbia University Awards. He is an honorary member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

CATHERINE SAMIE

Samie was trained at France's National Conservatory of Drama. She joined the Comédie-Française in 1956. She is presently the Senior Member, La Doyenne, of the Comédie-Française. She has interpreted great roles of the classical repertory, such as Frosine in "L'Avare," Madame Jourdain in "Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme," Dorine in "Tartuffe," the Môme Crevette in "La Dame de Chez Maxim," Suzanne in "La Mere Coupable," Arkadina in "La Mouette," and Leonida in "La Cagnotte." She has also performed in contemporary repertory, notably Charlotte Brontë in "La Jour ou Mary Shelley Recontrera Charlotte Brontë" by Edourado Manet; Emma in "Maitre Puntila et son valet Matti" by Bertolt Brecht; and Elisabeth Geoulinger in "Les Amants puérils" by Crommelynck. Most recently, she performed in "La Thébaïde" by Racine, "Les Fausses Confidences" by Marivaux, "Rodogune" by Corneille, "L'école des femmes, La mariage Forcé" by Moliere and "La Maison des coeurs brisés" by George Bernard Shaw. In cinema, she has worked with Claude LeLouch, Pierre Granier Deferre, Josiane Balasko, Coline Serreau, Albert Dupontel, and Jean-Louis Benoit.

VASILY GROSSMAN

Vasily Grossman was born December 12, 1905 in Berdichev in the Ukraine. He studied chemistry at Moscow University, and then became a journalist and a writer of "social realist" novels. From June 1941 to May 1945, Grossman was the chief war correspondent for the Soviet newspaper, *Izvetzia*, and was always at the front lines. He followed the Red Army from Gomel to Stalingrad, then from Stalingrad to Berlin. His articles were widely read, and he was considered by the Soviet regime as one of its best journalists. In 1941, his mother, Ekaterina Savelievna, a French teacher in Berdichev, was murdered along with all the other Jews in Berdichev. After the war, and because of Stalin's anti-Semitism, he lost his job and became a "non-person." He stopped writing approved "Soviet realist" fiction and began to do his own work.

From 1954 to 1961, Grossman wrote *Life and Fate*. The novel was confiscated by the KGB and disappeared in their files. The manuscript was miraculously smuggled to the west in 1980 and was published in Switzerland in 1981 by *l'Age d'Homme*. Other editions followed in France, Germany, England, and the United States. The book received both critical and commercial success and Vasily Grossman was acclaimed as a major Russian writer. He died in 1964, poor and alone, a victim of state anti-Semitism.

Life and Fate is built around the saga of one family from the Russian Revolution to the Battle of Stalingrad. In a kaleidoscope of scenes located on both sides of the front, Vasily Grossman describes the terrible history of the century that witnessed human violence inflicted on millions of people.

THE LAST LETTER is adapted from chapter 18 of *Life and Fate*.

ABOUT BERDICHEV IN 1941, THE SETTING FOR THE FILM

On June 22, 1941 Hitler broke the non-aggression pact signed with the USSR and launched an offensive against Soviet territory. In a few months, the German army invaded the Ukraine and Crimea, reaching the gates of Leningrad; they were halted only 20 kilometers from Moscow. Meanwhile, the Nazis exterminated the entire Jewish population living in the territory they conquered.

Before the war, some 30,000 Jews were living in Berdichev, a town of about 60,000 inhabitants. When the Nazis entered Berdichev on July 7, 1941, only a third of the Jews had managed to escape. All the town's remaining Jews were abruptly declared illegal and deprived of their civil rights. On August 26th, the Germans confined them to a ghetto in the Bazar district. On September 4th, 1500 of the youth were sent to do "farm work" and were killed the same day, and so there remained only the elderly, women and children. No resistance was possible. On September 14th, several SS units arrived in Berdichev, and at dawn on the next day, all the Jews of the ghetto were awakened and herded into the square. The Nazis selected out the doctors, skilled workmen, tailors, shoemakers, barbers, locksmiths and their families. All the others were sent in columns to a field near the airstrip, where they were shot down in groups of forty people, the bodies falling into immense pits.

And so on September 15th alone, 12,000 Jews were exterminated. Others were killed in the following months. Only 10-15 Jews from Berdichev survived the Nazis.

