

Production Notes

Journals and notes from the production staff of E:60.



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TUESDAY, AUGUST 17, 2010

From Belarus with Love

When Maria Sharapova returned to Gomel, Belarus in late June, E:60's cameras wanted to be there. Belarus was the Eastern European homeland of her parents, who fled it in 1986 after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Sharapova's mother and father moved to Siberia, where the tennis star was born in April 1987.

But a shoot in Belarus has special logistical challenges, as you might expect of a small country that at various times belonged to the Principality of Polotsk, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union.

Since 1990 Belarus has been sovereign, with its very own 'elected' dictator, Alexander Lukashenko, who did not take kindly to former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice calling it an "outpost of tyranny."

Amnesty International's 2009 report on Belarus said "state control over the media increased, and restrictions on independent media continued. Some public events were banned; peaceful demonstrators were fined and detained for short periods; and civil society activists and journalists were harassed."

Producer Matt Rissmiller's job was to get in and out of Belarus without becoming another statistic. Napoleon's Grand Army marched through Belarus in 1812 on its way to infamy, and Rissmiller was determined to avoid the same fate. The way in to Belarus, he decided, was through Ukraine, to the south.

"Belarus is more challenging to get into than Ukraine," Rissmiller said. "So we had contacts from Belarus meet us on the Ukraine side."

He and his crew flew into Kiev. Customs was slow because of 10-11

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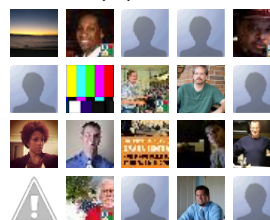
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cases of production equipment. Led by their Ukrainian and Belarusian guides, the crew drove two hours to the border. There, they were detained for 8 to 10 hours, even though they showed the proper paperwork and letters from government officials.

By the time they reached Gomel, a drive that should have taken 5-6 hours took 15 hours. They had flown out of New York on Saturday evening, and arrived in Gomel at 3 a.m. Monday.

The exhausted crew slept for a few hours and shot Gomel for the rest of Monday and Tuesday. Sharapova arrived on Wednesday, June 30. At

5:30 a.m. Rissmiller and his shooters - Bill Roach and Joel and Jesse Edwards - began to set up in a local "palace" for the Sharapova session scheduled at 9 a.m. But they ran into a problem.

"As we were setting up fire started shooting out of the electrical strip that the equipment was plugged into - it was jumping off the ground and cracking," Rissmiller recalled. "Power in another country can be sketchy."

The crew could not fix the problem, and Sharapova's arrival drew nigh. Rissmiller scrambled.

"I called an audible," he recalled.

The interview of Sharapova took place outside the palace, in natural lighting.

Sharapova left on Thursday, as Rissmiller's crew made its way back to northern Ukraine to shoot desecrated Chernobyl. The crew was cautioned to walk on the pavement and avoid stirring up dust or dirt. It was warned about local food, water and air. Rissmiller had no urge to linger.

"We had our points mapped out pretty well," he recalled. "We shot from 10 to 3 and got out of there."

They returned July 4, touched ground on an international runway, jet propelled back home, from overseas to the USA. The fruits of their journey air tonight.

Posted by Steve Marantz, August 17, 2010

Posted by [E:60](#) at [10:40 AM](#)

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