

"REGINA"

The Story of the World's First Woman Rabbi

A poetic documentary film about an extraordinary woman's struggle, devotion, faith, and love.

Directed by: Diana Groó
Voice of Regina: Rachel Weisz



"Beautifully written and passionately directed by Groó, Regina is a profound and poetic documentary that pays a graceful tribute to Regina Jonas, who serves as an undeniably inspiring subject for the film. With her soft-spoken voice, Rachel Weisz is well cast as Regina, and together with the gentle music by Dániel Böhm and Dániel Kardos, the documentary enjoys a suitably compassionate sound. Merging various footage of early twentieth century Jewish life in Berlin, Ágnes Mógor's skilful editing ensures a poignant backdrop for Groó to tell Regina Jonas' incredible story, which as you can imagine, is rather moving." - *London View*

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Regina – The Film

Background

Diana Groós's poetic documentary tells the story of Regina Jonas (1902-1944), a strong woman who made history by becoming the first properly ordained woman rabbi in the world. The daughter of an Orthodox Jewish peddler, Jonas grew up in Berlin's Scheunenviertel, studied at the liberal Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums (College for the Scientific Study of Judaism) beginning in 1924, and was ordained in 1935. During the Nazi era and the war, her sermons and her unparalleled dedication brought encouragement to the persecuted German Jews. Regina Jonas was murdered in Auschwitz in 1944. The only surviving photo of Jonas serves as a leitmotif for the film, showing a determined young woman gazing at the camera with self-confidence.

Synopsis

There is only one photograph of Regina Jonas, the first female rabbi of the world. She lives in Berlin of the 1930s, and her greatest dream was to become a rabbi. But a woman could not be a rabbi according to the laws of Jewish religion. Regina chooses a calling she must struggle to attain within her own religious community and moreover in a historical period where one is lucky not to be branded as a Jew. In 1935, she manages to find a liberal rabbi who will ordain her. She hopes that henceforth she will have a place in the synagogues. But she doesn't. It is perhaps fate's irony that she officially receives her synagogue commissions when most of her rabbi colleagues are emigrating or being arrested, one after the other. At age 37, she meets the love of her life, Rabbi Josef Norden. Both of them were deported to Theresienstadt concentration camp. Only their love letters survive the Holocaust.

Specifications:

Running Time: 64 minutes

Color: Black and White

Language: English

Web: www.menemshafilms.com/Regina
www.reginajonasmovie.com
www.facebook.com/ReginaTheStoryOfTheWorldsFirstWomanRabbi

Regina – Diana Groó's unusual documentary on the first female rabbi

By Gábor Czene, 22 April, 2013

Translated by: Mark Baczoni

We strongly suspect that by mixing different styles of directing, Diana Gróó has created a new genre of documentary. As the poster itself says, she reconstructed the story of Regina – Regina Jonas, the world's first female rabbi – from a single photograph.

The fate of this film was determined by coincidence and necessity. Even the fact that Diana Gróó heard of the late Regina Jonas at a festival in Amsterdam is pure luck. The fact that there is a book on her life is also lucky. It was Elisa Klapheck, the author of that book, a woman rabbi from Frankfurt, who recommended that Regina's life be the subject of a film. But the Hungarian director was in no way thinking of making a film about a person who was to her a complete stranger, and isolated in time and place. Then she read the book.

Regina Jonas was born at the turn of the 20th century to an Orthodox Jewish family in Berlin. She consciously trained to be a rabbi from a young age. That was something that seemed completely impossible – the ordination of women as rabbis was strictly forbidden in the Orthodox community (and still is). The otherwise conservative Jonas pulled together the religious arguments for the ordination of women as rabbis in a professional paper. She finished her theological studies in 1933, the year that Hitler and the NSDAP came to power in Germany.

Although she was ordained in 1935 thanks to a liberal rabbi, she was not allowed on the pulpit. It took her several more years to gain recognition within the Berlin Jewish community as a fully-fledged religious leader. It's a morbid paradox, but this would hardly have been possible without the growth of Nazism. With the takeover of anti-Semitic propaganda, the Jewish community started to thin out – whoever could fled Germany. But Regina Jonas stayed and made herself indispensable. She organized charitable activities, and gave hope to children and the elderly. She was by the side of the persecuted even as the deportations began.

She knew what to expect. She moved her papers and official documents to a safe place before her deportation. In 1942, she was taken to Theresienstadt, later to Auschwitz, where she was killed in 1944. As far as Diana Gróó knows, the next female rabbi was ordained in the 1970s and even then in a Reform or Progressive (and not Orthodox) community.

