Zsuzsanna Sándor in 168 Óra

George Weisz: a citizen of the world from the XIIIth district

George Weisz emigrated form Hungary with his parents on the eve of the Second World War, and still lives in London. The Hungarian-born engineer and innovator built his own factories, his inventions made him famous. But many people know him as the father of the Oscar- and Golden Globe- winning actress Rachel Weisz. The businessman has just backed his first Hungarian film: he is the producer of Diana Gróo’s *Regina*, the story of the world’s first female Rabbi, who died in Auschwitz. Weisz has never before given interviews in the Hungarian press, but today he’s made an exception for 168 Óra.

George Weisz, the noted inventor and businessman is a real citizen of the world. He speaks ten languages and lives in London, but often hops across the Pond to visit his Oscar-winning daughter, Rachel Weisz. And every now and then, when his time allows, he spends a few days here in Budapest, mostly in the XIIIth district.

For Weisz, or Gyuri Weisz to his Hungarian friends, is originally Hungarian. And like a real self-made man, he’s never afraid of trying something new, even at the age of eighty-three. Though he’s never been involved with films before, he’s now the producer and principal backer of Diana Gróo’s “creative documentary” about the world’s first female rabbi.

The producer and director first met five years ago when George happened to be visiting Budapest. His friends invited him to Spinoza Ház to watch Diana Gróo’s first foray into the theatre, *Not known at this address*. The piece, set during the Second World War affected Weisz – he himself was a witness of anti-Jewish persecution. After the performance, he and the director got talking. During the conversation, she told him that she was planning to make a film about the world’s first female Rabbi, the German Regina Jonas, who was murdered in 1944 in Auschwitz. Only a single photo of Regina survived, along with the letters and writings about her that she herself deposited with the Berlin Jewish community prior to her deportation. There has never been a film about her. The director added that if she managed to secure funding for the biopic, she’d like to ask Rachel Weisz to play the lead.

George retuned to England, but kept abreast of how the film was doing. Gróo chose a cheaper, but more labour-intensive approach to the film, reconstructing the world of the Weimar Republic in the 20s and 30s through archival film material and the character of the rabbi through the extant documents. The Hungarian Moving Picture Foundation promised support in 2010, but ceased to exist with the change of government, the funding along with it.

By then, Gróo had been doing research in archives abroad for two years, and had collected a great deal of material - in vain as it now seemed. It was Weisz who rushed to her aid in this dark hour – he offered to help the production and distribution of the film. It is thanks to him that this special film got made, despite everything.

Weisz says that this film is important to him not because he wants to present yet another narrative of the Holocaust, but because it tells the story of an extraordinary woman who – through hard work – realised her dream and became a rabbi. Right up to her last moments, even in the shadow of death, she gave faith and strength to her fellows.

George Weisz’ Hungarian ancestors also included rabbis, though his father chose a lay profession. When the First Jewish Law was introduced in 1938, his father decided to leave the country with his family. They left everything behind and emigrated to London when George was nine years old.

The Weiszes survived the War and started their lives anew. George and his two sisters went to school in England, then got into university on scholarships. George got his degree in mechanical engineering. When he was in his twenties, he founded his first factory. Later, his lifesaving medical devices and resuscitators became well-known the world over. He was respected not only for his creativity and readiness to work, but for his humanity also: he earned the respect of his employees.

George’s first wife was an Austrian psychologist – they had two daughters. The younger, Minnie is now a noted photographer in London, known for her camera obscura images. Her sister Rachel is one of the most famous actresses in the world.

It’s not easy being the father of a movie star. Rachel was modelling by age fourteen, and she was cast for a Hollywood movie with Richard Gere. The American producer begged George to let his daughter appear, promising to put her up in a five-star hotel and see to her every need. “That’s precisely what I don’t want”, her father replied and forbade his daughter from going. He was worried about her. Rachel went on to read English Literature at Cambridge. She embarked on her acting career during her university years, and didn’t have long to wait for her breakthrough in films. She later thanked her father for taking care of her and not letting her go to Hollywood in her early teens.

When Rachel married the British actor Daniel Craig last year, the tabloids were at George Weisz’ door even in the middle of the night, to quiz him about the young couple. He drove them away. When he visits his daughter and beloved grandson in New York, they are often followed by paparazzi. This is difficult for George – the world of the shining stars is difficult for a civilian to handle.

Weisz retired from commercial life five years ago and created a charitable foundation named after his parents. The foundation helps those in need and has given to hospitals and arts organisations. He raised his children to believe that the successful have a greater social responsibility. He supported his daughter when she helped found a hospital in Africa and asked Americans to support it: “If you help but a single person, it’s still better than doing nothing”. The actress kept her surname out of respect for her father, though her agents told her that something anglicised would sound better.

George Weisz has many friends in Hungary and enjoys visiting, but says he is worried by the current state of the country – the increasing nationalism, racism and resurgent anti-Semitism. Hence his support for the film about Regina, a victim of the Holocaust, which is also a warning about where exclusion and unbridled hatred can lead.