

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## ***The Way Back* (2010)**

Peter Weir

### OVERVIEW

**Director** Peter Weir (1944- ) is one of the best-known Australian filmmakers. He participated in what has been called the Australian New Wave in the 1970s, directing distinctive films like *The Cars that Ate Paris* (1974), *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975), and *The Last Wave* (1977) that made use of Australian settings. Weir's global status grew with *Gallipoli* (1981) and *The Year of Living Dangerously* (1982), the latter of which won an Oscar. Weir went on to make several Hollywood movies, including the acclaimed *Witness* (1985) and *Dead Poets Society* (1989), both also Oscar winners. Weir began making films less frequently in the 21<sup>st</sup> century but has maintained an international reputation.

**Film** Like many of Weir's films, *The Way Back* is based on a book: a memoir (though its authenticity has been challenged) by the Polish writer Slavomir Rawicz. The film tells the story of a group of people who escape a gulag in 1941 and walk all the way to India. Seven escape the gulag; only three make it to the end of the journey. The film features many shots of the characters dwarfed by the vast landscape in the manner of David Lean's mid-twentieth-century epic films. As of 2024, *The Way Back* is the last film Weir has made.

**Background** After 2003's *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*, Peter Weir began work on three projects that all fell through. Finally, *The Way Back* became the project that stuck, thanks to funding from various sources, including National Geographic Films. Most of the film was shot in Bulgaria and Morocco, in addition to a few scenes in India. Weir brought long-time cinematographer Russell Boyd on board, as well as two collaborators from *The Truman Show*: composer Burkhard Dallwitz and actor Ed Harris. A young Saoirse Ronan plays teenage fugitive Irena.

### CHARACTERS

*Janusz* – Polish gulag prisoner

*Janusz's wife*

*Mr. Smith* – American gulag prisoner

*Andrei Timofeyevich* – Russian actor and gulag prisoner

*Valka* – Russian criminal and gulag prisoner

*Tomasz* – Polish artist and gulag prisoner

*Voss* – Latvian priest and gulag prisoner

*Zoran* – Yugoslav gulag prisoner

*Kazik* – Polish gulag prisoner

*Irena* – Polish girl (late teens) on the run from Soviet authorities

### SYNOPSIS

In 1940, a Polish man named Janusz is arrested by the Soviets under suspicion of spying and criticizing Stalin. Under torture, his wife corroborates this claim. Janusz, horrified by what they have done to his wife, is sent to a gulag in Siberia. There, he meets another prisoner, Andrei Timofeyevich, and tells him he has to escape in order to get back to his wife and tell her he forgives her. Andrei Timofeyevich shares his plan to escape the prison and walk to freedom in Mongolia via Lake Baikal. Andrei Timofeyevich is ultimately unwilling to actually carry out this plan, but Janusz finds several other prisoners from various countries who are willing to try.

Janusz and the others escape; in the chaos of a blizzard, they easily elude the guards. The very first night, though, one of the escapees freezes to death because he gets separated from the others.

Nevertheless, the other six escapees continue through the woods. After several weeks, having survived on fish, bugs, and birds' eggs, they arrive at Lake Baikal. Here, they stock up on fish, clean their clothes, and shave their facial hair. They also meet Irena, a teenage girl also on the run from the Soviets. After some debate, they take her with them.

The group reaches the Mongolian border. To their horror, they see a picture of Stalin on the gateway leading to Mongolia. They realize they must go farther to escape the Soviets. They begin to walk across the Gobi Desert. After many days short on food and water, Irena dies, soon followed by one of the men. The remaining four reach the end of the desert and eventually enter Tibet, where villagers take them in. Despite the villagers' advice to wait until spring to carry out their plan to cross the Himalayas to India, they set off after only one night. They arrive in India safely. Janusz, we learn, keeps wandering the world until communism collapses in Poland in 1990; then, he returns home, finds his wife, and embraces her.

## SCENES

**Informant** – A man in uniform orders another man, sitting across a desk from him, to sign a document. The second man refuses. A crying woman is brought into the room. She acknowledges that she is the wife of the second man, whom she calls Janusz. Prompted by the uniformed man, she says she has learned that her husband is critical of Stalin and his communist party, and that he is a spy. "What have they done to you?" Janusz says, also crying.