The book on her life provides a range of documents and memorials of her life, but the images necessary for making a film – apart from that certain 'single photograph' – was completely missing. Diana Gróó therefore decided to take a trip to the borders of reality and imagination. She spent years researching in German, American, Czech and Polish film archives, looking for material that would help her recreate the mood of the time and put together, frame by frame, the seemingly surreal but all too real story of Regina Jonas. There are some images in the "creative" documentary (in the words of the director) that are well-known – including

our favorite where the super-gifted Black American athlete Jesse Owens wins one of his golds right under the eyes of a very irritated Hitler. The majority of the images however are from family collections and are probably reaching a wider audience for the first time. For Diana Gróo – as she says – the most unusual experience was that according to the evidence of the family images, there were moments during even the darkest times when people managed to enjoy themselves.

After the change of government in Hungary in 2010, it became doubtful whether she would manage to finish the film. The Hungarian Moving Picture Fund's promised funding did not arrive. The money needed was provided primarily by the film's London-based producer, George Weisz (father of the world-famous actress Rachel Weisz). For Weisz, finishing the film became a personal project.

Filmmaker Bio

DIRECTOR/WRITER: Diana Groó



Diana Groó is a feature and documentary director. She received her education in Budapest, obtaining a Bachelor's degree in French-Hebrew from the Faculty of Arts, ELTE, followed by a Master's in TV and Film Directing, at the Department of Film and Television Directing at the Hungarian Film Academy in 2000.

After her prize winning shorts and documentaries, her debut feature film was "A Miracle in Cracow", a Central European Jewish magic tale, in Polish-Hungarian coproduction in 2004. Her documentary "What lies ahead" - about disabled children of the Hungarian Pető Institute, was awarded by the Jury of Verzio 4 Int. Human Rights Doc. Filmfestival in 2005.

Her second feature film "Vespa" (2010), a road movie about a Romani teenager, was awarded the UNICEF Special Award at Italy's Terra di Siena Film Festival, as well as the Dialog Prize for Intercultural Communication at Filmfestival Cottbus. The film also earned Best Feature and Best Director awards at Festival Tous Écrans in Geneva and was named Best Film of the Hungarian Film Festival of Los Angeles.

Groó's "Wild Imagination" art-history series, presenting the art of Marc Chagall, August Renoir, Pieter Bruegel and Henri

Rousseau, opened the contemporary art exhibition of Herzlya Muzeum in Israel in 2005. The "Intervisual Mediaprogram between Painting & Cinema" at Haifa University intergrated the series into its courses along with the works of Peter Greenaway, Derek Jarman and others.

In 2008, Diana premiered first time in Hungary the stage adaptation of Katherine Kressman Taylor's prophetic novel about the Nazism "Address Unknown", that she staged also in Sao Paulo Theatro Hebraica in 2011. Her most recent work is "Regina" (2013), a poetic documentary about the world's first woman rabbi was the winner of the Lia Award for dealing with Jewish Heritage at 30th Jerusalem Film Festival 2013.

Selected Filmography

- 2013 - REGINA – THE STORY OF THE WORLD'S FIRST FEMALE RABBI (documentary)
- 2010 – VESPA (feature)
- 2009 - ELDORÁDÓ (short)
- 2006 - URLICHT (short)
- 2006 – What lies ahead (documentary)
- 2001-2006 WILD IMAGINATION (animation short series)
 - THE GARDEN OF THE MAGICIAN
 - BRUEGEL'S DREAMS
 - ROUSSEAU'S DREAMS
 - RENOIR'S DREAMS
 - OVER THE VILLAGE - CHAGALL'S DREAMS
- 2004 - A MIRACLE IN CRACOW (feature)
- 2001 - WAYS (documentary)
- 1999 - MELODY OF THE STREET (short)
- 1998 - BLUE EYES (TV film)
- 1997 - OTTAVIO (documentary)
- 1996 – TRAPÉ (documentary)

Diana Groó on Making “Regina”

Interview with Ayelet Dekel

July 3rd, 2013

Regina Jonas (1902 – 1944) was the first woman to be ordained as a rabbi. One might expect this knowledge to have become part of the Jewish collective consciousness, and Regina a source of inspiration, a leader to emulate, yet she remains an arcane chapter in Jewish history, hidden from view. It is perhaps symbolic that there is only one existing photograph of Regina Jonas.

