

# Some of Hitler's unwilling victims

Rosenstrasse, directed by Margarethe von Trotta

David Walsh  
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*Rosenstrasse, the remarkable film directed by Margarethe von Trotta, has opened in the US in a limited run. The following comment, slightly edited, was first published as part of the WSWScoverage of the Toronto Film Festival in 2003: Encouraging signs [17 September 2003]*

*Rosenstrasse* is perhaps director Margarethe von Trotta's strongest work since *Rosa Luxemburg*. The film took eight years to organize and finally make.

It relates a little-known episode that occurred in Germany in late February and early March 1943. The Jewish spouses of "Aryan" wives and husbands, after being protected hitherto, were suddenly rounded up by the Nazi regime. Deportation and death in concentration camps confronted them. A spontaneous demonstration by hundreds of wives broke out on Rosenstrasse, the Berlin street outside the detention center where the Jewish prisoners were being held. The women defied the authorities, who eventually trained machine-guns on them. In the end, an extraordinary thing happened.

To tell her story, von Trotta (born 1942) invents fictional characters and sets her work in several different time periods. In modern-day New York City a Jewish woman, Ruth (Jutta Lampe), who has just lost her husband, unexpectedly marks religious traditions which she has never observed before. Her daughter, Hannah (Maria Schrader), is slightly unnerved and tries to get to the bottom of her mother's transformation. She sets out to learn about Ruth's past, which has always been something of a mystery. The search leads her to Berlin and the non-Jewish woman, Lena Fischer (Katja Riemann), who took Ruth in as a child when the latter's mother was deported and murdered by the Nazis.

At the center of the film is Lena's struggle in the

winter of 1943 to win the release of her Jewish husband, Fabian (Martin Feifel), from the detention center on Rosenstrasse. In a flashback, we see the progress of their relationship—he, a gifted violinist; she, a pianist from an aristocratic family. Her family disapproves violently of the match. Lena, Fabian and her brother (Jürgen Vogel) haunt Berlin night-clubs, dance to jazz and black singers. An extraordinary social and cultural moment is recreated. Anti-Semitism, the Nazi menace, seem very distant.

As the political situation deteriorates, the Fischers' economic and moral condition worsen. They live in a small apartment, everything is taken away from them: career, instruments, music itself. Fabian is forced to work in a munitions plant. Eventually he is arrested. Lena's brother returns from Stalingrad, having lost a leg. He takes a leading role in seeking Fabian's freedom. "I know what they do to the Jews. I saw it," he tells a fellow officer. Lena's appeals to her family and to a high-ranking Nazi official are "desperate" and fruitless. Meanwhile she has "adopted" Ruth, whose mother has already been deported, thanks to her "Aryan" husband's having divorced her out of fear and weakness.

The demonstrations on Rosenstrasse become more vocal and aggressive. It is an astonishing moment when the women shout, "Give us our husbands back!" and, later, "Murderers!" The troops fire in the air. The women scatter and reassemble. Perhaps they have nothing to lose. Perhaps they know that the defeat at Stalingrad means the end of the war and the end of the regime. In any case, they are very brave.

Von Trotta's film is deeply principled and humane. Whether it is consciously intended to or not, *Rosenstrasse* delivers a blow to the arguments of those who claim that the crimes of the Nazis expressed the

will of the German people. The filmmaker does not avoid the harshest realities, but she keeps her eyes on reality as a whole. German culture flowered in the 1920s, in anticipation of a social revolution that never took place due to the criminal betrayals of the Social Democratic and Stalinist parties.

The brief night club scene, when the cultures, “high” and “low,” and “races” mingle in an almost ecstatic instant of freedom, provides a glimpse of this possibility. To suggest that the Nazi regime was the inevitable outcome of German history becomes inarguable even on the basis of this short sequence. This is entirely to von Trotta’s credit. She shows that art can indelibly establish objective truth in the face of lies and slander.

There are less successful features to the film. The past-present framework is somewhat predictable, and the scenes in New York rather stiff and not entirely convincing. Von Trotta, an actress herself, is perhaps not the finest director of actors. One feels that those who have strong personalities thrive in her films. Those she must guide are less successful. Riemann and Vogel make the strongest impression in *Rosenstrasse*.



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