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Stefanie Sinclair 'Memory and identity: Female leadership and the legacy of Rabbi Regina Jonas' in Hartmut Bomhoff, Walter Homolka (eds.) *Female Rabbis, Pastors, and Ministers: Gendered Pathways Toward Leadership Roles in Jewish and Other Religious Traditions*, (Studia Judaica Book 95, English ed.) De Gruyter, Berlin. (Forthcoming Sept 2019) ISBN 978-3-11-052339-3 ISBN (ebook, Pdf) 978-3-11-052099-6 (hardcover)

Memory and identity: Female leadership and the legacy of Rabbi Regina Jonas

Regina Jonas is now widely recognized as the first female rabbi in the world. Her story highlights particularly pertinent issues in historiography, especially with regard to the role of memory and identity. For almost fifty years following her murder at Auschwitz in 1944, Jonas remained a largely forgotten figure and received hardly any acknowledgement in published records, reference works or scholarly literature. Until the early 1990s, it was widely assumed that Sally Priesand, who was ordained in the Reform movement in the US in 1972, was the first female rabbi. However, Jonas' ordination had taken place in Nazi Germany – of all places - 37 years earlier. How is it possible that Jonas was almost lost to historiography? And how is she remembered today? This chapter reflects on possible reasons why Jonas was 'almost forgotten' and explores how she is remembered today in a range of different national contexts (with a particular focus on Germany, Britain and the USA). My analysis centers on themes of memory and identity and highlights the significance of a sense of heritage in the process of inspiring and 'naturalizing' female leadership within faith communities and beyond.

Why was Jonas 'almost forgotten'?

While a range of complex factors were at play, gender bias and prejudice are likely to have played a role in Jonas' temporary disappearance from historiography. From this point of view, her case could be regarded as a classic example of women's "marginalization in the process of history making."¹ In historiography, "women's stories are particularly vulnerable since, until recently, [they] were not the keepers of these stories".² The opportunities Jonas had to ensure the preservation of her legacy were indeed very limited. Jonas was not only a woman in a world dominated by men,

¹ Gerda Lerner (1993) *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 280–281.

² Judith Abrams (2016) "Who controls the narrative? A 'stop action' analysis of the story of Beruriah and the implications for women rabbis", in Rebecca Einstein Schorr and Alysa Mendelson Graf with Renee Edelmans (eds.) *The Sacred Calling: Four Decades of Women in the Rabbinate*, Central Conference of American Rabbis, Kindle Edition.

but a Jewish woman exposed to the persecution of the anti-Semitic policies of the Nazi regime leading to her deportation, incarceration, and death. Nevertheless, a collection of her most important papers was preserved. This collection included her ordination certificate as well as a copy of her dissertation “Can women serve as rabbis?,” letters, newspaper clips, and two photographs of Jonas. While the exact circumstances are not known, Jonas (or a trusted colleague or friend) brought these papers to the administration of the Jewish community in Berlin before she and her mother were deported to Theresienstadt in 1942.³ However, after the fall of the Nazi regime and the end of the Second World War, her papers disappeared in inaccessible archives controlled by the repressive policies of the government of the East German Democratic Republic (GDR). Her papers were only discovered in 1991, when access to East German archives was opened up following the fall of the Berlin Wall. Access to the archive where Jonas’ records are currently held, the Centrum Judaicum, is now in the hands of leaders of the Jewish community in Berlin.⁴

Another factor contributing to Jonas’ temporary disappearance from historiography was the fact that she had challenged and transgressed many different norms and boundaries and had not strongly associated herself with a particular movement, social class, or political organisation. Jonas’ approach was difficult to label as it combined aspects of Orthodox and Liberal Judaism. She came from an Orthodox background, but studied at a Liberal seminary and was ordained in a private ceremony by Rabbi Max Dienemann, executive director of the Conference of Liberal Rabbis (*Liberaler Rabbinerverband*) in Germany. Some of her contemporaries found Jonas’ approach too radically reformist, others criticized her for not being radical enough. As Kellenbach notes, “Jonas’ interpretation of Torah, Talmud, and halakhah in support of women’s equality was unpopular on both the right as well as the left, among more conservative Jews as well as in more liberal circles.”⁵ While Jonas’ story needs to be understood in the wider context of the Jewish women’s movement, there is no evidence that Jonas was aware of or in contact with other contemporary women seeking to be ordained as rabbis in the USA or Britain – or vice versa.⁶ Unlike most of these women, Jonas came from a poor background with no other rabbis in her family. While there is evidence that Jonas gave lectures at meetings of the German Jewish Women’s League (*Jüdischer Frauenbund*, JFB), the Women’s International Zionist

³ Hermann Simon (2004) “Foreword”. In *Fräulein Rabbiner Jonas: The Story of the First Woman Rabbi* (trans. T. Axelrod). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p. ix; Hermann Simon (2012) Interview conducted by author, 30 May.