Yet it is not the mere fact of ordination that makes Regina Jonas memorable. Far more remarkable and deeply moving, is the story one discovers in “Regina”, a beautifully realized documentary by Diana Groó, that brings Regina Jonas, her life and times to vibrant life onscreen, revealing the intelligence, empathy, strength and determination that made Regina Jonas a spiritual leader. “Regina” will be shown at the Jerusalem Film Festival as part of The Jewish Experience. Director Diana Groó will be the guest of the festival, on the eve of her departure from Hungary to Jerusalem, Ms. Groó conversed with *Midnight East* about the making of “Regina.”

“The project this film idea goes back many years,” said Groó, “actually if I remember, in 2005 I was at the Amsterdam Jewish Film Festival, my first feature film “A Miracle in Krakow” was screened there. A woman rabbi from Frankfurt, Elisa Klapchek, opened the festival and we started to talk... she was the first who mentioned Regina Jonas to me, she liked my first feature and asked me if I wanted to make a film about Regina Jonas. She had just published a book about her at that time (Fraulein Rabbiner Jonas: The Story of the First Woman Rabbi). I was not really interested in the topic as my first feature also had a Jewish topic and I wanted to make something new.”

“Years later (in 2008) I read her book. That was the moment I came to know Regina Jonas. I was very impressed by her short life, her devotion, her faith, but what really impressed me was her character. I was very impressed that she was a brave woman, independently of whether she was the first woman rabbi or not. I felt she was really born to be a rabbi, a religious leader, because of her humanity, regardless of whether she was Jewish or not. That she was Jewish of course that added to the story... she came from an Orthodox family and she made reforms and so on. I think she was kind of person who didn’t care that she’s a reformer, she wanted simply to help people who needed her and she never left them, even though she had the chance to leave Germany at the hardest time. She decided to stay in Germany. I think she was a fantastic person.”

“She was exactly what a leader should be,” said Groó, “and it’s really rare. I was really amazed how she was fighting, how many difficulties she had to face, but at the same time she concentrated on her work. Actually for me it’s not interesting the paper of the ordination, I think she was a rabbi without a paper as well. She was a real rabbi and a real religious leader, it’s proven by the testimonies that I could read from survivors and people who had known her.”

Groó’s film evokes the atmosphere of Berlin in the first half of the 20th century, black and white archival footage, with voice-overs telling the story of Regina Jonas through narration, reading letters and other documents, and giving voice to the memories of those who knew Regina Jonas. As Groó recalls, putting it all together was a challenging task.

“Elisa Klapchek published her book in the late 1990s,” said Groó, “when I read the book I started to research and tried to find all those people with whom she made the interviews, but I couldn’t find anyone alive. So I had to find out how I could recreate the feeling, so that we could hear old ladies in the voice-overs, who would sound like real persons who used to know Regina. I chose for example for one of the voice-overs my grandmother, because regarding her age, she is 86 now, she is a Holocaust survivor and she has of four concentration camps behind her, but regarding her age, if she had lived in Berlin she could have been one of the students of Regina Jonas.”

“At the end when is speaking about how they could survive in the concentration camps, I was 100% sure I don’t want to use actors for the voice-overs. I wanted to use someone who really knows what it is about and my grandmother, although she did not know Regina Jonas, she really knows the meaning of a concentration camp and surviving, and feeling, and talking about this feeling that she also felt at that time at the age of 17.

This is the way I re-created the voice-overs, creating somehow the feeling that it is true, casting actors and non-professionals as well to keep this kind of natural, human part of the story."

In some sense, Groó received much of her information almost directly from Regina Jonas.

"Before her deportation, Regina Jonas (she was deported to Theresienstadt in 1942) collected all her documents," Groó said, "letters from friends, the official documents about her ordination, including the photo she had, and she went to the Jewish community, to the Centrum Judaicum (The Neue Synagogue) thinking maybe this is a safe place where all these documents can be preserved and they can testify that once upon a time she lived in the world and she made rabbinical work. I think she knew that she would never return. Miraculously her documents survived."

Yet despite the documentation, the research into Jonas life, the papers and books that have been published since, Regina Jonas remains relatively unknown.

"I think it has different reasons," Groó reflected, "actually you mentioned Leo Baeck and Viktor Frankl. It's really interesting because both of them knew Regina Jonas and after they survived they did not talk too much about her. But now at the Leo Baeck College there is a huge photo of Regina Jonas in the college. I don't know the reason about this silence but I have some thoughts."

"I know that the ordination of female rabbis is still controversial, it poses many tensions. I know also in Israel, also here in Hungary, we have a woman rabbi (Rabbi Katalin Kelemen), a good friend of mine, actually she's the first woman rabbi from Central Europe. She has also, very sadly, the same fight with the Jewish community that Regina Jonas had 60 years ago. I think it's because the Orthodoxy attacks this question very strongly and it's still questioned if a woman can practice as a rabbi. I think it's really sad because if someone is really born to be a religious leader, it would be so great if everyone could practice it, regardless of gender. Here in Hungary it's still a very controversial question."