**Siberia** – A large group of men walk into a gulag; Janusz is among them. There is snow on the ground. An official informs the newcomers that Siberia itself is their prison: there is no point in trying to escape because they could never survive outside.



**Gulag** – Prisoners line up for a soup dinner. Someone comments that some of the men have night-blindness due to vitamin deficiency; they can no longer see in the dark. Janusz gives some of his food to an old man. Another prisoner advises him not to give away his food, saying, "Kindness...that can kill you here." A third man appears and comments that the selfish man was an American. He introduces himself as Andrei Timofeyevich, a Russian actor who was arrested because he played an aristocrat in a film. Janusz explains that he is a Pole wrongfully arrested for spying.



**Real criminals** – In the dormitory, Andrei Timofeyevich points out to Janusz a group of men who he says are real criminals, rather than political prisoners; he says that the guards let them order the other prisoners around. They are playing cards for money. One of them, Valka, runs out of money. He tells another prisoner to give him his sweater, which the man refuses to do. So Valka stabs him and takes it, then uses it as currency in the game.



**Plan to escape** – The prisoners work. Some log, some mine. At night, Janusz and Andrei Timofeyevich discuss how they might escape. Andrei Timofeyevich says he believes that they are about 500 kilometers north of Lake Baikal; after going there, he says, they could cross the Trans-Siberian Railroad and get to freedom in Mongolia. Andrei Timofeyevich says that they could store up food and leave in the autumn.



**Mr. Smith** – The prisoners are led by a couple of guards to a worksite away from the gulag. But there is a blizzard and freezing weather. The American prisoner tries to persuade a guard to let them shelter in the forest. The guard eventually consents. The prisoners build themselves a temporary shelter in the woods. The American identifies himself as Mr. Smith.



**Mining** – Back in the dormitory, a guard pulls Mr. Smith, Janusz, and a few other men to work in the mine. When they begin doing so, Janusz is terrified and chokes on the dust and smoke. He seems to hallucinate the front door of a house, with a couple of potted flowers on the windowsill. He tells Mr. Smith that he has to get back, and that in fact he and Andrei Timofeyevich are planning an escape. Mr. Smith says that Andrei Timofeyevich is always talking about escape but never intends to really do it. Mr. Smith adds that he himself, though, is very willing to escape with Janusz. That night, Janusz tests Andrei Timofeyevich by suggesting that they leave immediately because the heavily falling snow would cover their tracks. Andrei Timofeyevich refuses.



**Preparations** – Janusz, Mr. Smith, and a few other men prepare to escape. They trade with other inmates for more food. Valka approaches Janusz with a knife and makes him promise to take him along too. Another prisoner advises them to cut the wire to the generator in order to plunge the camp into darkness and thus gain some time. They do so and then run off into the woods.

**Escape** – Wind and snow rage as the prisoners run through the woods. Eventually the storm stops; the guards have not found them. The seven men (Janusz, Mr. Smith, Valka, Kazik, Zoran, Tomasz, and Voss) sit in a cave and take stock of their food and other supplies. They proceed through the woods.



**First death** – They walk, then rest. Janusz says that in about three to four weeks they will make it to Lake Baikal. They discuss the fact that they only have one week's worth of food with them. They consider how they should plan to get more food and settle on fishing. As it gets dark, they light a fire using flint, and several men go to gather wood. Kazik, who has night-blindness, gets lost. The next morning, the other men find him, frozen to death. They bury him under a pile of stones and walk on.



**Searching for food** – The men, now with substantial facial hair, separately search for food, finding things like bugs and birds' eggs. Tomasz draws on the walls of a large cave while Zoran rests. Valka asks Janusz, in a whisper, which of the men they should kill first for food. Janusz says they will get more food when they get to Lake Baikal. They hear the sound of wolves; holding spears, they chase a group of wolves off of a carcass of another animal. The men eat the carcass themselves.