⁴ Stefanie Sinclair (2013) “Regina Jonas: Forgetting and Remembering the first female rabbi”, *Religion*, Vol. 43 (4), p. 543.

⁵ Katharina von Kellenbach (2001) “Denial and defiance in the work of Rabbi Regina Jonas”. In *In God’s Name: Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Omer Bartov and Phyllis Mack. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, p. 247.

⁶ Klapheck, Elisa (2016) “‘Mir war nie darum zu tun, die Erste zu sein’: Das Vermächtnis von Rabbinerin Regina Jonas”, *Bet Deborah Journal, Special Issue on Engendering Jewish Politics*, p. 24.

Organisation (WIZO), and other women's organisations, there is no clear evidence that she strongly associated herself with these organizations or was a member. Jonas' biographer, Elisa Klapheck argues that "it was important for her to be above political organisations".⁷ However, that also meant that in the decades following her death, before the arrival of a new generation of female rabbis, there was no clear lobby or organization with a strong interest in promoting her legacy.

Jonas' temporary disappearance from historiography as well as her rediscovery as a significant historical figure have been deeply intertwined with turbulent social and political developments in German history and with dramatic changes in Jewish communities in Germany and beyond. As historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi points out " 'forgetting' in a collective sense occurs when human groups fail – whether purposely, out of rebellion, indifference, or indolence, or as a result of some disruptive historical catastrophe – to transmit what they know out of the past to their posterity."⁸ The devastating impact of the Shoah, the dispersal of Shoah survivors across the globe, the division of Germany into East and West, and the lack of trained teachers and rabbis with German roots in the small re-emerging Jewish communities in post-war Germany created significant hurdles in the transmission of knowledge of the history of Jewish life, culture and traditions in Germany – including knowledge of Jonas' ordination.⁹ In spite of the Hebrew Bible's command to remember, many traumatized survivors of the Shoah simply found it too painful and tried their best to distance themselves from an 'unmasterable past' to enable themselves to build a new future.¹⁰

Some did talk about Jonas. Hermann Simon, former director of the Centrum Judaicum in Berlin, recalls his mother talking about "Rabbinerin Jonas, who supposedly had lived in our city", but struggled to find out more about her from her surviving contemporaries.¹¹ Apparently, Rabbi Gerhard Graf, who was a rabbi at the Cardiff New Synagogue, "often mentioned her and her work", and British rabbi Sybil Sheridan, who was ordained in 1981, remembers that stories about a "woman in Germany who studied to be a rabbi" were circulated in Jewish communities and colleges in Britain.¹²

⁷ Elisa Klapheck (2012). Interview conducted by author. Berlin, May 30.

⁸ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi ([1982] 1996) *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press., p. 109.

⁹ Michael Brenner (1997) *After the Holocaust: Rebuilding Jewish Lives in Postwar Germany*. (trans. Barbara Harshav). Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

¹⁰ Roger Frie (2012) "Memory and responsibility: Navigating identity and shame in the German-Jewish experience". *Psychoanalytic Psychology* 29/ 2, p. 208.

¹¹ Simon, Hermann Simon (2004) "Foreword". In *Fräulein Rabbiner Jonas: The Story of the First Woman Rabbi* (trans. T. Axelrod). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p. ix.

¹² Rachel Montagu (2015) "Comment: Shameful silence", *Jewish Chronicle*, 12 June, p. 37.
Sybil Sheridan (1994) "Preface" in Sybil Sheridan (ed.) *Hear Our Voice: Women Rabbis Tell their Stories*, London: SCM Press, pp. x.

However, the lack of written evidence posed significant hurdles in the transmission of Jonas' story. Sheridan recalls, "As one of the first women ordained at Leo Baeck College, I had heard of her [Jonas]. The story I received was a strange and garbled one that made no mention of her ordination."¹³ Sheridan also admits to a certain level of indifference about Jonas' story amongst British women seeking to be ordained as rabbis in the 1970s and early 80s: "I can only think that our indifference grew out of an attempt to be like men. As we struggled to gain recognition and respect in the Jewish world, we thought that to reclaim the inheritance of other women would only serve to marginalize us and emphasize our differences from our male colleagues."¹⁴

National and generational trajectories of memory

The first published posthumous acknowledgement of Jonas' ordination – that I am aware of – was in a newspaper article entitled "The first woman rabbi" by Rabbi Jacob R. Marcus (1896–1995), founding director of the American Jewish Archives, published in *The American Israelite* in 1972, written in response to Sally Priesand's ordination in the US.¹⁵ In this article Marcus makes reference to Jonas as the first woman worldwide ordained as a rabbi. In her book *Judaism and the New Woman*, Priesand acknowledges herself that "I was actually the second woman rabbi, then, although I was the first to be ordained by a theological seminary."¹⁶

However, in the UK, the ordination of the first British female rabbi, Jackie Tabick, in 1975 was described by the secular newspaper *The Times* as "the first woman outside the United States to be ordained as a rabbi" and by the *Jewish Chronicle* as "the third woman rabbi in the world (two have been ordained in the United States)."¹⁷ No reference to Jonas was made.

