

# RED STAR LINE

a documentary film by Daniel Cattier & Fabio Wuytack

RED STAR LINE SCRIPT & DIRECTION DANIEL CATTIER & FABIO WUYTACK A PRODUCTION BY OFF WORLD  
EKLETIK PRODUCTIONS, VRT-CANVAS, RTBF & CASAKAFKA GENRE DOCUMENTARY LENGTH 3 x '50 & 1 x '90



WATCH TRAILER: [www.vimeo.com/74850168](http://www.vimeo.com/74850168)  
link and password for watching the series on demand ([maarten@offworld.be](mailto:maarten@offworld.be))

Between 1873 and 1934, the Belgian shipping company Red Star Line transported approximately 2 million migrants from Antwerp to New York.

What makes the Red Star Line unique is that it mainly transported Eastern Europeans to the United States, many of whom were of Jewish origin.

This made Antwerp the main passenger port in Europe at the time.

The documentary series presents a mosaic of human migration stories. Audio tapes containing over 2000 interviews with people testifying on the most important journey of their lives, are kept on Ellis Island, the island just off the coast of New York where migrants would arrive. We visited the descendants of these Red Star Line passengers in America and brought with us the original sound recordings. With them, we discovered why they had left everything they owned, travelled to Antwerp, how the RSL brought them across the ocean to New York, and how they tried to build up a new life on the other side of the ocean.

**international title:** **RED STAR LINE**

**format:** HD - 3 x `50 minutes series - 1 x `90 minutes documentary  
Tranzyt Antwerpia - book, written by Pascal Verbeken with photos by Herman Selleslags, in collaboration with De Bezige Bij and the RSL-Museum

**spoken languages:** English, Dutch

**language versions:** Dutch, English, French, Czech

**Shooting locations:** **Europe:** Antwerp, Charleroi, Krakow  
**USA:** New York, Detroit, Charleroi, Miami, Boston, Chicago

**scenario:** Daniel Cattier

**direction:** Daniel Cattier & Fabio Wuytack

**narrated by:** Bjorn Soenens

**coproduction partners:** **Belgium:** VRT-Canvas & RTBF, Eklektik Productions, Red Star Line Museum  
Flanders Audiovisual Fund, Casakafka Pictures.  
**United States:** Ellis Island Museum New York

**with the support of:** the Flanders Audiovisual Fund, le Centre du Cinema de la Federation Wallonie-Bruxelles, the Brussels Capital Region and Wallonia, the Tax Shelter of the Federal Government en het Media+ Programme from the European Community.

**involved broadcasters:** VRT-Canvas & RTBF (Belgium), TVP Kultura & Planete (Poland), LTV (Letland), RTV (Slovenia), Ceska Televize (Czech Republic)



## GENERAL SYNOPSIS

Red Star Line is a three-part documentary series produced by Daniel Cattier and Fabio Wuytack about the legendary Belgian Red Star Line, which transported over two million migrants from Antwerp to New York between 1873 and 1934.

Many Europeans, including approximately 20.000 Belgians were forced to leave their homelands due to several crop failures, wars and religious conflicts. What makes the Red Star Line unique is that this shipping line mainly transported Eastern Europeans to the United States, many of whom were of Jewish origin.

The passage of all those migrants allowed Antwerp to grow into one of Europe's major passenger ports.

The border crossing at Ellis Island, the island just off the coast of New York where all migrants arrived for approval to enter the United States, is now a prestigious museum. The tapes from the Oral History Program are stored here: over 2000 interviews with people talking about the most important journey of their lives.

The documentary series presents a mosaic of human migration stories. We visited the descendants of these Red Star Line passengers in America and brought with us the original sound recordings. Today, they will be hearing the tapes of their great-grandparents' testimonies for the first time. We will relive each migrant's personal way of life and try to find answers to questions like: 'Why were so many Europeans forced to leave their home countries?', 'How did they travel to Antwerp to start their hellish crossing to New York?', 'How did they try to build up a new life in the United States?'

