

**Doctorate School of the University of Theatre and Film Arts**

**PRESERVATION AND DOCUMENTATION**

**Behind the Picture: The Story of the World's First Female Rabbi**

**“doctoral dissertation theses”**



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As the DLA doctoral candidate of the University of Theatre and Film Arts the subject chosen for my dissertation is "*Preservation and Documentation*", in which I analyze through my creative documentary film entitled *Regina*<sup>1</sup> whether or not pure and perfect documentation exists. I also present the process of how - with the help of archive documentary footage - it is possible to reconstruct a course of life, with only one surviving photograph of the protagonist as the result of the Holocaust.

My film portrays an unusual and forgotten life: it is about the world's first female rabbi – Regina Jonas from Berlin, who was ordained in 1935 and who died in Auschwitz in 1944. She lived 42 years.

The story of Regina Jonas found me. It was Elisa Klapheck female rabbi from Frankfurt who called my attention to it in 2005 when my first feature film (*A Miracle in Cracow*, 2004) was screened at the Amsterdam Jewish festival. She asked me whether I wanted to make a film of the first female rabbi. That was when I first heard the name of Regina Jonas. As up till then I had made films with primarily Jewish subjects I felt disinclined to take on another one. I wasn't attracted by the magical words either: the world's first woman rabbi... Just because someone is the first in something it doesn't necessarily mean they are of interest. Years later, however, I picked up the biography written by Elisa Klapheck under the title *Fraulein Rabbiner Jonas – The Story of the First Woman Rabbi*<sup>2</sup>. When I reached the end I was certain I wanted to make a film on Regina Jonas.

Regina Jonas lived and worked in Berlin. She became a rabbi not because she was recognized officially only after a long and toilsome period and neither was it her certificate of ordainment that raised her to the height a veritable religious leader. I have assembled her real character from her correspondence that miraculously survived, along with contemporary newspaper clippings quoting her speeches, deposited by Regina Jonas herself at the parish in Berlin prior to her deportation to the concentration camp in Theresienstadt in 1942. She probably had a premonition of never returning and thus wanted to leave a trace of her existence in case it survived.

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Groó, *Regina*, documentary film 2013, [www.reginajonasmovie.com](http://www.reginajonasmovie.com)

<sup>2</sup> Klapheck, Elisa: *Fraulein Rabbiner Jonas - The Story of the First Woman Rabbi*, translated from the German by Toby Axelrod, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, A Willey Imprint, 2004.

Beyond a premonition the fact of depositing the documents and the hope of their survival may indicate a conscious intention of remembering and being remembered, a fundamental principle in the existence of Jewry: “And thou shalt shew thy son in that day, saying...” (Moses 2 13:8)

It can be considered a miracle that Regina Jonas’ personal documents, deposited at the parish in Berlin, were not destroyed by the Nazi system and that they remained unharmed.

I accessed these written documents in the Centrum Judaicum in Berlin, functioning in the place of the former parish. Having read the several hundred letters addressed to Regina and preserved on microfilm, in addition to interviews made by her biographer in 2003 with survivors and eye witnesses who came into contact with her as students, acquaintances or peers, it became clear to me that in truth it is these recollections and confessions that raise her to the level of a rabbi or - what’s more - a universal religious leader surpassing religious boundaries.

I visualized a film whose script would be made up of these written documents, commemorating a true and brave woman who in the most inhuman period of the 20th century was able to offer hope till the very last moment.

In 1942 Regina was deported to Theresienstadt, where she worked for two years by the side of psychologist Viktor E. Frankl, selecting those from the daily transport who had given up hope on their way to the camp. Regina Jonas knew exactly that only hope can provide strength for survival and that handing on and recounting memories guarantee the future existence of Jews. It was this existence that the Nazi system tried to annihilate in every sense of the word through its programme of Endlösung or Final Solution.

Regina Jonas talked about hope even in her last sermon in October 1944, a day before her deportation to Auschwitz. This speech contains the entire history of Jewry and the purpose of its existence.

