



Rosenstrasse. Margarethe von Trotta.

Reviewed by Frank Noack

Published on H-German (July, 2004)

<cite>Rosenstrasse</cite>: Margarethe von Trotta's Homage to Non-Political Antifascism

Near the end of 2003, several German newspaper and magazine editors asked their film reviewers to name what they considered to be the best and the worst achievements of the year. With the polls of the Berlin-based magazines <cite>TIP</cite> and <cite>Zitty</cite> (appearing every two weeks) and <cite>Der Tagesspiegel</cite> (the only daily newspaper in Germany to conduct such a poll) combined, the winners in the "worst" category were <cite>Matrix Reloaded</cite> and <cite>Matrix Revolutions</cite>, followed by <cite>Kill Bill, Vol. 1</cite>, <cite>Das Wunder von Bern</cite>, <cite>Irreversible</cite>, and—if only with three votes—<cite>Rosenstrasse</cite>. <p> <cite>Kill Bill, Vol. 1</cite> and <cite>Irreversible</cite> were also among the year's favorite films; a few critics even championed <cite>Das Wunder von Bern</cite>, but nobody showed real enthusiasm for <cite>Rosenstrasse</cite>. Even its defenders were defensive, asking readers to ignore the film's flaws because of its honorable content. Director Margarethe von Trotta was not slaughtered but, even worse, she was treated patronizingly as someone who means well and is not much of an artist. When the nominations for the German Film Awards were announced in mid-April 2004, <cite>Rosenstrasse</cite> was completely overlooked—just a few days after winning Italy's David di Donatello Award as Best Foreign Picture. <p> Audiences were kinder. According to the magazine <cite>Filmecho/Filmwoche</cite> (February 14, 2004), more than 600,000 people have paid to see <cite>Rosenstrasse</cite> after its nation-

wide release on September 18, 2003. Half a year later, it was still shown in a few cinemas across Germany, and its recent DVD premiere was well-promoted. Von Trotta has scored an average, solid success. Among German films released during 2003, only <cite>Good Bye, Lenin!</cite>, <cite>Das Wunder von Bern</cite>, <cite>Luther</cite>, <cite>Das fliegende Klassenzimmer</cite>, <cite>Werner-gekotzt wird spaeter</cite>, <cite>Die wilden Kerle</cite>, <cite>Till Eulenspiegel</cite>, and <cite>Anatomie 2</cite> had attracted more cinema-goers. If one adds all international films released in Germany during 2003, <cite>Rosenstrasse</cite> was at number 57—not too bad a place, considering that Ang Lee's <cite>The Hulk</cite> occupied number 58. <p> Promotion for <cite>Rosenstrasse</cite> had visibly been inspired by Max Faerberboeck's similarly-themed 1999 hit <cite>Aimee and Jaguar</cite> in which "Aryan" housewife Juliane Koehler falls in love with Jewish resistance fighter Maria Schrader. Blond Koehler and dark-haired Schrader had dominated the ads for <cite>Aimee and Jaguar</cite> just as blond Katja Riemann and Schrader were to dominate those for <cite>Rosenstrasse</cite>. <p> Before the film's nationwide release, leading lady Katja Riemann had won a Best Actress award at Venice, the first given to an actress in a German film since 1942, when Kristina Soederbaum won for <cite>Die goldene Stadt</cite>. During the 1950s, two of West Germany's biggest stars won, but Lilli Palmer did so for the U.S. film <cite>The Four Poster</cite> and Maria Schell for the French drama <cite>Gervaise</cite>. Apart from some flattering