Red Star Line is more than just a historical documentary. Migration is a relevant topic in all eras and the strength and emotion that emanates from these historical migration stories makes the whole story seem very real. We go back in history with the Red Star Line to get a better understanding of the present.

Red Star Line is an exciting and cinematic journey, based on never-before-seen archival footage, scenes from the present and dazzling animation sequences of the boat crossing.



## SYNOPSIS EPISODE 1: THE DEPARTURE

Margaret Roets, a spirited elderly lady with Flemish roots, is still the passionate publisher of a Flemish newspaper in America: The Gazette of Detroit. Her parents left West Flanders for a new life on the other side of the ocean. She is now trying to reconstruct the origins and many stories of migrants from Europe with her immense collection of obituaries.

From 1850 until just after the First World War, millions of Europeans left for the United States to flee poverty and war. They all cherished the hope of a new and better life. The Belgian-American Red Star Line transported over 2 million Europeans from Antwerp to America during its 60-year existence.

The border crossing at Ellis Island, the island just off the coast of New York where all migrants arrived at that time for approval to enter the US, is now a prestigious museum. This is where the Oral History Program tapes are stored: over 2000 interviews with people talking about the most important journey of their lives.

We visited the descendants of these Red Star Line passengers in America and brought with us the original sound recordings. Today, they will be hearing the tapes of their parents or grandparents' testimonies for the first time. Together we relive each migrant's personal life story and find out why they saw no other way out but to leave behind their European home country.



David McKay is the grandson of Louis Wallot, a glass worker from Charleroi. Louis Wallot left Belgium for the United States after the riots of 1886 during which glass workers took out their dissatisfaction with their low wages and inhuman working conditions on the glass factories and their bosses. He and many other workers had had more than enough of their hopeless situation.

The exodus of so many Europeans was a stroke of fortune for the major shipping companies. Ships were built on a scale like never before. The Red Star Line wanted to attract some of these migrants and built an extensive network of sales agencies, primarily in Eastern Europe.

The Jews saw hard times in Eastern Europe. They were obliged to live in Jewish communities called Shtetls. Wars and economic problems increased the hatred of the Jewish community.

Carole Malkin is the granddaughter of David Toback. At the end of the 19th century, Toback left the poverty of the Jewish Shtetl in which he had grown up and began his long journey to America. There was not enough money to take the whole family with him. The rest of the family remained in Europe until David had earned enough for them to join him.

When the First World War was afoot, many men left Europe out of fear. Joel Mason's grandfather also sensed that the war was not far off. He was a soldier in the Russian army when he decided to desert and leave for America. He had no choice but to leave his family behind.

After World War I, America's doors started to become even more closed to foreigners. It was a case of now or never for those who wanted to bring their families to join them.

Morris Moel is one of the last passengers who still lives to tell the tale. On his 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, he reminisced about the illegal and perilous journey from Russia to Antwerp. When he and his mother, brother and sisters went to join their father in America, they had not seen him in eight years...



## SYNOPSIS EPISODE 2: THE CROSSING

The Red Star Line's decision to use Antwerp as their European base was a major revolution for the city. By making large investments in the port, Antwerp was able to grow into one of the most important migration cities in the world.

Louis Wallot, the glass worker who migrated to America from Charleroi in the late 19th century, left Antwerp at a time when the presence of the Red Star Line had not yet paid off. He can tell us about Antwerp before it saw economic prosperity.

When the great wave of migration from Eastern Europe got underway, Antwerp was almost swamped with migrants. They came in large groups to an unfamiliar city. Many also spent some time hanging around in Antwerp before they could leave for America because they often had no money left to pay their Red Star Line ticket by the time they arrived. Some were also robbed of the only money they had by fraudulent ticket sellers.



Although many Antwerpers protested against the presence of so many migrants, not everyone was insensitive to their struggle for survival. The painter Eugene Van Mieghem immortalised the passage of migrants in vivid pastels drawings and paintings.