Incidentally, the scholar who initiated the successful search for Jonas' papers and was the first to publish her research on Jonas's life was not a Jewish scholar, but a German Christian feminist theologian, Katharina von Kellenbach, living in the USA.¹⁸ While studying in the USA, she had heard rumors about Jonas and decided to further investigate, recognizing the new opportunities that the collapse of the GDR regime offered in terms of access to archives in East Germany. Her interest in Jonas' story was related to her research interest in the history of the ordination of women in the

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. x-xi.

¹⁵ Jacob R. Marcus (1972) "The first woman rabbi". *The American Israelite* 118/ 34, March 9, pp. 1 + 3.

¹⁶ Sally J. Priesand (1975) *Judaism and the New Woman*. New York: Behrman House, p. 67.

¹⁷ *The Times* (1975) "First woman rabbi in Britain", 30 June, p. 3; *Jewish Chronicle* (1975) "Britain's first woman rabbi", 4 July, p. 1.

¹⁸ Katharina von Kellenbach (1992) "Frl. Rabbiner Regina Jonas: Eine religiöse Feministin vor ihrer Zeit". *Schlangebrut* 38: 35–39. [add reference to Kellenbach's chapter in this volume]

German Protestant Church. However, Kellenbach has also described her motivation for her work on Jonas as a ‘form of reparation’ as a descendant of the perpetrators, reflecting Jürgen Habermas’ view that “there is the obligation incumbent upon us in Germany – even if no one else were to feel it any longer – to keep alive, without distortion and not only in an intellectual form, the memory of the sufferings of those who were murdered by German hands.”¹⁹

The news of the discovery of Jonas’ papers has been of particularly great significance to a new generations of female rabbis as it has given this group a new historical perspective. The discovery of Jonas’ papers happened at a time, when a growing number of female rabbis had established itself more securely and confidently. Female rabbis had become “a fact of life” in the non-Orthodox world and become more confident in establishing a distinct sense of identity and tradition.²⁰ British Rabbi Sibyl Sheridan described the impact of the news of the discovery of Jonas’s papers in the 1990s, as follows:

it gave us a heritage. [...] Judaism itself has such a long tradition. You’re always looking back at where you come from, at previous rabbis and their statements and their understanding, and there was nothing for women rabbis at all. There was just a blank page. And so really, the discovery of Rabbi Regina Jonas gave us the first link, as it were, to go back. And it also opened up the possibilities that since she, who had been ordained so recently within the living memory of people, could be forgotten, then how many more people could there be out there that we didn’t know? It opened up a huge possibility to explore [...] women’s leadership roles within Judaism that just wasn’t there before.²¹

Sheridan’s statement stresses the importance of the link between leadership, heritage, memory and identity. While this link is not unique to Jewish communities, these concepts are of particularly great significance to a community that understands itself as a “community of memory.” As Yerushalmi points out, the Hebrew Bible’s “injunctions to remember are unconditional, and even when not commanded, remembrance is always pivotal. Altogether the verb *zakhor* [remember] appears in its various declensions in the Bible no less than one hundred and sixty-nine times”.²² So,

¹⁹ Katharina von Kellenbach (2012) Telephone interview conducted by author, July 9.; Jürgen Habermas (1989) *The new conservatism: Cultural criticism and the historians’ debate*. ed. and trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
p. 233.

²⁰ Sylvia Rothchild (2015) “Why aren’t women viewed as ‘proper’ rabbis?”, *Jewish Chronicle*, 29 May, p. 37.

²¹ Sybil Sheridan (2012) Interview conducted by author. London, May 25.

²² Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi ([1982] 1996) *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, p. 5.

from this point of view, the memory of Jonas' story helped to firm up and consolidate a growing female tradition of leadership in Jewish communities and served as an important point of identification for a new generation of female rabbis.