press reports, Katja Riemann's award did nothing for her. <p> Riemann also got a Best Actress nomination at the European Film Awards. Born in 1963, she had not achieved stardom until she reached the age of thirty, when she became a national box office draw via several "Beziehungskomoedien" ("relationship comedies"). For about five years she was Germany's Meg Ryan, but overexposure hurt her career, as did some unpleasant public appearances. She insulted journalists (not all of them with justification) and on several occasions imitated the worst eccentricities of Madonna and Jennifer Lopez. <p> In Egon Guenther's well-meant but painfully uninspired TV movie <cite>Elsa-Geschichte einer leidenschaftlichen Frau</cite> (1999)-von Trotta is a genius compared to Guenther-Riemann was supposed to play a Jewish mother who leaves Nazi Germany in the mid-1930s, sending her children into exile first and following them later. Riemann, mother of a daughter born in 1993, protested that she would never travel without her children and insisted on a script change that had nothing to do with historical facts but satisfied her ego. Whatever one may say against her, she has a strong presence and remains a national celebrity. Her portrayal of Lena Fischer certainly contributed to the minor success of <cite>Rosenstrasse</cite>. Outside of Germany, the film will get some attention because of its subject matter, even if it is not really that new: Meryl Streep had already played a blond, non-Jewish woman fighting for her Jewish husband in the TV series <cite>Holocaust</cite> back in 1977. <p> For nearly ten years, <cite>Rosenstrasse</cite> had a reputation as the picture that never got made, like Jodie Foster's <cite>Flora Plum</cite>. Once production started, there were no serious conflicts. After fifty-four days of shooting, filming was completed on December 18, 2002. The first Berlin press screening was held on July 16, 2003. <p> One minor pre-shooting conflict involved 1943-born Jutta Lampe, one of Germany's two or three greatest living stage actresses, who had hesitated to play Maria Schrader's orthodox Jewish mother Ruth Weinstein. Her hesitation was justified. Lampe gives an unhappy, even campy performance, having to play a character completely alien to her and, one may assume, to von Trotta as well. To anyone who has seen Lampe's Phaedra, Andromache, Masha (<cite>The Three Sisters</cite>), Ranevskaya (<cite>The Cherry Orchard</cite>), or Arkadina (<cite>The Seagull</cite>) on-stage, she is ill at ease and most reviewers were kind enough not to mention her at all. Like the similarly protestant Meryl Streep, she is unable to wear a black wig without audiences being aware of its being a wig. <p> Within

Germany Lampe contributed to the film's prestige. The cast of <cite>Rosenstrasse</cite> includes two relatively bankable stars (Riemann and Schrader) as well as superior stage actresses such as Lampe, Doris Schade (enjoyably sarcastic as ninety-year-old Lena Fischer), and Jutta Wachowiak, a Brecht performer from East Berlin's Deutsches Theater to whom film historian Annette Insdorf had paid tribute in her book <cite>Indelible Shadows: Film and the Holocaust</cite>, in connection with the 1980 concentration camp drama <cite>Die Verlobte</cite>. Wachowiak and Belgian actor Jan Declair play an elderly couple and although they act in different scenes until he is released, you know they belong to one another, with their combination of larger than life dignity and earthiness. <p> Schrader (playing Hannah, the protagonist of the present day plot), though not Jewish herself, was associated with filmmaker/actor Dani Levy for many years (in 1998 they co-wrote <cite>Meschugge</cite>). There is an undertone of bitchiness in Schrader's and Riemann's star personae that gives von Trotta's film a much needed energy. Too often, the good characters bore audiences to death. Schrader and Riemann are refreshingly different from the noble heroines of von Trotta's earlier pictures. It is an intriguing anecdote-mentioned by Riemann in an interview-that one American company had developed a <cite>Rosenstrasse</cite> project starring Sharon Stone and seeking German money for it. For the record, the cast of <cite>Rosenstrasse</cite> also includes a veteran bit player, 76-year-old Johanna Penski, who had debuted as an extra in Veit Harlan's "Durchhalte"-spectacle, <cite>Kolberg</cite> (whose production had begun in 1943; it was released on January 30, 1945). <p> Among the male cast, the dashing presence of Martin Feifel (as Lena Fischer's Jewish musician husband Fabian) and Fedja van Huet (as Luis Marquez, Hannah's South American fiancée) stand out. Fedja van Huet had starred, alongside Jan Declair, in the Academy Award winning Dutch film <cite>Karakter</cite>. Considering his talent, he is scandalously wasted by von Trotta. The Nazis could easily have become stock villains, but von Trotta knows there was a gray zone, and in this respect the insecure guard of Rainer Strecker deserves praise. On the debit side, Martin Wuttke (a fine stage actor who had his breakthrough as Brecht's Hitlerian Arturo Ui, but who is generally unremarkable on-screen) struggles hopelessly with the admittedly difficult part of Joseph Goebbels. He is leagues below Martin Kosleck, who so brilliantly impersonated the minister of propaganda in John Farrow's <cite>The Hitler Gang</cite> (1944)

