**Népszabadság**

(Népszabadság is a major left-leaning Hungarian newspaper, Hungary's top news daily)

**A surreal reality from Hitler’s Berlin**

**By Gábor Czene, 22 April, 2013**

**Translated by: Mark Baczoni**

*Regina* – Diana Groo’s unusual documentary on the first female rabbi

We strongly suspect that by mixing different styles of directing, Diana Gróo 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 Gróo 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 in 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 organised 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 Gróo 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 Gróo 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 favourite 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 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 they 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. If all goes according to plan, we will be the witnesses of a rare cultural phenomenon in Budapest. We won’t have to go searching through the channels of our small screens late at night to see a Hungarian documentary. We’ll be able to go and see one in a real cinema. Regina should be playing at the Uránia cinema from April 25th, host of the film’s recent packed premiere.