**Solo search** – Janusz sets off alone to search for Lake Baikal, saying he will come back within a week. He quietly tells Mr. Smith not to let Valka out of his sight. Janusz searches for several days, often shivering and chewing on bark. He then comes stumbling back to the cave, announcing that the lake is three days from there.

**Irena** – The men walk together to Lake Baikal. Near the lake, they realize that someone is following them. It turns out to be a teenage girl who says that her name is Irena, that she is Polish, and that she too is running from the Soviets, having escaped from a Russian collective farm. Voss and Janusz want to let her come with them, but the others do not allow it.



**Clean-up** – The men kill a cow they find stuck in the mud near the lake; they cook it. Voss turns back and gets Irena; the others consent to let her eat with them. The next day, they stay by the lake, washing their clothes and shaving off their facial hair. Irena remains with them, also washing her clothes. Mr. Smith says privately to Janusz that he is worried Irena will slow them down.



**Irena's story** – As they walk alongside the lake, Mr. Smith talks to Irena about her past. She says that she lived on a farm near Warsaw and that her parents were murdered by the Soviets. Mr. Smith says that she must be lying because the Germans, not the Soviets, seized Warsaw. He tells her never to lie to him again.



**Knowing about survival** – They approach a town and decide to go around it so as to avoid detection. Valka secretly goes into the town by himself and comes back carrying an armful of food and wearing a bloody shirt. He says that he killed a dog to get it, and that if they do not believe him, they do not have to eat the food. He says he has known about survival his whole life. As they all eat, Irena confesses that actually her parents were Polish communists who took the family to Moscow to join the revolution. But her parents were arrested as spies and she was sent to an orphanage, from which she has fled.



**Personal information** – Finally leaving Lake Baikal behind, they walk on. Irena walks beside Mr. Smith, telling him things she has learned about Zoran and Tomasz. She tells Janusz that Mr. Smith is an engineer with a Finnish father who came to Russia with his son. The Soviets, she said, shot the son, David, when he was seventeen. Janusz looks shocked and frowns. When they all stop to rest, Irena wipes Mr. Smith's bloody foot with a wet cloth.



**Valka stays behind** – The group approaches a railroad. Janusz explains that once they cross it they will be very near the border with Mongolia. They agree to wait till nightfall to cross because it is patrolled by Soviets. As they wait, Zoran makes fun of Valka's chest tattoo of Stalin, which makes Valka very angry. Night falls and they cross the railroad. Valka stops at a post that has a sign saying CCCP ("USSR" in Cyrillic) on one side and something in Mongolian on the other side. Janusz comes back and talks to him. Valka says he has realized he does not know what he would do outside of Russia. They shake hands and say goodbye.



**Communism in Mongolia** – The remaining six people walk along the next day, approaching a gateway standing by itself on the land. When they reach it, their faces fall. At its top is a picture of an Asian man, and of Stalin, and of two hands shaking. "They're communists," Irena says. "So it's here too," Janusz says. "This changes everything," Mr. Smith says. They pass through the gate anyway, seeing a Buddhist temple in the distance. They enter the temple and realize it has been ransacked and partially destroyed. Voss, who used to be a priest, tells Irena about what happened to churches in Russia when the Soviets took over and banned religion.



**Mongolians** – The group debates where to go. They decide to cross Mongolia to Tibet and then go over the Himalayas to India, despite some doubts as to whether they will really be able to do so. They walk. After some time, they are approached by three Mongolian men and a boy on horseback. Prompted by their questions, Mr. Smith tells them in Russian that they are pilgrims going to Tibet and that Irena is his daughter. They ride away. Sometime later, as the group walks, the Mongolian boy reappears and gives them water.



**Gobi Desert** – They walk. Eventually they reach the brink of the Gobi Desert. They begin to walk across it. They stop to rest, making hats and other forms of sun shelter for themselves, and catching lizards for food. Janusz offers Irena some extra padding for her feet.



**Water** – They run out of water. Janusz and Mr. Smith think they might see trees in the distance but cannot be sure it is not a mirage. Janusz wants to ignore it and continue south, but Mr. Smith insists that they go east in search of the water that would be near the trees. Indeed, there turns out to be a large well,



**Sandstorm** – The next day, they fill as many containers as they can with water and walk away from the well. They walk and walk. Suddenly, a sandstorm rushes toward them. They all manage to duck into a sort of trench and survive, but much of the water is lost. Mr. Smith asks Janusz if he thinks he could find his way back to the well. He says no, because the landscape is so featureless.