and Stuart Heisler's *Hitler* (1962), or Cliff Gorman, who portrayed Goebbels to Anthony Hopkins's Hitler in George Schaefer's TV movie *The Bunker* (1981). Even the best performances cannot compensate for the dull sets and cinematography. *Rosenstrasse* is neither a historical pageant nor an intense chamber piece. It has flaws that are typical for a medium-budget film. Von Trotta lacked the money and, it must be admitted, the imagination to recreate 1943 Berlin. The scenes set in the present are damaging not for dramaturgical reasons, but, since they include spectacular shots from present-day New York and Berlin, you realize all the more that the old Berlin consists of only one street corner and various interiors. You never have a sense of 1943s everyday life. You are never really there. Most historical films contain inaccuracies. Who decides which inaccuracies matter and which do not? It depends on each filmgoer's special knowledge, which he all too often considers to be an absolute. I initially laughed when I read the following letter to the editors of the British film magazine *Sight & Sound* (March 1999): "For all the talk of the 'realism' of 'Saving Private Ryan' ..., the film contains many gaffes. In Iowa in mid-June fields of ripe grain are nonsensical, as are the fields of ripe grass in France shortly after D-Day. The mother in Iowa is shown looking out of a window over her sink, but in those days ... farm sinks had high backs—don't sinks by windows belong to the 50s or later? And the old gramophone is remarkably 'high-fidelity' for its time." As said, I did laugh initially at this letter, but if I were an expert in horticulture, sink architecture, or gramophones, I would also have complained about the several gaffes. Several German reviewers of *Rosenstrasse* have complained of historical inaccuracies. I want to single out Iris Noah's article "Willkommen seid ihr, Klischees" which appeared in the weekly *Jungle World* (September 17, 2003) because it managed to attack the film for alleged inaccuracies while adding inaccuracies of its own. Noah's tone is unusually aggressive, full of resentments that have nothing to do with von Trotta's film itself; she seems to be unfamiliar with Nazi culture and subculture, and she seems not to have talked to or read books by participants of the *Rosenstrasse* events. She accuses Margarethe von Trotta of anti-Semitism, even if it is not a malicious one. Indeed, the casting company who chose the extras seems to have used such dubious expressions as "Jewish types" or "Aryan types," but these faux pas have nothing to do with what happens on-screen and do not justify Noah beginning her article with the following sentence: "In Margarethe von Trot-

