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Russian Alexei Guskov to Play Pope John Paul II

By Alexander Bratersky

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Alexei Guskov playing Captain Kalmykov in German-Russian-Ukrainian World War II film “4 Days in May” (2011).

The relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church might be strained, but the choice of a Russian actor to portray the late Pope John Paul II might help to warm them up.

Alexei Guskov, a Russian star, beloved to many Russians because of his portrayal of sympathetic heroes, was selected to play the world-famous Pope in a new Italian fiction film, "Era santo, era uomo. Il volto privato di papa Wojtyla," ("He was a saint, he was a man. The private face of Pope Wojtyla"). Italian newspaper La Stampa reported the news at the end of last week, citing information from film producers.

The film is based on the bestselling novel by Lino Zani "The Secret Life of John Paul the Second," published last year. Zani spent many years with the Pope as his ski instructor,

becoming his close confidant and admirer.

The film will be directed by Andrea Porporati, whose 2007 film "The Sweet and the Bitter," a drama about the Italian mafia, was lauded by critics. It is to be shot in the English language in order to reach the broadest possible audience.

Porporati said he was planning to finish it by October 2013, the time of the Pope's recently announced canonization. The current Pope, Francis, signed the canonization decree on July 5.

Guskov, 54, is a theater actor who has recently been teaching at the legendary Moscow Art Theater (MKHAT theater school). He has played more than 30 roles to date.

Many Russians admire his lead role in "The Garbage Man," a 2001 philosophical saga about a rich man who also works as a part-time waste collector, seeing it as a noble cause.

Guskov is best known to the Western public for starring in Romanian filmmaker Radu Mihaileanu's 2009 film "Concert," playing the conductor of an orchestra who brings together his old musicians after 30 years of obscurity.

While Guskov's face resembles that of an old school professor, his features bear little likeness to the late pontiff. However, by a twist of fate, he was also born in Poland, like John Paul.

His birthplace was Brzeg, a small city in the south of the country, where his parents worked at the time. "I lived in Poland until the age of six and even spoke Polish quite well. Of course, I don't remember anything now," Guskov said in an interview published on his official site.

Like John Paul, who at one point wanted to become an actor and engaged in school drama performances in his youth, Guskov acted in his university theater while studying mechanical engineering.

Bloggers have been saying that Guskov's portrait of the world most famous religious figure and statesman is certain to bring the two countries' churches together after some tense decades, especially in Pope John Paul II's time as head of the Roman Catholic institution.

But Andrei Zolov, a Russian journalist who specializes in religious matters, said the choice of a Russian actor for that role would not have a big impact on relations.

"I don't think that it will have any influence on the Russian Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church's relationship. Ironically, they are doing better since the Polish Pope has left," Zolotov said.

During the Cold War, Soviet authorities had a negative attitude towards Pope John Paul for his criticism of Communism. The West in turn has blamed the KGB for an attempt to assassinate the Pope in 1981.

Some claimed that the Soviet organization planned the shooting during which the Pope was struck three times. The incident happened in the Vatican's St Peter's Square, spawning allegations that the Turkish assailant had assistance from the Bulgarian secret service, East German Stasi and Turkish mafia.

A member of the far-right Turkish "Grey Wolves" youth organization, Mehmet Ali Agca, was found guilty.

Late KGB head Vladimir Krychkov dismissed the accusations.

Despite his passion for Russia, John Paul never visited the country as either a church figure or a head of Vatican, due to the stained ties with the Russian Orthodox Church, which blamed it for conducting proselytization policies — attempts to convert people on Orthodox canonic territories in Ukraine.

Interestingly enough, The Pope's Slavic roots always fascinated many Russians, prompting beloved Russian bard Vladimir Vysotsky to pen a famous line: "We gave them Papa, a man from us, from Poland, from the Slavs" in a humorous song: "A lecture about the foreign policy" written in the mid 1970s.

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