



## **Regina Jonas: The First Female Rabbi**

*Finding Regina Jonas*

### **Stefanie Sinclair:**

Regina Jonas is now widely recognised as the world's first female rabbi. However, for almost 50 years after her death in the holocaust she was treated as a mere historical footnote and was given very little, if any, public recognition. This has all changed now.

### **Elisa Klapheck:**

The first female rabbi was in Germany and we can be proud about it.

### **Ulrike:**

I have a lot of respect for her, that she fought her way through in a totally hostile environment.

### **Stefanie Sinclair:**

I'm Stefanie Sinclair and I've come to Berlin, Regina Jonas' hometown, to find out more about her. Why was she almost forgotten? And how is she remembered today? I'm starting my journey at the Centrum Judaicum in the New Synagogue where Regina Jonas' papers are held. I'm with Dr Hermann Simon, the director of the Centrum Judaicum. Why do you think it's important that people know about Regina Jonas today?

### **Hermann Simon:** (in German)

Regina Jonas has become a symbolic figure, for something new, for something modern within Judaism. She was the first woman to become a rabbi and she explored theoretical questions: why she was doing it, and whether the tradition allowed it.

### **Stefanie Sinclair:**

I'm sitting in a little room where I've just been brought the papers Regina Jonas left with a friend, or with an acquaintance, we don't know, before she was deported to Theresienstadt. And this is the very first time I've ever seen them. What I've got in front of me is a grey box with some folders in them. And it's actually it's not very much. I'll just open one of them. I'm just trying to find my way around this. They're basically letters addressed to her that she kept. These are letters inviting her to preach and inviting her to take over some rabbinical functions in Jewish communities in 1937. It's kind of random, At the moment I'm just starting at the top. And she's being asked to present her Certificate of Ordination. I'm opening another folder now. I'm looking for the Certificate of Ordination. Look this is a letter from the person who ordained her. But actually it's quite difficult to read the handwriting. Oh I've now found the Halachic Treatise. That is actually stuff that Regina Jonas has written herself. Now that is very moving. That's the original. Typed, with typewriter, and annotated.

Some people have thought because there's so many comments on this that this might be not the final version. Then I can see that now, There's lots of words underlined, crossed out, different types of pencil as well, and biro. And the title is (speaks German) *Can Women, Can Women Work as Rabbis?* This is almost like a time capsule in some ways. If you thought you'd never come back from something, what on earth would you put if you had a tiny box, what would you put in it for people to remember you with? This is quite an emotional topic. I'm standing in front of documents of someone who died violently. And who fought for an important cause. I feel emotionally involved because I am German and I find it difficult to come to terms with Germany's past and this is a reminder that someone that special was just killed in an instant. As Hermann Simon explains, it is not clear how Regina Jonas's papers found their way to the archive.

**Hermann Simon: (In German)**

What especially impressed me— I think 'impressed' is the right word – about her estate, her papers, is the fact that we don't know how they got here. In the beginning of November 1942 Regina Jonas was deported to Theresienstadt. Then, there was still something like a community here. In these rooms where we are sitting right now, in the rooms of the New Synagogue, next door was the archive. We assume that she gave her papers to a trustworthy person who then brought them here. Or she might have brought the little bundle of papers here herself before she was deported. And, the assumption was that she would collect them at a later point in time.

**Stefanie Sinclair:**

Do you think it's possible that she thought she was coming back?

**Hermann Simon: (in German)**

Yes, I think so. Every human being has a shred of hope. And I think when you are packing up your papers and you bring them here, you must have some faith in the continuity of things, or that people will use them in a sensible way at some point in the future.

**Stefanie Sinclair:**

I'm now standing a few streets away from the Centrum Judaicum in front of what was Regina Jonas' house.

It's in a quiet side street. The house is marked by a memorial plaque with Regina Jonas' name, her signature, her photo in her rabbinical robes and a brief summary of her life.

A group of women rabbis raised the money to pay for this plaque - it's an indication of how significant she is in their eyes. I've arranged to meet Regina Jonas' biographer, Elisa Klapheck. When she wrote the biography she was a journalist. Since then she's been ordained as a rabbi.

**Elisa Klapheck:**

I think with me she found the right person to write about her. Because I was really willing to write her story. Her Treatise *Can Women be Rabbis?* was of course a sensation. Then all the letters. There are many files here with letters of famous rabbis of her time. So I thought I had enough to write something. And then I put ads in all the German/Jewish newspapers in the world looking for people who had seen her in Berlin or later in the concentration camp, Theresienstadt. And about 40 people reacted from all over the world.

**Stefanie Sinclair:**

What did you find out about Regina Jonas through those eyewitness accounts?

**Elisa Klapheck:**

It depended on the person. The girls who had her as religious instructor in schools. They said she was a fantastic teacher. She kept our attention, and she had so many ideas how to teach the Jewish religion. The older girls, they said she was very strange. What woman would want to be a rabbi. So she did things, which were not allowed, which were not decent for a woman.

**Stefanie Sinclair:**

Such as?

**Elisa Klapheck:**

As in the Jewish religion it's not allowed for women to behave like a man. She did not care about her looks. So you could see that she was a threat to them. She also asked the girls in school what do you want to learn after you have finished with school, what kind of profession do you want to exercise? She challenged the girls. And then there were even horrible moments. For example, one woman who did slave labour with her together in a factory in Berlin.

**Stefanie Sinclair:**

Forced labour, under the Nazi's?

