

The first time director Ruut van der Beele and I stood at Katja Tolstoj's door in Kampen, she firmly said, "Don't look at the dog!" We wanted to gain Katja's trust that morning to collaborate on our documentary about her life and her year as Theologian of the Fatherland. The dog danced enthusiastically around our feet and then began growling as it tugged at our shoelaces. Its collar read: "Do not pet!" It seemed like an animal that would first take your shoes and then gradually the rest. Katja addressed the dog in Russian. When I asked the animal's name, Katja tersely replied, "A Russian name. You can't pronounce it anyway."

Only when we sat did the dog calm down, as did Katja, who served us a Russian cake. She had slept little that night, she told us, and had stayed home from the university for our arrival, but her work—centering around theology and post-traumatic societies—continued as usual. **On all subsequent filming days, it became clear that her life sometimes more closely resembles a novel—a Russian novel, of course--than that of an average professor awaiting the next a stack of books. No mild boredom here, but life and death.**

Katja lives multiple lives simultaneously. She's a caregiver for sick family members in beds both domestic and abroad, a dog whose heart has started to falter, and the eight Ukrainian refugees she has taken into her home since the invasion began. At the same time, she pursues her academic research, "Theology after Gulag, Bucha and Beyond," and retains her role as the Theologian of the Fatherland. **Somehow, though, she remains upbeat and cheerful. Perhaps that is providence.**

In thought and action, Tolstoj is progressive and independent, yet she exudes an old-fashioned demeanor, stately, untouchable. All the Tolstojs are related, little Katja was always told, but she has little to do with that past. And yet, seeing her, a horse and a dilapidated manor would not be out of place.

Katja grew up in a fifty-square-meter Soviet apartment in St. Petersburg. In the living room—her parents were doctors—were a few thousand books and a grand piano. At the age of eight, she read Dostoevsky (she would later earn a doctorate on him), and with her grandmother, she played games like one that conjured a five-course dinner on the table, with only the cutlery being real. Grandma was a theater director and brought her work home: theater is nothing more than a way to survive reality. And perhaps religion too. Although she rarely visits a church, faith seems so logically present in Tolstoj's life, like the stars hanging above the Earth, that mentioning it becomes pleonastic and nonsensical. It has always been so. “My parents must have thought I was a strange child; they are atheists. As early as I can remember, I have believed in God.”

In high school, Katja cut a lot of classes. She preferred to sit on the rooftops of St. Petersburg, where characters from Dostoevsky lived, reading poetry with friends. What you read, knowledge, was the way for the intelligentsia to excel. She attended punk concerts in underground venues as a form of resistance. “A rebellious little life,” she euphemistically called it. Her ringtone is still “London Calling” by The Clash.

In Russia, Tolstoj found freedom literally above and below ground. Only when, already married at 18, she deliberately became pregnant with twins and ended up in a dispassionate Soviet hospital, did she realize what kind of society she was living in. She told the children in her womb, “I'm not going to let you grow up here.”

Katja fled Russia with the twins and two suitcases and came by chance to the small city of Kampen. Initially, she wanted to study medicine, but with two children, it was difficult from that home base. Someone told her that she could study theology in Kampen: “It's almost the same as philosophy,” she said, “You love reading, don't you?” She became a theologian, a professor and a vice-dean of the Faculty of Religion and Theology at the Vrije Universiteit.

In the documentary “Theologian of the Fatherland: Katja Tolstoj,” you see someone who lives entirely for the content, running through university corridors, making calls in Russian or English, and constantly losing something banal. A person who walks down the street as if traffic rules were designed only for others. Tolstoj seems to live multiple lives to find fulfillment; like a mental athlete, she keeps several balls in the air. “I relax only when I walk from one room to another.” Yet in every space she enters, it becomes quiet; people listen to what she has to say. It’s as if she fluffs the pillows, making the listeners sit up a little straighter. When she is in function, she speaks calmly and only speaks—freely, after Gandhi—if it improves the silence, contributes to the debate, counteracts dehumanization. In between tasks, she is not averse to irony. After a speech, she can come off the stage and say, “I was playing the clown again.”

Following Katja Tolstoj taught us that whether you move through the world with or without God, humorless seriousness and moralism are for mediocre minds. The world is a bitter joke: “We overslept. No psychological profile of Putin was made when he came to power, cuts are being made in science, and the Earth is dying. It's time for action.” Like the humanist and the climate activist she is, Tolstoj uses her earthly life to bring about improvements for future generations. The beyond is present here and now.