The news of the discovery of Jonas' papers inspired British rabbi Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah to travel to Germany to work with Jonas' papers and write one of the first accounts of Jonas' life in English.²³ Sarah felt a particularly strong resonance between Jonas' fight for recognition as a rabbi and her own experience as one of the first lesbian rabbis in Britain and identified with her struggle as someone who "had shown an enormous amount of determination."²⁴ Sheridan and Sarah are part of a group of female rabbis in the UK, who contributed to a collection of essays dedicated to Jonas' memory commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of her death. This volume, which is entitled *Hear Our Voice*, relates to Jonas' memory as 'missing link' with their past, but is equally "intent on destroying the myth that there is such a thing as an 'archetypal' woman rabbi" and highlights the rich variety of thoughts and diversity of experiences of female rabbis.²⁵

The discovery of evidence certifying Jonas' ordination in the context of 1930s Germany was perhaps of even greater significance to members of Jewish communities in Germany, such as Elisa Klapheck, whose work on Jonas' biography played a significant role in her own decision to become a rabbi working in Germany. She explains:

So we found out all of a sudden, hey, we don't have to go to the United States to find inspiration in the Liberal Jewish communities there. We have our own tradition. We even have our own rabbi. The first female rabbi was in Germany. And we can be proud about it. It was still an issue. Can you be a proud German Jew? That was a taboo in those days. But all of a sudden you can say, hey, we can be proud. We have fantastic forerunners, predecessors.²⁶

The discovery of Jonas' papers coincided with a revival of Judaism in Germany and across Western and Eastern Europe. This "new chapter" in Jewish history (Klapheck, 2012) was triggered by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War. Until that time, many members of Jewish communities in Germany had felt somewhat ambiguous or embarrassed that they had stayed in 'the land of perpetrators'. Leading Jewish figures of the survivor generation, such as Leo Baeck, had previously argued

²³ Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah (1994) "Rabbiner Regina Jonas: missing link in a broken chain. In Sybil Sheridan (ed.) *Hear Our Voice: Women Rabbis Tell their Stories*. London: SCM Press, pp. 2-9.

²⁴ Elizabeth Tikvah Sarah (2012) Interview conducted by author. London, May 25.

²⁵ Sybil Sheridan (ed. 1994) *Hear Our Voice: Women Rabbis Tell their Stories*, London: SCM Press; Valerie Monchi (1995) 'A job for a Jewish girl?', *The Jewish Chronicle*, 16 December, p. 25.

²⁶ Elisa Klapheck (2012). Interview conducted by author. Berlin, May 30.

that there was no future for Jews in Germany and that following the trauma of the Shoah, “the history of German Judaism [had] definitely come to an end.”²⁷ However, since the early 1990s, there has been a growing desire amongst new generations to reconnect with the history of Judaism in Germany, including its vibrant intellectual culture and heritage, and develop a new, more confident and positive sense of Jewish German identity not exclusively framed by the Shoah.²⁸ Klapheck regards the renewed interest in Jonas’ story as “an expression of a greater development – the renewal of a German, a European Jewry that no longer stands on the ruins of the Shoah, that is no longer imprisoned by the trauma of the destruction, that builds bridges to a great past.”²⁹

The establishment of Abraham Geiger College in Berlin in 1999, which ordained its first male rabbi in 2006 and first female rabbi in 2010, is a clear expression of this new chapter in Jewish German history and a sign of confidence in the lasting continuity of Jewish life, heritage, and culture in Germany. When I interviewed a group of women training to be rabbis at Abraham College in 2012, I noticed a further generational shift. While they clearly had a lot of respect for Jonas, this new generation of female rabbis finds it harder to identify with Jonas’ struggle than Rabbis Sarah, Sheridan, and Klapheck had done. As one of these students explained to me, Regina Jonas “certainly offers an opportunity to identify. But on the other hand, I feel like I’m not in her position anymore.”³⁰ It is fair to say that members of this new generation of female rabbis can take knowledge of Jonas’ ordination, and that of many other women since, for granted, feel a lot more secure in themselves, and see their situation in contemporary Germany as very different and far removed from that of Nazi Germany.

By contrast, Gail Twersky Reimer, the founding director of the Jewish Women’s Archive, notices some hesitancy within the US American context to view German Jewish history and identity beyond the context of the Shoah. She maintains that “to this day, for most American Jews, Germany is a place of catastrophe, and not a place to which they would look to claim a legacy.”³¹ Reimer argues that this has contributed

²⁷ Leo Baeck cited in Michael A. Meyer (2001) “Denken und Wirken Leo Baecks nach 1945”, in Georg Heuberger and Fritz Backhaus (eds.) *Leo Baeck. 1873-1956. Aus dem Stamme von Rabbinern*. Frankfurt am Main: Jüdischer Verlag im Suhrkamp Verlag, pp. 130; my translation from German original.

²⁸ Elisa Klapheck (2012). Interview conducted by author. Berlin, May 30; See also: Michal Y. Bodemann (2006) “A Jewish Cultural Renaissance in Germany?” In Sandra Lustig and Ian Levenson (eds.) *Turning the Kaleidoscope: Perspectives on European Jewry*, New York/ Oxford: Berghahn, 164 -175.