Making a movie from a single photograph

"In the beginning," Groó recalled, "I really didn't know how this film will come alive because I just realized that in my hand there is only one visual material, the only photo, nothing more, and I have no eyewitnesses alive. I didn't want to interview rabbis because I didn't want to focus on the problem of women rabbis. That's why I didn't want to make recent interviews. So it was a challenge: how can I make a movie from one single photograph?"

"I started to research the historical period that was her life, from the turn of the century till '44. I wanted to get all kinds of footage and archival photos regarding social life, cultural life, Jewish life... I used text searches 'Jewish school in Berlin,' 'Jewish girl student,'... and I found out that I want to make a documentary using these archives. We as the audience would see her point of view, and I tried to reconstruct her life through this footage. It was a very, very long process. At the end I had more than 50 hours of archival footage from all around the world and I had to select with my editor the right scenes that fit into her life story. In this footage of course everything was silent, so we had to create a sound atmosphere for the film. It was different work, we had silent pictures in hand, so with the sound engineer we will emphasize the most important noises for atmosphere."

"It was really hard, and I can tell you some secrets... I really sometimes had difficulties. From the turn of the century I had no close ups about Jewish life in Berlin, I just had footage about the neighborhoods, but without faces. So what could I do? OK, I had the choice, OK I had footage about the buildings and the neighborhood but I would like to have Central European Jewish faces in the neighborhood, as it is in her life. In the quarter where she grew up there were so many Jewish Central European immigrants. I went to Warsaw and Krakow archives and I was looking at close ups of Orthodox Jewish people, and I selected them for my film saying – who knows? Maybe these people from Krakow or Warsaw, they were the families who moved to Berlin? I put these close ups into the Berlin slum atmosphere, so I was playing with these tricks because I really need it. It all fits, and I don't lie, because who knows, maybe these were the families."

Making the film took five years. Groó says, "We had many difficulties, at the same time it was a really joyful and exciting process. I live in Hungary, it's a Nazi country. It was obvious that we cannot get any support

from Hungary for this topic, mainly after the changes after the recent government came. We hoped to get money and support that was promised from the previous government, but we never got it. So we were very upset, and it was really difficult to get support, to explain to producers that this film is not about the Holocaust, it's about surviving. It's a story during the Holocaust, but this is a very special life story. We cannot deny the time, the Holocaust existed, but this is not a Holocaust film."

"So it was very difficult to find producers," Groó recalled, "then, like a miracle, a friend of mine appeared from London – George Weisz, he's actually the father of Rachel Weisz the actress. George has Hungarian roots, he left Hungary in 1938, luckily, they left for London, so they survived. He's a good friend of mine and he liked my previous films. He liked this topic and this story, and he supported the film with his foundation, and later German co-producers also joined the production."

Groó is already working on her next project, which is, as she says, "Unfortunately, again a Jewish topic...but this is my destiny." Her next film will be based on a historical event, the Tiszaeszlár Affair, a blood libel against the Jews and the ensuing trial and wave of anti-semitism in 1883. These events were re-introduced into the political discourse by Jobbik MP Zsolt Baráth last April.

"People talk about this again," said Groó, "they said Hungarian people would have to make memory of this poor Christian girl killed 100 years ago...I got so mad last year, I said OK, if Hungarian people really need to know the story, so they will know the real story."

Credits

Written and Directed by

Diana Groó

Produced by

George Weisz
Ivan Angelusz
Gideon Wittenberg

Edited by

Agnes Mogor HSE

Director of Photography

Sandor Kardos HSC

Music

Daniel Kardos

Sound Design

Daniel Bohm

A production of

Belfilms LTD

Co-produced with

Malcah Productions Ltd (London)
Katapult Film Ltd(Budapest)
Time Prints (Berlin)

Supported by

Joir and Kato Weisz Foundation (London)

Awards

**Winner of the Lia Award
For Films Dealing with Jewish Heritage
Jerusalem Film Festival 2013**

Jury Statement: “Using archival footage, fragments of letters, snippets of memoirs, and her own ingenuity, Gróo has brought a long-gone spirit back to life and in doing so, introduced us all to a brave and utterly singular woman.”

**Winner - Grand Prix
Szolnok International Film Festival of Cultural Arts,
History and Sciences 2013**

Hungarian Film Critics Award 2014

