

THE GERMAN SOCIETY'S

Friday Film Fest Series



HISTORY: THEN AND NOW

by Brian Conboy

History is replete with seemingly small events whose importance and resonance have grown beyond all expectation with the passing of years. Such an occurrence is the Rosenstrasse Protest dramatized in veteran director Margarethe von Trotta's 2003 film *Rosenstrasse*. Next to the ferocious clash of colossal armies and the general atmosphere of Armageddon that prevailed during WWII, one would think that this relatively small event would quickly fade. But its themes of German resistance and German/Jewish relations and its startling reversal of expectations have added to its power and longevity as a living piece of history.

On February 23, 1943, just weeks after Germany's cataclysmic debacle at Stalingrad, the Nazi regime conducted a sudden and unannounced round-up of Berlin's last remaining Jews, some 10,000, most of whom were engaged in essential work in armaments factories. Approximately 2000, mostly men, were married to gentile German women, an issue that had long worried the regime and about which Joseph Goebbels had on several occasions described as "an exceedingly delicate question." The intermarried Jews were sent to a large Jewish Community Center on Rosenstrasse in the old Jewish quarter near Alexander Platz. Almost immediately their German spouses, mostly women, assembled outside the building and began a weeklong vigil and protest, vociferously and aggressively confronting the SS guards and demanding the return of their husbands.

Von Trotta's narrative focuses on the struggles of three women from three different generations and the setting constantly shifts back and forth between 1943 and the present. During the Rosenstrasse crisis Lena Fischer is a German gentile who protects and adopts a young Jewish girl, Ruth, whose mother has just been arrested and deported. Lena herself has a Jewish husband who has just been arrested and the two join the other protesters on Rosenstrasse. Decades later in contemporary New York, Ruth's adult daughter Hannah travels to Berlin to find the woman who saved her mother. Hannah learns from Lena how the tragedies of the past so profoundly affected her mother's life.

It is no mere whim that von Trotta uses this fluid time structure to tell her story. The intertwining of past and present in the telling of historical work is a powerful narrative device that underscores the enduring grip of the past on the present. Through this method our experience and comprehension of history become as much the subject matter of the film as the event itself.

Rosenstrasse (2003)

Credits:

Length – 136 min.

In German with English subtitles

Directed by Margarethe von Trotta

Written by Margarethe von Trotta and Pamela Katz

Cast:

Katja Riemann Lena Fischer (aged 33)

Maria Schrader Hannah Weinstein

Doris Schade Lena Fischer (aged 90)

Jutta Lampe Ruth Weinstein

Svea Lohde Ruth (aged 8)

Martin Feifel Fabian Fischer

Jürgen Vogel Arthur von Eschenbach

The Rosenstrasse Protest compels us to grapple with moral and historical issues. Why did such a violent and repressive regime relent and release the Rosenstrasse Jews? What does the Rosenstrasse Protest mean for the larger issue of German resistance and German/Jewish relations? Does this protest indicate the possibility, as many people have inferred, that more open resistance could have occurred during the Nazi period? Von Trotta skillfully employs an indirect approach to contextualize the past even as she compels the viewer to confront that past.

What emerges from her tale is an avoidance of stereotypes, a rendering of individuals in all their complexity and a special emphasis on startling moments of kindness amidst overwhelming brutality and callousness. Indeed her view of history, dramatized with small and individualized stories, is a call for understanding and compassion. Early in the film in present-day New York we are struck by Ruth's open hostility toward Hannah's non-Jewish fiancée. Later in Berlin Hannah learns that Ruth's hostility is deeply rooted in the deportation and loss of *her* mother, a tragedy directly connected to the divorce and abandonment of Ruth's mother by her German gentile husband. When Hannah reacts to this revelation with bitterness and anger toward her never known grandfather, Lena urges understanding and explains the tremendous pressures that German gentile men with Jewish wives were subjected to by the Nazi regime. Rosenstrasse is not a film with a concise view of the political implications of the Rosenstrasse Protest. It is a story that honors its characters, expresses strong empathy for their sorrows and losses and urges caution in judgment.

Biography & Selected Filmography

Margarethe von Trotta was born in Berlin in 1942 but grew up in Düsseldorf. She began to study acting at 16 years of age in Munich in 1958. In 1964 she began her career as an actor on stage in Paris and later continued in Stuttgart and Munich. She was one of the most notable actresses of the New German Cinema in the 1960s and 70s and played in such films as *The American Soldier* (1970), *Beware of the Holy Whore* (1971), *Coup de Grace (Der Fangschuß)* (1976) and many others. In 1968 she met director Volker Schlöndorf and with him began a long and productive collaboration. They were married in 1971. She made her directorial debut in 1975 as a co-director with him on *The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum*. Her most famous works as a writer-director are *Sisters, or the Balance of Happiness* (1979), *Die Bleierne Zeit (Marianne and Juliane)* (1981), *Rosa Luxemburg* (1986) and *Das Versprechen* (1995). Von Trotta and Schlöndorf were separated in 1991 and von Trotta currently resides in Paris.