**Irena's death** – The next day, they walk on. Irena collapses in the sand. The men realize her legs and feet are swollen. They tell her to lie back down for a while, but she insists on going on. Soon, though, she collapses again. She tries to get up once more, but Voss picks her up and carries her. He walks with her this way for some time. Eventually, she asks him to lay her on the ground. The men surround her and she looks around at them all. Mr. Smith says, "It's okay," and then she closes her eyes. Mr. Smith confirms that she is dead. They bury her and walk on.



**Tomasz's death** – With almost no water or food left, they walk on through the desert. Tomasz collapses and takes off one of his boots, revealing that his foot appears to be injured. He struggles to continue. At night, the men all look together at various drawings Tomasz has made. Tomasz closes his eyes; they bury him the next day and walk on.



**Desperation** – "Go on without me," Mr. Smith says, sinking to the ground, as they walk the next day. Janusz asks Zoran and Voss to go on ahead and look for water in the distant hills. That night, Janusz, supporting Mr. Smith, arrives at a campfire where Voss and Zoran are. They say they have not found water. The next morning, Zoran wakes to find a snake crawling over him. As the snake moves away, he follows it, saying "Show me!" Indeed, the snake leads him to a puddle of water, which he shows the other three men. They attempt to drink, though it is very muddy. They then kill and eat the snake.



**Mr. Smith rallies** – That night, Mr. Smith again tells Janusz he should leave him there. Janusz refuses, and also tells him that he learned from Irena about what happened to his son. Mr. Smith tells him that Irena told him about what the Soviets did to Janusz and his wife. The next morning, Mr. Smith sets off with the others. They reach a river and bathe in it.



**Reaching Tibet** – As Janusz, Mr. Smith, Zoran, and Voss continue walking, the landscape changes to snowy hills. They reach the Great Wall of China and cross through it. They continue walking and eventually reach a cluster of Tibetan prayer flags, which makes them realize they have arrived in Tibet. A Tibetan man finds them and leads them to his settlement, while also pointing to Lhasa in the distance.



**Waiting** – That night, an elder tells them that it is possible to cross the Himalayas to India but not right now; he tells them they can stay with one of the local families to wait out the three months until spring. Mr. Smith, though, can go to Lhasa and then get connected to an American military base. They discuss what they will all do; Janusz says he will simply keep going because he cannot return to Poland while the communists are in charge.



**Over the Himalayas** – The next morning, Janusz walks off: the others realize he has decided not to wait until spring. Voss and Zoran follow him. They walk across the mountains, stopping at villages along the way. Finally, they reach India: they are welcomed by villagers who are out tending crops.



**Back home again** – A montage demonstrates that throughout the nearly fifty remaining years of communist rule of Poland, Janusz keeps wandering. Then, in 1990, Janusz returns home, now an old man, and embraces his wife.



## CHARACTER ANALYSIS

**Janusz** Janusz is a Polish man who becomes a political prisoner of the occupying Soviets. Eager to return to his wife and knowledgeable about how to survive in the wilderness, Janusz leads a small group in escaping the gulag and walking to freedom in Asia.

*Knowledgeable* Janusz states at one point that he has spent half his life in the woods and mountains. Indeed, he repeatedly demonstrates a solid grasp of wilderness skills such as making a fire, finding and building shelter, efficiently consuming water, and remaining protected from the sun, wind, and snow.

*Determined* At no point does Janusz waver from his goal of returning to his wife. Despite all the challenges, risks, and discomfort, he escapes the gulag and keeps walking even as it becomes clear that he will need to walk very, very far to escape communism. He also encourages others.

*Monomaniacal* Janusz's determination sometimes dips into monomania. In the Gobi Desert, Janusz does not want to walk toward a potential water source toward the east because the official goal is to walk south—even though at that point the group is out of water. Janusz also ignores the Tibetan villagers' advice to wait until spring to cross the Himalayas. He cannot stop walking.