Not everyone was allowed to leave. Because only healthy migrants were allowed into America, and the cost of repatriation in case of rejection had to be borne by the Red Star Line, all migrants had to pass a medical examination before their departure.

Together with his granddaughter, Carole Malkin, we hear the captivating testimony of David Toback, one of the Jewish migrants seeking a better life on the other side of the ocean. Because unmarried women were not allowed to travel alone, a young lady asked him to make the journey as her husband in exchange for a first class ticket. However, he declined her offer. He could not stop thinking about his abandoned wife and children in Russia.

Like many poor passengers, Toback could only afford a third class ticket. They made the 10-day crossing packed into tiny spaces with hundreds of others and with hardly any food, let alone washing facilities. The Red Star Line ships were a perfect reflection of the class society of the time: the luxury and entertainment provided in the first class stood in stark contrast to the hardships of the third class below deck.

Many migrants took a joint sigh of relief at the sight of the Statue of Liberty. After this exhausting crossing, their American Dream was finally and tangibly close by. But that did not mean the end of the journey...

## SYNOPSIS EPISODE 3: AMERICA

In the third instalment, 'The American Dream' can finally begin for these European fleeing a life of war and poverty. Yet the delirious joy after their first sight of the Statue of Liberty was short-lived for many: before they could set foot on the American shore, they had to undergo a grim medical examination on Ellis Island, the mythical gateway to New York.

Bessie Akawie Cohen was considered to be unhealthy and therefore had to remain in quarantine on Ellis Island. The rest of the family was allowed to pass through. It would eventually take eight months before she could join her family in New York. Ellen Bledsoe Rodriguez, the granddaughter of Bessie Akawie Cohen, was deeply moved by her emotional testimony.

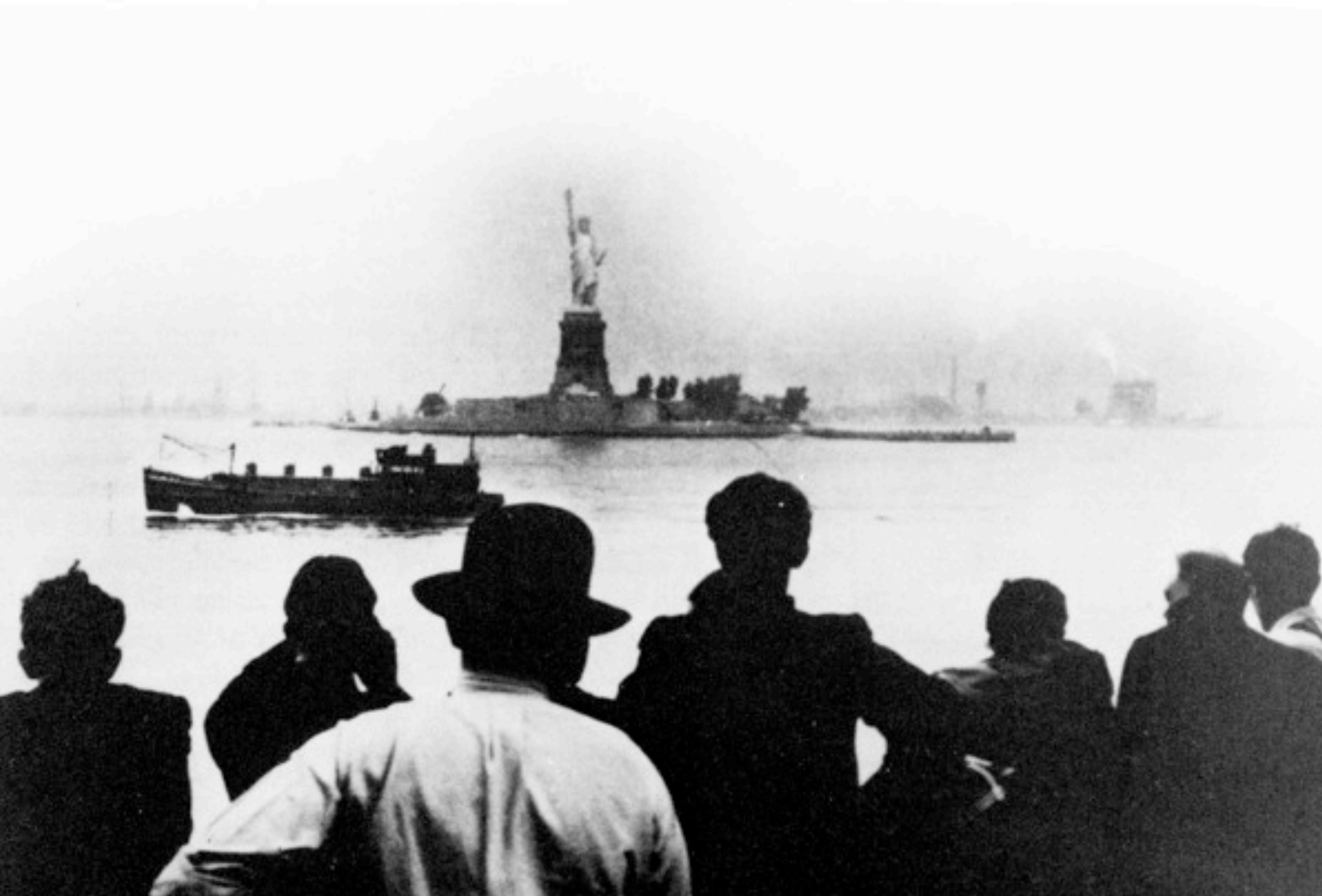
After the long and exhausting journey, Morris Moel and his mother, brothers and sisters, also arrived on Ellis Island. They would finally get to see their father again after eight years. But one of Morris' sisters was refused entry due to an eye disease. Mother Moel faced a difficult decision: either return to Antwerp with the whole family, or let her daughter return alone.