tas Film 'Rosenstrasse' soll man die Juden schon an der Nasenspitze erkennen und Deutsche haben unbedingt blond zu sein." Even after a second viewing, I have not detected a single nose that called attention to itself. Katja Riemann's blond hair is covered most of the time. The Nazi star Litzy (Nina Kunzendorf) looks like a Latin import and Hannah's non-Jewish fiancée has dark curls. In order to create a somber mood, von Trotta even let several blond actors (Juergen Vogel, Frank Behnke, Rainer Strecker) dye their hair. Had von Trotta used some racial stereotypes, they still would have been justified because it was easier for blond, Nordic-looking Jews to remain unharassed in Nazi Germany, as Herbert A. Strauss has described in his autobiography *In the Eye of the Storm* (1997), and a blond "Aryan" woman possessed more authority when confronting Gestapo men. While hair color does not reveal anything about a person's character, religion, or ethnic identity, it does contribute to his or her appeal to others. Anyway, von Trotta makes no use of such stereotypes. One attack that seriously backfires is the one on the admittedly dubious Goebbels episode. In front of Joseph Goebbels and other high-ranking Nazis, Lena Fischer plays the piano while her friend Litzy sings "Ich weiss nicht, zu wem ich gehoere". Such an event, Noah argues, would never have been possible in 1943 because the song had been written by the exiled Jew Friedrich Hollaender, and it was associated with Marlene Dietrich, whom Germans despised as a traitor for her entertaining U.S. troops. With this argument, Noah reveals herself as someone who, instead of doing research of her own, merely reproduces the usual Dietrich clichés from the yellow press. It is true that Friedrich Hollaender had written the song, but it was first sung by Anna Sten in the 1932 UFA melodrama "Stuerme der Leidenschaft" ("Storms of Passion"). Anna Sten's singing of "Ich weiss nicht ..." did have a political meaning when it was first heard. Sten, star of several Soviet and leftist German films, had been bought by the nationalist UFA. Thereafter the communist newspaper *Die Rote Fahne* denounced her as a traitor who tried to lure proletarian audiences into bourgeois cinemas. Noah has never heard of Anna Sten, but she has heard somewhere that Germans used to attack Marlene Dietrich as a traitor. This, however, was in 1960, when Dietrich gave her first (and only) live concerts in Germany. The motivation behind the protests against her is too complex to be discussed in the *Rosenstrasse* context, having to do with the tickets being too expensive for the average German Dietrich fan, and with Dietrich visiting them so late. *Rosenstrasse* is set in 1943,

not 1960. In 1943, Marlene Dietrich was not viewed as a traitor but as a German-born actress who made it in Hollywood. There is no factual evidence for Germans having felt hatred for Dietrich during the Nazi era. On the contrary, it was Germans who turned "The Scarlet Empress" (1934), a box office disaster in the United States and elsewhere, into a huge financial success. Dietrich was on the covers of Nazi film magazines. During the 1937 Venice Film Festival—a fascist event that was boycotted by leftist and liberal artists—she personally appeared after having appeared in the anti-Communist melodrama *Knights without Armour* in which she, as a Russian aristocrat, was assaulted and raped by greasy, subhuman Bolsheviks. At the same time, Luise Rainer participated in a demonstration against Vittorio Mussolini's visit to Hollywood, which severely damaged her reputation. A few ugly Nazi articles of that time depicted Dietrich as a victim of "Hollywood Jews," but these articles were anti-Semitic, not anti-Dietrich.

Dietrich had helped emigres financially, yet she never publicly attacked Nazi Germany until it was safe to do so; had she done that before 1945, her mother, sister and cousin (a Wehrmacht soldier) who had remained in Germany might have suffered. Dietrich began entertaining U.S. troops in the summer of 1944, a year after the *Rosenstrasse* episode. The people of the liberated town of Aachen greeted her enthusiastically in 1944, and her films were successfully shown in German cinemas during the 1950s. If she felt uneasy towards her homeland, it was chiefly because she had not left it as a star who knows and trusts her audience. Nobody in 1943 associated the song "Ich weiss nicht, zu wem ich gehöre" with Dietrich, since it had not been recorded by her at that time, and even afterwards nobody considered Dietrich to be a traitor for entertaining U.S. troops because these were the days before CNN. Germans did not even care when their biggest star, Zarah Leander, left for Sweden in 1943. And Germans loved stage actress Tilla Durieux who spent World War II among partisans in Yugoslavia (who have not been particularly nice to German soldiers), resuming her German career in the 1950s.