AN INTERVIEW WITH FREDERICK WISEMAN

*Q: After almost 40 years of documentary filmmaking, you've made your first fiction film. Why now and why **THE LAST LETTER**?*

Wiseman: I thought that Vasily Grossman, the author of the novel *Life and Fate*, from which **THE LAST LETTER** was taken, had summarized in dramatic form the feelings and experiences of many of the millions of Jews killed by the Germans. I was a young boy during the Second World War and was horrified at the ease with which people could find ways to kill others. I try in the film to convey what that experience of the Holocaust was for one person and simultaneously to create a portrait of a complex and interesting woman who recounts the principal aspects of her life in this, her last letter to her son.

Q: Tell us about how you became connected with the story and what it meant to you.

Wiseman: I saw a reading of the chapter in a small theatre in Paris, went out and bought the novel, read it and decided I had to try to make a play from the letter. I did this at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge in 1986 and then in 2000 I directed the play at the Comedie Francaise in Paris and made the film based on the play. In the movie and the play, I tried to find a way to recreate aspects of this lost world and the feelings of someone who lived and died in it.

Q: There have been many Holocaust stories brought to the screen - how do you think this story compares to other films that explore similar subject matter?

Wiseman: The film is a monologue. All the other characters are represented by shadows which I thought was

an appropriate way to represent the people killed by the Germans. But, I could make this take place in Rwanda. Or Bosnia. You substitute machete for machine gun, you change a couple of place names and a couple of ethnic characteristics and you could be in Bosnia, Rwanda, Kosovo, Timor or the Sudan. I wanted to do this film not only because of my longtime interest in the Holocaust but also because of my continuing amazement at people's capacity to kill. Whether it is part of an industrialized process or done with a machete is not a significant difference.

Q: At the age of 75, you've broken new ground in a long and successful career...what's next?

Wiseman: I am currently working on a film about the Idaho legislature as part of my continuing series about American institutions. An elected legislature is one of the basic institutions of democracy and as a subject is related to all of the other documentaries I have made.

ABOUT INDEPENDENT LENS

Independent Lens is an Emmy Award-winning weekly series airing Tuesday nights at 10 P.M. on PBS. Hosted by Susan Sarandon, the acclaimed anthology series features documentaries and a limited number of fiction films united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement and unflinching visions of their independent producers.

Independent Lens features unforgettable stories about a unique individual, community or moment in history, which prompted Nancy Franklin to write in *The New Yorker*: "Watching **Independent Lens**... is like going into an independent bookstore—you don't always find what you were looking for but you often find something you didn't even know you wanted." Presented by ITVS, the series is supported by interactive companion websites, and national publicity and community outreach campaigns. Further information about the series is available at www.pbs.org/independentlens. **Independent Lens** is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS, and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.

ABOUT ITVS

Independent Television Service (ITVS) funds and presents award-winning documentaries and dramas on public television, innovative new media projects on the Web and the Emmy Award-winning weekly series

Independent Lens on Tuesday nights at 10 P.M. on PBS. ITVS is a miracle of public policy created by media activists, citizens and politicians seeking to foster plurality and diversity in public television. ITVS was established by a historic mandate of Congress to champion independently produced programs that take creative risks, spark public dialogue and serve underserved audiences. Since its inception in 1991, ITVS programs have revitalized the relationship between the public and public television, bringing TV audiences face-to-face with the lives and concerns of their fellow Americans. More information about ITVS can be obtained by visiting www.itvs.org. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American People.

ABOUT PBS

PBS is a private, nonprofit media enterprise that serves the nation's 349 public noncommercial television stations, reaching nearly 90 million people each week. Bringing diverse viewpoints to television and the Internet,

PBS provides high-quality documentary and dramatic entertainment, and consistently dominates the most prestigious award competitions. PBS is the leading provider of educational materials for K-12 teachers, and offers a broad array of educational services for adult learners. PBS' premier kids' TV programming and Web site, PBS KIDS Online (pbskids.org), continue to be parents' and teachers' most trusted learning environments for children. More information about PBS is available at pbs.org, the leading dot-org Web site on the Internet. PBS is headquartered in Alexandria, Virginia.



ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American People.

**Pressroom for more information and/or downloadable images: www.itvs.org/pressroom/photos
Program companion website: www.pbs.org/lastletter**