²⁹ Elisa Klapheck (2004) *Fräulein Rabbiner Jonas: The Story of the First Woman Rabbi* (trans. T. Axelrod). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p. 14.

³⁰ Student at Abraham Geiger College (2012) Interview conducted by author at Abraham Geiger College. Berlin, May 31.

³¹ Gail Twersky Reimer (2016) “Regina Jonas: The shifting sands of memory”, *Bet Deborah Journal, Special Issue on Engendering Jewish Politics*, p. 19.

to a “certain reluctance amongst Americans to make the German Jonas part of their story of women in the rabbinate.”³² She claims that this reluctance has led to a “pattern of acknowledging Jonas but ‘keeping her in the shadows’”³³ This reluctance to regard Jonas as a full member of the chain of female rabbis is, for example, reflected in the title of the recent volume commemorating the fortieth anniversary of Priesand’s ordination: *The Sacred Calling: Four decades of Women in the rabbinate*.³⁴ While this volume includes several chapters referring to and reflecting on Jonas’ story, the title of this volume refers to only four decades of women in the rabbinate and thus excludes Jonas’ ordination and work as a rabbi in the 1930s and 40s from this narrative, placing Priesand’s ordination in 1972 as the first. Reimer concludes that

In Germany the absence of a usable past has shaped how Jonas is remembered whereas in America her memory was shaped by the presence of a quasi-sacred narrative about women’s ordination. In neither community was her memory shaped in a vacuum. In both, present understanding and needs determined how the memory of Jonas was received as well as how it would be transmitted to future generations.³⁵

Filling the gaps

Jonas’ story has been explored in a wide range of different contexts and interpreted in many different ways. Her story has not only been covered in Elisa Klapheck’s biography *Fräulein Rabbiner Jonas* and an increasing range of academic publications, reference works and newspaper articles, but also in Diana Groó’s 2013 film *Regina*.³⁶

Since the initial discovery of Jonas’ papers, there has been further research into witness accounts, primarily conducted by Kellenbach and Klapheck, and further written evidence was found, including transcripts and notes of Jonas’ sermons delivered in Theresienstadt and letters Jonas wrote to her fiancée Rabbi Joseph Norden. In preparation for her work on Jonas’ biography, Klapheck placed ads in Jewish newspapers across the world in 1998 to locate and interview eye-witnesses, who had known Jonas. She was surprised by the amount of people who contacted her:

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., p. 18.

³⁴ Rebecca Einstein Schorr and Alysa Mendelson Graf with Renee Edelmann , eds. (2016) *The Sacred Calling: Four Decades of Women in the Rabbinate*, Central Conference of American Rabbis, Kindle Edition.

³⁵ Gail Twersky Reimer (2016) “Regina Jonas: The shifting sands of memory”, *Bet Deborah Journal, Special Issue on Engendering Jewish Politics*, p. 21.

³⁶ Elisa Klapheck (1999) *Fräulein Rabbiner Jonas: Kann die Frau das rabbinische Amt bekleiden?* Teetz: Hentrich & Hentrich; Elisa Klapheck(2004) *Fräulein Rabbiner Jonas: The Story of the First Woman Rabbi* (trans. T. Axelrod). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; *Regina* (2013) Malcah Production (UK), Katapult Film (Hung), Time Prints (Deu).

It was as if they all had been waiting to say something about Regina Jonas, whether good or bad. The story moved them in a way that the ordination of Sally Priesand had not, because Regina Jonas was ordained in Germany – specifically, in Berlin. It was a way for all these older people to reconnect with their own past.³⁷

The accounts of the witnesses who contacted Klapheck reflect strong and sometimes conflicting views about the ordination of women in general and about Jonas in particular. Whereas some eye-witnesses remembered Jonas with much admiration and referred to her “very impressive personality,” her gift for teaching and public speaking, her moving, popular sermons, her exceptional energy and dedication to her work, or the pleasant sound of her deep voice, others “described Jonas as a ‘hysterical person’ whose only goal was to ‘show herself off against the men.’”³⁸ Many eye-witness accounts centered on Jonas’ looks, clothes, and hairstyle. Some remembered her as “unforgettably beautiful,” others claimed that she “did not take care of herself, her wardrobe left much to be desired, and even her hair supposedly stood on end.”³⁹ Klapheck comes to the conclusion that “often, the descriptions revealed more about the witnesses themselves than about Regina Jonas.”⁴⁰ As Hermann Simon, the former Director of the Centrum Judaicum, notes: “it is difficult to assign Rabbi Jonas to her proper place in Berlin Jewish history: some reject her vehemently, while others raise her to the heavens and turn her into a cult figure.”⁴¹ However, what is her “proper” place in history? Who “owns” her story?