The song "Ich weiss nicht ..." did not make much of an impact for decades since the film *Stürme der Leidenschaft* (directed by Robert Siodmak) was not too successful. In 1975, Israeli singer Daliah Lavi (a big star in West Germany since the 1960s) added the song to her repertoire and made it famous. Dietrich's interpretation never achieved the popularity of Lavi's. Lena Fischer's interpretation of Friedrich Hollaender's "Ich weiss nicht ..." is certainly meant by von Trotta to be an act of subtle resistance, but its presentation is hardly

comparable to the rousing "Allons enfants de la patrie" episode from *Casablanca*. Even if all the people present at the occasion had known the song had been written by an exiled Jew—and it is well-documented that due to uncertain authorship, much forbidden music was played during the Nazi era—the fact remains that the Nazi elite privately enjoyed forbidden fruits.

Iris Noah considers the conditions under which the men live in their Rosenstrasse prison to be too comfortable. Although she doesn't express it that directly, she misses the smell of sweat and urine. Obviously, she confuses the Rosenstrasse building with a train leading to Auschwitz. In his autobiography *Und Gad ging zu David* (Berlin 1995), Gad Beck (b. 1923) described his stay in that environment as not particularly nightmarish; he felt nervous but he also got warm food, and he spent most of the time cruising and having sex (pp. 112 ff.). A more audacious, provocative filmmaker than von Trotta might have worked Gad Beck's experiences into her and Pamela Katz's pious screenplay. Also, according to Beck, many more men had been involved in the protests than is officially recognized.

But then, who cares for authentic witnesses anyway? One of the women who had helped to free her beloved during the Rosenstrasse protests, Gisela Miessner, defended the film to little avail in the daily newspaper *Junge Welt* (September 26, 2003). It seems that actual experience is not in demand these days. It is second-hand experience that counts. A few years ago, I had to endure a whining girl accusing a real Auschwitz survivor—who told audiences how much she enjoyed visiting today's Germany—of being naive and inappropriately optimistic. "Today's Germany is so horrible!" the girl (or girlish woman) screamed, trying to upstage the woman who really had been in hell.

Margarethe von Trotta's worst decision was to suggest a sexual encounter between Lena Fischer and Joseph Goebbels. Too many people have left the cinemas asking themselves: Did they or didn't they? As if that mattered in the context. As someone who pays particular attention to sexual improbabilities (as opposed to other cinemagoers who detect horticultural improbabilities), I would say they did not, and could not have done it. For her meeting with the Propaganda minister, Lena wears a tight red dress that she is incapable of putting on without help from others. After Goebbels has left, she is still wearing her dress, with no button unbuttoned. Friends have to help her out of it. Of course, there may have been sexual practices that did not require undressing, but I will not go further into that. It is a well-documented fact that Goebbels was not attracted to blondes, and unlike Hermann Goering

(whose WW I sweetheart, actress Kaethe Dorsch, repeatedly persuaded him to release prisoners), Goebbels rigidly separated sex from politics. <p> The chief reason why <cite>Rosenstrasse</cite> was attacked despite its good intentions is, to me, an ideological one. I dare say that <cite>Rosenstrasse</cite> was attacked for its humanism, its homage to non-political antifascism. If you study the lives of people who saved Jews during the Third Reich, you will discover that they usually were apolitical. Those who do the right thing are not identical with those who write the right thing. Self-righteous journalists and historians who promote civil courage are almost never identical with those anonymous people who risk their lives by intervening when neo-Nazis attack blacks or Arabs in the subway. Needless to say, these real heroes do not get any awards for their courage, and usually they do not want them. Such humanitarian awards go to talk show humanists—glamorous people who say on TV that they hate Nazism and violence. A notable exception is politician and marijuana activist Christian Stroebele (member of “Die Gruenen”) who, after being attacked with an iron rod by a neo-Nazi, fought back despite being unarmed and bleeding. <p> The Rosenstrasse women demonstrated courage because they loved their husbands, sons, or cousins. Their attitude is still not taken seriously even if it has saved more lives than the writings of more politically motivated people. <p> Another taboo subject which von Trotta has touched is the gray zone. In his review of Fred Zinnemann’s 1944 antifascist drama <cite>The Seventh Cross</cite>, the <cite>New York Times</cite> critic Bosley Crowther felt it necessary to remind his readers that the film based on Anna Seghers’s novel was set in 1936 and that in the meantime, all good Germans as depicted must have emigrated or been killed. In view of the bombs dropped on Germany, this position was understandable. <p> Less understandable is the fact that German emigres who spent World War II in Hollywood (not the worst place, if I had to choose) and came back to Germany after 1945 miraculously did not meet any good German or concentration camp survivor, only Nazis and opportunists. Never mind that leading West German film producers Gyula Trebitsch, Arthur Brauner and Walter Koppel had survived the Holocaust, that our most popular literature critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki and his wife had witnessed the Warsaw ghetto uprising; popular talk host Hans Rosenthal had survived in hiding, and theater and TV director Imo Moszkowicz had been an Auschwitz inmate. Somehow, no Hollywood emigre (as opposed to Moscow emigres, whose views are far more differentiated) wanted to know about these people’s fates. A

