

“To show the courage of those who resisted the Nazis”

An interview with Margarethe von Trotta, director of *Rosenstrasse*

Richard Phillips
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More than two years after its European premiere, Margarethe von Trotta's Rosenstrasse is finally being shown in Australian cinemas. The movie is about the courageous action of German women who protested against the arrest and impending deportation of their Jewish husbands by the Nazis in 1943. It will screen at Palace cinemas in Sydney and Melbourne in early June, with other cities to follow.

Previously reviewed by the World Socialist Web Site (“Some of Hitler's unwilling victims”), von Trotta's film is a powerful depiction of these previously little known protests.

Defying constant fascist intimidation, the growing number of demonstrators maintained their protest day and night in late February and early March, 1943. The demonstrators' intransigence finally forced the authorities to free up to 2,000 Jews, including some who had already been deported to Auschwitz. As one of Rosenstrasse's central characters remarks towards the end of the film, it was “a ray of hope in a sea of darkness”. Some historians estimate that up to 6,000 people were involved in the demonstrations.

Von Trotta, who worked with directors Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Volker Schlöndorff during the late 1960s and 70s, has written and directed a number of award-winning films, including The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum (1975), Rosa Luxemburg (1986), The Promise (1995), as well as numerous television dramas. She recently spoke by phone with Richard Phillips about Rosenstrasse.

Richard Phillips: Firstly let me congratulate you on an impressive and very humane film. How and why you were attracted to the subject?

Margarethe von Trotta: And so late, after all it happened in 1943.

Of course, I, like most Germans, including many Berliners, had never heard of the Rosenstrasse protests and I didn't find out about them until the early 1990s, after the Berlin Wall came down.

At that time Volker Schlöndorff, who was in charge of Studio Babelsberg, heard about the story and thought it would be a good project for me because of my reputation as a so-called feminist director. He put me in touch with a documentary filmmaker—Daniela Schmidt—who'd made a movie about the demonstrations and through her I met some of the people she'd interviewed. I was able to speak to even more people—about 12 or

15 altogether—because some didn't want to be interviewed on camera for her film.

It was a varied group: there were some women and men, and younger people who had protested in the street with their mothers, as well as some Jewish people who had been locked up by the Nazis. I collected a whole spectrum of testimonies and spent many days with individual participants, which was very moving. As I began to more deeply understand the tremendous courage of these people, I just had to make this film.

I wrote my first script, which centred entirely on events in 1943, but Schlöndorff said it would be too expensive and that the studios couldn't afford it and that I should prune it back. So I cut it and came up with the idea of little Ruth leading us through the story. But despite this we were still unable to get the German film finance institutions to provide any money and had to give up the project. At that time all they were interested in was comedies. We had several years of these sorts of films, which were not very sophisticated, and could not be released anywhere else in the world. Everyone thought German cinema was dead.

The 1990s was a difficult period and I wasn't able to do anything much until I got some television work, which really saved me and gave me a living.

Then, in 2001, a friend suggested that I should try to make *Rosenstrasse* again. Political times had changed, the days of German comedies were over, and we thought it might be possible to try again. So I wrote another script. I couldn't present the old one to the funding institutions; they had already rejected the initial proposal.

This time I asked Pam Katz, a New York Jewish scriptwriter, if she would like to work with me on the story, but this time starting in contemporary New York and moving back to Europe and the Nazi years. I chose New York because many Jewish people escaping the Nazis had gone to America.

The script was finally accepted and so it took more or less eight years from my initial interest until I was able to actually start shooting the film.

RP: Of the people you interviewed, who had the biggest impact and why?

MVT: While the events are true, the characters are a mixture of the people I met during the first research and my own fantasy. Lena, however, is mainly based on one person I interviewed at

length. Unfortunately, she was very old and by the time I'd begun filming she was already dead. In fact, half of the people I'd met at the beginning were dead when the film finally came out, which was very sad.

RP: It seems to me that the film is an important antidote to those like Daniel Goldhagen who claim that the German people were Hitler's willing executioners.

MVT: That everyone was a hangman?

RP: Yes. Your film reveals some of the opposition that existed. Did this attract you to the subject as well?