The space left by the relative scarcity of information about Jonas has often been filled with projections of people’s own hopes, ideals, and fears.⁴² So it is not surprising that in recent years, her story has also inspired a number of novels, including *Nuit Ouverte* by Clémence Boulouque and *The English German Girl* by Jake Wallis Simons, which both mix history with fiction.⁴³ The French novel *Nuit Ouverte* uses historical references to Jonas’ life to explore themes of memory, the weight of the past and guilt. It focuses on the fictional character Elise Lermont, an actress who plays Regina

³⁷ Elisa Klapheck(2004) *Fräulein Rabbiner Jonas: The Story of the First Woman Rabbi* (trans. T. Axelrod). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p. 10.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8, 11-14.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Hermann Simon (2004) “Foreword” in *Fräulein Rabbiner Jonas: The Story of the First Woman Rabbi* (trans. T. Axelrod). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p. xi.

⁴² Elisa Klapheck(2004) *Fräulein Rabbiner Jonas: The Story of the First Woman Rabbi* (trans. T. Axelrod). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p. 40; Sheridan, Sybil (1994) “Preface” in Sybil Sheridan (ed.) *Hear Our Voice: Women Rabbis Tell their Stories*, London: SCM Press, p. xvii.

⁴³ Clémence Boulouque (2007) *Nuit Ouverte*. Paris: Flammarion; Jake Wallis Simons (2007) *The English German Girl*. Edinburgh: Polygon.

Jonas and enacts her life story on screen as a form of atonement for her grandparents' guilt as Nazi collaborators.⁴⁴ *The English German Girl* tells the story of the fictional character Rosa Klein, her Berlin childhood as a Jewish girl in Nazi Germany and her escape to England on a *Kindertransport*. This novel only briefly mentions Jonas' work as a rabbi supporting the Jewish community in Berlin as part of a backdrop to the main character's story. Jonas is one of many real-life characters incorporated in this novel, including Rabbi Malvin Warschauer; Wilhelm Kruetzfeld, the German police lieutenant who saved the Neue Synagogue from being burnt down during Kristallnacht; Norbert Wollheim, who played a key role in organising the Kindertransports, which he often accompanied; Baron Rothschild, the French-born philanthropist who did much to help Jews during the war; and Clare Alexander, matron of the London Hospital." Eva Tucker's review of this novel in *The Jewish Chronicle* notes that the inclusion of these real-life characters enhances this novel's factual foundations.⁴⁵ It is fair to say that their inclusion also draws a wider audience's attention to the existence of these historical figures and the contributions they have made. This novel does not specifically focus on Jonas, but by including her as part of the wider picture of Jewish community life in Berlin at this time, it contributes to the wider acceptance and "naturalization" of her place in history as a religious leader and as the first woman to be ordained as a rabbi.

In Diana Groó's 'poetic documentary' *Regina*, Jonas' story takes center stage. Hungarian director Groó was attracted to her story as she felt that Jonas "was exactly what a leader should be [...] and it's really rare. I was really amazed how she was fighting, how many difficulties she had to face, but at the same time she concentrated on her work."⁴⁶ As critics have noted, this film "is not a Holocaust tale but a gracefully edited documentary of a woman who emerges as determined, fearless, with the true calling of rabbi."⁴⁷ In the production of this award-winning documentary Groó faced a number of challenges due to the limited availability of visual material and the fact that none of the eye-witnesses were still alive. Only two photographs of Jonas' are available to us today: one was taken in 1936 and the other three years later, but both show Jonas in a very similar pose wearing rabbinic robes. In the absence of further visual clues, Groó used black and white archival footage to "evoke the atmosphere of

⁴⁴ Courty, Isabelle (2007) "Nuit Ouverte", *Le Figaro Magazine*, 4 October [Available online] http://www.lefigaro.fr/lefigaromagazine/2007/09/28/01006-20070928ARTMAG90501-nuit_ouverte.php (Accessed 13 March 2017).

⁴⁵ Eva Tucker (2011) "Review: The German English Girl - From Bicycle to Kindertransport", *The Jewish Chronicle*, May 18 [Available online] <https://www.thejc.com/culture/books/review-the-english-german-girl-1.23101> (Accessed on 13 March 2017).

⁴⁶ Groó cited in Ayelet Dekel (2013) "Jerusalem Film Festival 2013: Diana Groó on making Regina", *Midnight East: An insider perspective on Israeli culture*, 3 July [Available online] <http://www.midnighteast.com/mag/?p=26893> (Accessed 14 March 2017).

⁴⁷ Amy Stone (2014) "Meet on screen the first woman rabbi", *Lilith Magazine*, 12 February [Available online] <http://lilith.org/blog/2014/02/meet-on-screen-the-first-woman-rabbi/> (Accessed on 14 March 2017).