Under pressure from trade unions and the anti-immigration movement, the eligibility criteria to enter the US became even more stringent. Newcomers and their pasts were thoroughly investigated. That was what made it so difficult for the Belgian glass worker Louis Wallot from Charleroi to enter the US. He travelled on to Pittsburgh, where he was able to start work immediately in the local glass industry. But the American workers were not very happy with this large group of Belgians engulfing their factories. After a very tense period, the Belgians decided to leave Pittsburgh and found their own glass industry elsewhere. Oddly enough, they named the town that grew up around their industry, Charleroi.

Many children saw their fathers for the first time upon arrival in America. One of those was Max Mason, whose father had left his family behind in Russia when Max was just 15 months old. His grandson Joel Mason tries to imagine how hard that must have been.

Many started their new lives in this unknown world without a penny to their names. That was no different for Max Mason and his family, who had to survive in a tiny one-bedroom apartment on the Lower East Side of New York. The Masons' first residence is now the busy Tenement Museum, which aims to preserve the memory of the hard living conditions experienced by newcomers to America.

Compulsory education and various other government initiatives succeeded in assimilating all these different nationalities into one nation. They would all contribute to the creation of modern America. A quote from one of the Ellis Island tapes sums it all up: This country was built by immigrants. This country is a country of immigrants. We are all immigrants...÷





## THE DIRECTORS

### DANIEL CATTIER



Daniel Cattier is a freelance film director. He comes from a mixed cultural and linguistic background, his father being Belgian and mother Zulu. After completing the first cycle of a Law degree at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, he read Politics and History at the School of Oriental and African Studies of London University.

He began his career as a Research Assistant for both West Africa and Southeast Asia departments of the International Secretariat of Amnesty International in London. He then goes to the field of documentary and worked as Production Coordinator and Researcher for Channel 4, BBC and ARTE.

His last project was « Kongo : the Grand Illusions », the second part of an ambitious creative documentary series mixing never before seen colonial film archives and animation. The film attracted more than a million viewers in

### FABIO WUYTACK



Fabio Wuytack focusses in his documentaries on the human story behind social and historical events.