**Mr. Smith** Mr. Smith—who does not reveal his first name—is an older American man who has also run afoul of the Soviets and ended up in the same gulag as Janusz. His 17-year-old son, David, was killed by the Soviets. Mr. Smith eagerly joins Janusz's plan to escape.

*Grieving* The Soviet authorities tortured Mr. Smith's son, David, to get him to incriminate his father, then shot David. Mr. Smith does not speak of this until Irena asks him about himself. Mr. Smith's gruffness and his eventual tenderness toward teenage Irena are manifestations of his grief.

*Determined* Like Janusz, Mr. Smith is determined. When he and Janusz are forced to work in a dangerous mine, he says they must escape or they will die. Mr. Smith helps Janusz plan the escape and does most of the work of catching fish for them all to eat. Despite his age and a period of despair in the desert, Mr. Smith makes it to the end of the journey.

**Irena** A teenage Polish girl, Irena is running away from a Soviet orphanage. Her parents were communists who took the family to Moscow to support the Russian revolution but then were accused of being spies. Irena is eager to travel with Janusz's group; though some of them initially see her as a burden, she wins them over in the end.

*Compassionate* As they walk, Irena often chats with the others in the group. She learns about each man's background (including intimate and tragic stories) and is surprised to realize that they have not already shared these details with each other. In addition, in one scene she bathes Mr. Smith's injured foot.

*Brave* Irena sets out on her own from the orphanage and asks a group of grown men if she can join them. Although she cannot swim, she runs across the cracking ice of a lake. When dying, she keeps trying to walk instead of letting someone carry her, so as not to slow the group down.

## THEMES

### JUSTICE

**Prison** Roughly the first quarter of the film takes place in a gulag in Siberia. There, the prisoners must work (at either logging or mining), eat bad food, and live in cold conditions—and, of course, they are not free to leave. The prisoners consist of political prisoners, like Janusz and most of the other characters, and ordinary criminals, like Valka. The guards allow the criminals to exercise some control over the political prisoners; Valka, for example, regularly takes things from other prisoners and even stabs a man who does not want to give up his sweater. As presented in this film, the greatest dangers of the gulag are the frigid environment and the work; Janusz and Mr. Smith are taken to work in the mine, where no safety precautions are being taken. The impetus for Mr. Smith to escape with Janusz is his concern that he will die in a mining accident if he does not leave.

### QUEST

**Wilderness** When Janusz first enters the gulag, one of the guards states that the real prison is Siberia itself; there is no point in trying to escape, he says, because it is too difficult to survive in the extreme Siberian conditions. This argument is ultimately compelling to Andrei Timofeyevich, but Janusz and the six other men decide to escape anyway. Indeed, though, the Siberian wilderness proves to be very harsh. One man freezes to death the first night after the escape. Before they make it to Lake Baikal, the escapees encounter frigid temperatures, snow, wind, and ice, not to mention difficulty finding food. Lake Baikal is a friendly environment, offering mild temperatures, water, and ample fish to eat. But before long the group encounters another harsh wilderness: the Gobi Desert, where water and food are fatally scarce and the sun beats down relentlessly, burning their skin. Finally, the surviving members of the group must cross the Himalayas – another cold and snowy environment. Throughout the film, the wilderness is presented as safe in that they do not encounter any people who might be hostile to them, but dangerous in that the conditions of the wilderness are often unsuitable for human life. This wilderness is fatal for some. The film's images of wilderness are often beautiful, though – suggesting a sublime landscape that dwarfs the human being and produces a sense of awe.

**Survival** At one point in the film, Valka goes alone into a town and comes back with food—and with blood all over his shirt. He claims that he killed a dog to get the food, and that if they do not believe him, they do not have to eat the food. He goes on to say that he has known about survival his whole life. He does not elaborate, but it is clear that he means he has always had to fend for himself and does not have the luxury of moral scruples. Valka's suggestion to Janusz that they cannibalize one of their fellow escapees when they are short on food is consistent with this idea. For the others in the group, though, survival does not mean violence to others. It has more to do with finding the will to survive within oneself. Particularly when Janusz, Mr. Smith, Irena, Voss, Tomasz, and Zoran are proceeding through the Gobi Desert, they keep walking in spite of thirst, hunger, fatigue, and various forms of injury and pain. They eat snake and drink water that is mostly mud. Near the edge of the desert, Mr. Smith temporarily loses hope, telling the others to go on without him. But Janusz helps him find his motivation again. Survival is also, the film suggests, dependent on receiving help from other people.