**Elisa Klapheck:**

Forced labour. She said well everything Regina Jonas did was forbidden. We should put a mantle of silence on her and forget about her. I said, come on you survived it, she was murdered. Is this really the only thing you have to say about her? And it was the only thing she wanted to say. And the same thing with the men. I met rabbis, Cantors who witnessed her, who did services together with her. And some of them were absolutely in favour. They belonged to the progressive fraction of the Jewish community and supported her. And others said well she was not a rabbi. She was just a preacher.

**Stefanie Sinclair:**

Hermann Simon recalls his mother speaking about Regina Jonas.

**Hermann Simon:** (in German) I have always been interested in Regina Jonas. My mother talked a lot about her. She told me a lot about the fact that she didn't pay much attention to her appearance. That's something that we don't think about when we read her work today: She was quite a strange figure. But my mother said that, to use her words, she was 'like a medieval mystic'. Inward looking, in her own thoughts, not paying attention to her surroundings, focusing on other things. As a child I knew that she was a rabbi, and what fascinated me was the fact that the members of the community council or of the board of the synagogue talked about 'Miss Rabbi Jonas'. And this German word '*Fraeulein*' 'Miss' was said in a somewhat dismissive way. As if she wasn't taken all that seriously.

**Stefanie Sinclair:**

I'm wondering why Regina Jonas was not mentioned for so long, given that so many people who had known her were still alive.

**Elisa Klapheck:**

The Jews after the Shoah had to deal with a lot of shame. That you were humiliated. And your feelings, the whole family was killed. You were the only survivor. There's also a feeling of guilt. So I think in this conglomerate of shame, of feelings of shame, Regina Jonas was forcefully forgotten. I think even nowadays it's still a challenge when a woman behaves differently than what you expect.

**Stefanie Sinclair:**

Hermann Simon disputes the fact that Regina Jonas was forgotten.

**Hermann Simon:** (in German)

I don't think that she was forgotten. OK, she wasn't well known abroad, you could say that. The people who knew her, it was a small circle because of the years of persecution and the things that happened in those times. But within that circle, she was never forgotten.

**Stefanie Sinclair:**

In the foreword to her biography you say that 'it is difficult to assign Regina Jonas to her proper place in Berlin Jewish history'. Can you maybe say a little bit more about that?

**Hermann Simon:** (in German)

Perhaps, because due to the circumstances we don't know what would have happened to her in life, to what extent she would have stayed with it, whether she would have been accepted as a rabbi by members of the community and by her colleagues. We just don't know... because her life was cut so violently short.

**Stefanie Sinclair:**

There's no doubt that Regina Jonas has had a profound influence on women rabbis in Germany today, particularly Elisa Klapheck.

**Elisa Klapheck:**

I haven't heard one female rabbi yet not referring to Regina Jonas. We are all her disciples. And that was actually my goal that despite the fact that she was suppressed, forgotten. She would take her place as trail blazer.

**Stefanie Sinclair:**

In what way can the publication of Regina Jonas' biography be understood as "an expression of a greater development of a renewal of a German or European Jewry that no longer stands on the ruins of the Shoah" - and I'm actually quoting from your introduction to the book.

**Elisa Klapheck:**

Everywhere in all the big cities all of a sudden you had groups of Jews who wanted something new. Liberal Judaism and open-minded Judaism, something new. After the fall of the Wall and the new development on the continent in Europe. Also Jewish history started with a new chapter. 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.

**Stefanie Sinclair:**

I've come to Abraham Geiger College in Berlin where a new generation of German women rabbis is being trained. Amongst them are Sonja and Ulrike. Ulrike, when did you find out about her, when did you first hear about her?

**Ulrike:**

Well, I heard first her story at the end of the 90's. And it's quite interesting because actually I'm an historian and my main field was always German/Jewish history of 19<sup>th</sup>/20<sup>th</sup> century. And I never had heard about her until Elisa Klapheck wrote her book and there were some activities to publish it and publicise the name and the work of Regina Jonas. But until then I hadn't heard of her.

**Stefanie Sinclair:**

What does Regina Jonas mean to you personally?

**Ulrike:**

I have a lot of respect for her really that she fought her way through in a totally hostile environment. Where people thought is that really serious. Isn't it just a crazy idea what this lady is doing. I have a lot of respect because I think she must have been very lonesome. And had probably only a few people who understood and supported her.

**Stefanie Sinclair:**

Sonja, to what extent do you think that changes in German/Jewish community are reflected in the way, changing ways Regina Jonas has been perceived?

**Sonja:**

She's still perceived in very different ways and I think most of rabbis working in Germany won't even refer to her as being a rabbi. And just forgot to talk about her. Just as Leo Baeck did for example. Who was one of the witnesses who knew her, he knew her. He met her personally. Never talked about her. What I think is very outstanding is the fact that everybody who talks about her nowadays, it's mostly women. So to us she certainly means something. She's meaningful because she was the first one. And she was a fighter and she didn't give up. And as such she's important for us as women who want to be there too.

**Stefanie Sinclair:**

Coming to Berlin has made Regina Jonas somehow more tangible or real to me. Her home city has changed so much since her lifetime. However, it's been very moving for me to see for myself the places where she lived, where she worked, where she studied, to see her handwriting and read the many letters she received from people who obviously thought very highly of her and really valued the work she did. My visit has also brought home to me how difficult it is to reconstruct her life on the basis of relatively few sources and how tempting it is to project one's own feelings onto her.