MVT: Well my intention was not to make a picture that answered Daniel Goldhagen. Nor was my aim to rehabilitate Germans, which would have been shameless on my part.

Of course I don't agree with his claims that the German people willingly accepted Hitler. But the problem was that there were too few people in Germany who reacted like my women in *Rosenstrasse* or others who bravely resisted the Nazis.

For me, the main issue was to show the courage of these women, which was so amazing, and to explore the contradiction between the Nazis' firm belief in the faithfulness of women to their husbands, and the fact that these women were being faithful to their Jewish husbands.

RP: What has been the response to the film in Germany?

MVT: The public reaction was very good. It has been my most successful film, which was very surprising, even to me. And there has been a good response wherever it has been screened—in the US, France, Italy and Israel.

RP: Many of your films explore historical issues of the twentieth century. Why do you think this is important?

MVT: I must say that not all of my films deal with historical questions but certainly the best-known ones do. I have a reputation of being a political, historical and feminist filmmaker, but half of my pictures have been psychoanalytical examinations of personal relationships.

But I think as a German, and from the generation that came into being towards the end of the Nazi regime, it was very important for me to explore these historical questions. I was also influenced by, and participated in, the so-called student rebellion, where the issues of the Holocaust and more details about the Nazis' record started to become known. Young people began to ask their parents what really went on in these years and whether or why they didn't rebel against Hitler's regime.

I'm particularly interested in showing aspects of these events through personal stories and exploring how and why people could accept rules and regulations that, in a different time, people could not or would not normally follow. I don't know if I've explained this very well but, for instance, I made a four-part television series in which the main character was born in Germany in March 1933. Who would pick this date if you had a choice? Do you become someone who follows orders or do you become someone who refuses to think this way and rebels in their own way? These are important questions.

RP: In the background material for *Rosenstrasse* you make reference to Walter Benjamin and an article called "The Angel of History". I'm not familiar with this. Could you elaborate?

MVT: Benjamin, as you probably know, was a German Jewish

philosopher from Berlin, who went into exile in France when Hitler's regime came to power. He committed suicide in 1940 while attempting to escape to America from France. His essay is about how you always look back at history and that, although you may want to escape the past, you cannot. This has been an important inspiration and guide to me.

RP: Why do you think the film industry has taken so little interest in seriously exploring important historical issues?

MVT: It's a complex question and it doesn't just apply to history. Today, for example, you can see many, many violent films but there is no analysis of where this violence comes from.

In relationship to Germany, after the war many people didn't want to be confronted with the past. Some felt guilty, others were traumatised, and so there was a collective silence. That silence was broken in the 1960s with the student radicalisation. Then there was the theory that everyone was responsible for the Nazi regime, that everyone was guilty. But of course when everyone is guilty no one is responsible, so this clouded the issue. It was only later in the 1990s that some examination of these questions began.

At the same time, in East Germany, [where the *Rosenstrasse* protests actually took place], they were not really reported on and the people involved were not regarded as heroines. I suspect that in official circles they were defined as non-political, that they just began these protests out of devotion to their husbands and nothing else. While the *Rosenstrasse* women might have started out apolitical, as more and more became involved it obviously became a political movement. Maybe if there had been communists involved, or something like that, then perhaps the East German government might have paid more attention. So these courageous individuals were largely ignored.

As you know, there are always people who want to understand and remember and those who want to repress all memories. In *Rosenstrasse* you have both tendencies. Sometimes it's difficult to confront these questions, and for some it's better to try and live in a dream world or to flee.

RP: It's impossible to watch this movie and not think about the war in Iraq and the illegal detention of hundreds of people in Guantánamo Bay and other places as part of the so-called war on terror. Could you comment on this?

MVT: I was born in Germany before the war ended and saw its terrible effects, with whole areas devastated and tremendous poverty, so I'm totally antiwar and was opposed to the invasion of Iraq. Sixty years ago, many German people regarded the American military as liberators. Few people see it that way anymore. Many think of them as the opposite. But when I began filming *Rosenstrasse* the war had not started and I didn't intend to make any comparison between these events. It's true though, there is a correspondence. Today there are many war crimes being committed, efforts to cover them up, and, no doubt, attempts to forget these crimes.



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