### RELATIONSHIPS

**Kindness** His first night in the gulag, Janusz shares his dinner with an old man. Mr. Smith approaches him and tells him he should not do things like that because he will need every bit of food he can get for himself. Mr. Smith says, "Kindness...that can kill you here." Later, though, Mr. Smith tells Janusz that he wants to escape with him because he may need Janusz's kindness if he himself becomes weak or injured. When they encounter Irena and are debating whether to let him join their group, Mr. Smith argues that she will slow them down and that they should not be sentimental. Soon, though, Irena is showing Mr. Smith kindness by talking with him and bathing his injured foot. Throughout the journey, all of them except for Valka show kindness to each other in various ways—sharing food, sharing water, making sun hats and shoe padding for each other, and encouraging each other. Irena ultimately does not really slow the group

down; she keeps up with them until eventually she simply dies. The group also benefits from the kindness of the few other people they encounter on their journey, including the Mongolian boy who gives them water, the Tibetan villagers who give them food and shelter, and the Indian villagers who welcome them as they descend from the Himalayas.

## POLITICS

**Political oppression** Many of the film's major characters are suffering because the Soviet Union has occupied their countries and is now imposing its political demands on all of the citizens. Janusz, Irena, and Tomasz are in particularly bad shape as Poles, given that Poland is partly occupied by the U.S.S.R. and partly by Germany. The Soviet regime is clearly portrayed in the film as oppressive. It begins with the imprisonment of Janusz based merely on an accusation and a witness statement extracted under torture, and it ends with a montage indicating that even after reaching India, Janusz continued to wander for nearly fifty more years while awaiting the collapse of communism in Poland. The oppressive regime imposes on Janusz a half-century-long separation from his wife and his homeland. Meanwhile, while they are imprisoned and while they are on the run, all the major characters are separated from their homes, their families, and their professions. One of the escapees in the group, Voss, had been a priest. He tells Irena about the destruction of his church in Latvia by the Soviet authorities—while they are standing in a partially destroyed Buddhist temple in Mongolia that has clearly suffered the same fate.

**Power** Janusz begins the film being forced to cede his individual power to the greater power of the Soviet regime. Although Janusz initially tries to resist, he can do nothing to prevent the regime using their political power to seize and torture his wife, thus forcing a corroborating witness statement out of her. Once Janusz is sent to prison, the power of the regime is in the hands of the guards, who use it to control the prisoners' movements and activities. The guards choose to let prisoners like Valka who are there for committing ordinary crimes exercise power over the political prisoners. Valka uses this power for childish purposes such as seizing another man's sweater to use as currency when he runs out of money while gambling. Ultimately, though, Janusz's wilderness skills and bravery give him the power to escape the prison and survive the journey out of Siberia. The whole setup of the gulag in Siberia indicates that the Soviet regime is banking on their prisoners lacking such power. Even though some of the people who escape with Janusz die, a total of four prisoners ultimately escape thanks by exercising what power they do still possess to take a risk and survive.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What did you think of the character of Janusz? Which do you think is ultimately more prominent—the portrayal of his bravery and determination, or the portrayal of his monomania?
2. This film follows a common but rather outdated practice of having English-speaking actors play characters of other nationalities. Did this bother you, or not?
3. Compare and contrast *The Way Back's* portrayal of people in the wilderness with that of Weir's earlier film *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (or, if you have not seen that film, with another film that sends its characters into a harsh landscape).
4. Compare and contrast Janusz with Allie Fox in Weir's earlier film *The Mosquito Coast* (or, if you have not seen that film, think of another film that centers on a person leading a group in a difficult activity or journey).
5. Would you have joined Janusz in this plan to escape the gulag? Why or why not?