He's the director of several international award-winning documentaries. One of his first films was Made In Italy. The documentary is a personal quest through Tuscany in search of the forgotten location where the Lumière Brothers filmed in 1897.

His first feature documentary Persona Non Grata tells the story of his father Frans Wuytack. As a young priest Frans was leading one of the social uprisings in the favela's in Latin America in the 60-ties. In 2012 his last film Expecting was selected for the IDFA film festival. The documentary follows the story of a young couple of illegal immigrants expecting their first child. Their intense battle to survive shows an unseen part of Belgium.

With RED STAR LINE Fabio dives again into the experience of migrants, but this time a century earlier.

## THE PRODUCERS

Off World is an independent production company based in Brussels, capital of Flanders, Belgium and Europe. Eric Goossens founded Off World in 1995, joined by Frederik Nicolai in 2002.

Off World's main goal is producing author documentaries for the national and international market. Over the last few years, the company has built up a large portfolio and a solid reputation as delegate producer and co-producer of many creative and original documentaries. Off World has a long-term collaboration with their national broadcasting companies VRT-Canvas, Lichtpunt and RTBF and national co-producers (Eklektik, Simple Production, Luna Blue Film...) Moreover, Off World co-produces documentaries with foreign broadcasting companies on a regular basis such as ARTE, IKON, RAI, TV3 and with foreign producers such as Zeppers Film (NL), Moztu Filmak (ESP), Amo Film, Monkey Bay, French Connection (FR).

Off World's trademark is a contemporary and wayward look on the world, which springs from the passion and talent of the documentary authors.

Off World has built up a long term collaboration with renowned and distinguished documentary authors. However, Off World is also consistently investing in young filmmakers, as a creative investment for the future.

Off World maintains an personal editorial line in order to construct a clear frame for all its productions. In the centre of that frame we place the author's personal and original approach and his/her critical view on an historic or current society. We want to mesmerize the viewer, invite him to think and develop new insights. After all, that is the basis for a broader and more skeptical view on the world. This is never a luxury in our society that all too often evolves in just a single dimension.

Therefore, our documentaries must contain universal values and must be able to reach people across all borders. Starting from its own clear and sometimes even local context, the documentary can clear the path for a broader truth.

Besides being a key player in the industry, Off World also works to usher Flanders into the global documentary industry. In 2009, the production company cofounded the professional organization Flanders Doc along with fellow Flemish documentary producers. Flanders Doc unites creative forces in order to enhance the level of performance, professionalism and globalization of the Flemish documentary industry. Off World is also an active EDN member.

## ERIC GOOSSENS

Eric Goossens studied communication sciences at the Catholic University of Leuven. Afterwards, he was an intern for a year at the Centre for Audiovisual Arts of CUL.

He organized several national and international workshops for the FEMI (Flemish Media Institute), under the artistic supervision by Frank Daniel (American producer/screenwriter) and Stephen Peet (BBC). In 1990, Eric Goossens joined Little Big One as a television producer to work on various projects for the VRT, RTBF and Canal+. In 1995, Eric Goossens founded the production company Off World. Together with Anton Roebben, an exceptional animation expert, Eric founded the production company Walking The Dog, which produces creative animation films and series.

Eric Goossens is also the vice chairman of anim.be, the association of Belgian animation producers.

## FREDERIK NICOLAI

Frederik Nicolai has been sharing his love for documentaries with Eric Goossens since 2002. Frederik started his career by executive producing fiction series, feature and short films in Belgium and the Netherlands. Then he completely dedicated himself to author documentaries and collaborated with broadcasters like VRT, NPS, VPRO,... Some successful films from that period were: 4 Elements (Jiska Rickels, opening film of the International Documentary Film Festival of Amsterdam 2006), Filming without boundaries (about George Sluizer, by Hans Heijnen), Panna (Nordin Lasfar),... After years of commuting between Brussels and Amsterdam, Frederik chose Brussels as his home. Ever since, he has been working with Eric Goossens to expand the record and international network of Off World. Besides producer Frederik is also a direction coach for young filmmakers.