**But how to make a film about this exceptional and brave person with only one surviving photograph of her?**

**This was the biggest challenge for me.**

I started off on a creative game entailing several years of research. Using as my point of departure the single photograph of Regina Jonas that shows her ordination as a rabbi in 1935 – also one of the personal documents deposited at the Berlin parish – I decided to collect from various motion picture sources the moments of her short life from the turn of the century to the hell of Auschwitz. I set to reconstruct the scenes of her life, and by presenting Berlin in the 20s, 30s and 40s, I endeavoured to talk about her as if she were on the screen too.

This experiment would not have worked if documentaries by the great figures in the history of film, such as Walter Ruttmann: *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City*<sup>3</sup>, or for instance László Moholy Nagy's experimental films had not assisted me. Putting aside my moral judgement, I have to single out from among the most important sources with an emphasis on its professional boldness Leni Riefenstahl's films of *Triumph of the Will*<sup>4</sup> and *Olympia*<sup>5</sup>, in addition to Kurt Gerron's propaganda film made of the Theresienstadt camp in 1944.

However, above all I must remark on the private amateur footage, the newsreels and photographs that I came across during my research, and whose creators though unknown, authenticated the every days of my heroine.

The aim of my doctoral thesis is to present the visual aspects of the memory of the Holocaust and the process approach in which the life of a person who is no longer alive (and nor are witnesses who could remember her) is reconstructed, and how based on a single photograph a documentary is assembled according to a fictive dramaturgy, whose almost every frame was planned to be destroyed by the Nazi system.

Besides presenting the background of the film as far as history and the history of film and religion are concerned, and highlighting the circumstances of its methodology, research and creation, the thesis lays particular emphasis on the detailed analysis of source materials from the time of the Holocaust.

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<sup>3</sup> *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt Walter Ruttmann, 1927)

<sup>4</sup> *Triumph of the Will* (Triumph des Willens, Leni Riefenstahl, 1934)

<sup>5</sup> *Olympia* (Olympia, Leni Riefenstahl, 1936)

In term of the visual creation of collective memory I compare films made after the Shoah: *Night and Fog*<sup>6</sup> by Alain Resnais, *Shoah*<sup>7</sup> by Claude Lanzmann and *Free Fall*<sup>8</sup> by Péter Forgács, analyzing the ways of using archive footage and the various visual approaching methods.

As my film has been exclusively constructed from archive cinematic documents - contemporary news and amateur footage, private collections, along with excerpts from the propaganda films of Hitlerite Germany - my study includes specific chapters on the creators of these propaganda films. Through the films of Leni Riefenstahl, promoting Hitler and his national socialist politics I intend to portray the responsibility of creators and the affect the various solutions of form can have on crowd psychology, i.e. the power of the image. While by studying the propaganda film *The Führer gives the Jews a City*<sup>9</sup>, shot in 1944 by Kurt Gerron, a prisoner of the camp in Theresienstadt, I intend to demonstrate the fate of the individual versus the cruel mechanism of Nazi ideology.

### **Major stages of the thesis:**

#### **The birth of the visual concept based on one single photograph**

##### **Tracing archival footage**

- Reconstruction of the life of Regina Jonas with the help of various archive footage
- Screenplay composed of original, written documents

##### **The representation of presence through visual metaphor**

- The subjective viewpoint
- “Reusing” amateur shots and excerpts from feature and documentary films

##### **The dramaturgic role of sounds and music**

- Creating sound for silent film
- The psychology of voice casting

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<sup>6</sup> *Night and Fog* (Nuit et Brouillard, Alan Resnais, 1956)

<sup>7</sup> *Shoah*, Claude Lanzmann, 1985.

<sup>8</sup> *Free Fall* (Az örvény, Forgács Péter, 1996)

<sup>9</sup> *The Führer gives the Jews a City* (Der Führer schenkt den Juden eine Stadt, Kurt Gerron, 1944)

- The subjectivity of witnesses - narrations

### **Holocaust-themed films and documentaries: Is it possible to depict the Holocaust?**

- Memory and remembrance through archival footage.
- Methods. Classical examples: Alain Resnais, Péter Forgács, Claude Lanzmann, Hitchcock

### **The power of images**

- Nazi propaganda films
- Responsibility of creators: intention and motivation

### **Preservation and documentation**

- Historical narratives. Photography and cinema.
- Does a “pure” portrayal of reality exist?

The English version of my documentary *Regina* can be accessed with a protected password through the following link:

<https://vimeo.com/76181418>

password: rjrw