Berlin in the first half of the 20th century” supported by musical recordings from the Weimar era.⁴⁸ However, since there was only limited archival film and photographic footage of Jewish life of Berlin at the beginning of the 20th century, Groó took some artistic liberties and supplemented footage of Berlin with close-ups of Orthodox Jews in Warsaw and Krakow.⁴⁹ The trailer of this film highlights a poetic, mysterious scene from the film superimposing Jonas’ photograph, almost floating, on black and white footage of a deserted street. Against the backdrop of melancholy music, a female voice is heard quoting an extract from an eye-witness account: “They say she walked on the streets like a mystical medieval figure, her gaze turned inward, her thoughts not on this world but on completely different things.”⁵⁰ The set-up of this scene and the choice of words could suggest an almost hagiographic approach to Jonas – however, while the film conveys a deep emotional connection with its subject, it does “stay true to the hundreds of documents Regina Jonas managed to save for posterity.”⁵¹

As none of the eye-witnesses were still alive when Groó made the film, she decided to use voice-overs reading out witness accounts as well as passages from letters that form part of the collection of Jonas’ papers. Groó aimed to recreate the feeling of hearing “old ladies in the voice-overs, who would sound like real persons who used to know Regina Jonas.”⁵² It was particularly important to her to use the voice of someone who had first-hand experience of concentration camps, “who really knows what it is about [...] creating somehow the feeling that it is true [...] to keep this kind of natural, human part of this story.” The voice-overs were recorded in English, German and Hungarian, with subtitles in many other languages. In all three versions Groó used the voice of her own grandmother, who survived four concentration camps, to bring to life witness accounts, reflecting a particularly close emotional connection with the subject matter of the film. Groó notes that in terms of her grandmother’s age, “if she

⁴⁸ Ayelet Dekel (2013) “Jerusalem Film Festival 2013: Diana Groó on making Regina”, *Midnight East: An insider perspective on Israeli culture*, 3 July [Available online <http://www.midnighteast.com/mag/?p=26893> (Accessed 14 March 2017)]; Brokaw, Kurt (2014) “New York Jewish Film Festival 2014 – Critic’s Choices: Regina” *Independent Magazine*, 15 January [Available online] <http://independent-magazine.org/2014/01/new-york-jewish-film-festival-2014-kurt-brokaw/> (Accessed on 14 March 2017).

⁴⁹ Ayelet Dekel (2013) “Jerusalem Film Festival 2013: Diana Groó on making Regina”, *Midnight East: An insider perspective on Israeli culture*, 3 July [Available online <http://www.midnighteast.com/mag/?p=26893> (Accessed 14 March 2017)]; Dekel, 2013; Amy Stone (2014) “Meet on screen the first woman rabbi”, *Lilith Magazine*, 12 February [Available online] <http://lilith.org/blog/2014/02/meet-on-screen-the-first-woman-rabbi/> (Accessed on 14 March 2017).

⁵⁰ *Regina* (2013) Malcah Production (UK), Katapult Film (Hung), Time Prints (Deu).

⁵¹ Amy Stone (2014) “Meet on screen the first woman rabbi”, *Lilith Magazine*, 12 February [Available online] <http://lilith.org/blog/2014/02/meet-on-screen-the-first-woman-rabbi/> (Accessed on 14 March 2017).

⁵² Groó cited in Ayelet Dekel (2013) “Jerusalem Film Festival 2013: Diana Groó on making Regina”, *Midnight East: An insider perspective on Israeli culture*, 3 July [Available online <http://www.midnighteast.com/mag/?p=26893> (Accessed 14 March 2017)].

had lived in Berlin she could have been one of the students of Regina Jonas.”⁵³ A close personal connection was also reflected in the fact that the well-known actress Rachel Weisz, who is the daughter of this film’s producer, George Weisz, gives voice to Jonas’ own accounts in the English language version of the film. Groó initially had difficulties in finding producers until George Weisz decided to support the production of this film as he wanted to “promote awareness of Jonas’ work.”⁵⁴ Weisz has Hungarian Jewish roots, but his family escaped to England in 1938. He made his debut as a producer with this documentary, but is also considering making a feature film of Jonas’ life story, and already holds the rights for this.⁵⁵ In an interview with the German newspaper *Jüdische Rundschau* following the German premiere of the film in Berlin in 2015, Weisz explained that he felt that Jonas’ story “was something that had to be preserved for the future.”⁵⁶

While the film *Regina* has been screened in many different countries, it was particularly warmly received in Berlin. As Weisz notes, “since 2013, we’ve been to Paris, the USA, Budapest, Hong Kong and London. We won various prizes. The reactions to the film have always been different. Perhaps that’s why it was so important to us to come to Berlin today. Because you see in every face here that this story touches people in a special way. There’s a special atmosphere here, a vibrancy, a vivid engagement. In London, for example, people seemed very distant.”⁵⁷ As the *Jüdische Rundschau* concludes “Berlin is something very special because Regina Jonas is ‘coming home.’”⁵⁸

Looking ahead

Regina Jonas’ story has offered female leaders in Jewish communities and beyond an important historical perspective, but it has also found strong emotional resonance

⁵³ Groó cited in *ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Jennifer Lipman (2013) “Rachel Weisz’ father makes his movie debut”, *Jewish Chronicle*, 31 May, p. 10.

⁵⁶ Translated from the German original: “Und das ist etwas, was für die Zukunft bewahrt werden muss” George Weisz cited in Laura Kúlper (2015) „Die erste Rabbinerin der Welt: Zum neuen Film über ‚Fräulein Rabbiner Jonas‘“, *Jüdische Rundschau*, No. 12, Vol. 16, December, p. 28.

⁵⁷ Translated from German original: “Wir waren seit 2013 in Paris, den USA, Budapest, Hongkong und London und haben verschiedene Preise gewonnen. Die Reaktionen auf den Film waren immer anders, vielleicht was es uns deshalb so wichtig, heute in Berlin zu sein. Denn man sieht in jedem Gesicht hier, dass diese Geschichte berührt und das auf eine besondere Art. Da herrschte eine besondere Atmosphäre, ein Vibrieren, eine Lebendigkeit der Anteilnahme. In London zum Beispiel wirkten die Menschen sehr distanziert” (George Weisz cited in *ibid.*)

⁵⁸ Translated from German original: “ist Berlin etwas ganz besonderes, denn Regina Jonas ‘kommt nach Hause’” (*Ibid.*).

with many people in a wider sense, either as a reminder of controversy, loss, or guilt, or as a source of strength and inspiration for leadership, commitment, and faith in the face of adversity. The different national trajectories the memory of her story has taken since the discovery of her papers, certainly in the US American, German and British contexts, and the generational differences the memory of her story reflects are particularly fascinating. As Jonas' case illustrates, memory is a process that is shaped by and shapes national, generational, and gender identities. "'Remembering,' i.e. the way a social group positions itself in a historical perspective, is an essential feature of identity."⁵⁹ However, as Yerushalmi concludes "Memory is always problematic, usually deceptive, sometimes treacherous."⁶⁰

As Jonas' case illustrates, written evidence can serve a crucial role in anchoring and shaping historiography. The lack of access to written evidence and the discovery of her papers have been important factors in her temporary disappearance from and reappearance in historiography. As Sally Priesand notes, had Jonas not given "her documents to the Berlin Jewish community for safekeeping [...], we would know even less than we do now about her life and the significant contribution she made to the Jewish community."⁶¹ In recognition of the significance of written evidence, Priesand has taken the initiative to protect the memory of her own legacy and that of other female rabbis: "When I retired from the active rabbinate, I announced that I would be donating my documents and papers to the American Jewish Archives in Cincinnati, and I encouraged all female rabbis to do the same."⁶²

In recent years, digital archives have been offering new important opportunities for the preservation of primary sources. The website of the Jewish Women's Archive, for example, offers "the world's largest collection of information on Jewish women, and draws more than one million visitors a year."⁶³ Digital archives allow previously marginalized groups and their leaders to take control of preserving and curating sources and grant public access to them, and thus transcend many of the bureaucratic, logistical, financial and political hurdles that have restricted access to many archives

⁵⁹ Translated from German original, Thomas Brechenmacher (2009) "Identität und Erinnerung: Schlüsselthemen deutsch-jüdischer Geschichte und Gegenwart. Eine Einführung". in Thomas Brechenmacher (ed.) *Identität und Erinnerung: Schlüsselthemen deutsch-jüdischer Geschichte und Gegenwart*, München: Olzog, pp. 9-19.

⁶⁰ Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi ([1982] 1996) *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, p. 5.

⁶¹ Priesand, Sally J. (2016) "Foreword" in Rebecca Einstein Schorr and Alysa Mendelson Graf with Renee Edelmann (eds.) *The Sacred Calling: Four Decades of Women in the Rabbinate*, Central Conference of American Rabbis, Kindle Edition.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Jewish Women's Archive (2017) "About the Jewish Women's Archive" [Available online] <https://jwa.org/aboutjwa> (Accessed 4 April 2017).

in the past.⁶⁴ So, hopefully, this means that current and future generations and their leaders will have more opportunities to protect evidence and secure their legacy than Rabbi Regina Jonas had.

⁶⁴ Wolfgang Ernst (2013) *Digital Memory and the Archive*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.