notable exception is actor Fritz Kortner who spent World War II in Hollywood: Kortner, one of the most viciously attacked Jewish stars of the Weimar years, never forgot the cowardly and reactionary behavior of many of his fellow emigres who would have become Nazis had they been allowed. <p> Younger German journalists of today have chosen what I call the Hollywood perspective. It is easier, more comfortable to divide Germans into killers, victims, and emigres. And the Rosenstrasse women did not fit into any of these categories. They could save lives because they were part of the system. At least one of the Rosenstrasse women is depicted by von Trotta as a Nazi, wearing her swastika on her chest, but she is still fighting for a Jewish relative. (German actor Michael Degen recently revealed that those Gentiles who saved his and his mother’s lives had been anti-Semites, but they were horrified by Nazi violence against Jews.) <p> All films that have dealt with German resistance made it clear that these courageous people had been a minority. Yet even these few decent people seem to offend the average young German of today. It was different in the early 1980s. In those days when thousands of young Germans (as well as older people like Heinrich Boell who had remained young at heart) protested against nuclear weapons, the heroes of German resistance were appreciated. After reunification, if you asked people in the streets to name antifascists, they would certainly have mentioned Oskar Schindler and Marlene Dietrich. Both have done good, particularly Schindler, but both are impossible to imitate. The average German could not go to the Gestapo and say: “Heil Hitler, please give me a thousand Jews to help me repair my roof.” As much as I usually disagree with Claude Lanzmann, I think he was right in accusing <cite>Schindler’s List</cite> of telling a story that was too atypical to be of educational value. As for Dietrich, she is too Apollonian a figure to invite identification. By focusing on extraordinary situations (Schindler) or personalities (Dietrich), the German media intimidate ordinary people instead of encouraging them to become politically active. Having to look up to gods makes you passive. <p> Like such emigrants as Klaus and Erika Mann (two of my favorite enemies), most journalists today say that the average German could not have fought Hitler anyway, so it was better to leave Germany in the first place. Fortunately, another 2003 poll asking who were the greatest Germans of all time had the following antifascists among the top ten: Hans and Sophie Scholl (resistance fighters who were executed), Willy Brandt (a resistance fighter who emigrated to Norway and Sweden and later became German Chancellor), and Albert Einstein, one of the few pacifists during WW

I. All of them had either been Nazi victims (the Scholls) or emigres, though Brandt did visit Nazi Germany illegally until the outbreak of World War II. There remains a distrust of all Germans who survived within Nazi Germany. This distrust is hardly reduced to non-Jewish Germans. I vividly recall a scene from Otto Preminger's Leon Uris adaptation *Exodus* (1960) in which concentration camp survivor Sal Mineo is brutally interrogated after the liberation, having to explain why he had managed to survive the death camps. *Discussing *Rosenstrasse* is much more engrossing than watching the film itself. In view of the subject, this is not too bad an effect. There are great films which leave audiences paralyzed, unable to talk for days. *Rosenstrasse* has flaws and could easily be improved upon by a more virtuoso filmmaker. But it raises questions that its makers may never have thought about.*

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

Citation: Frank Noack. Review of , *Rosenstrasse*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. July, 2004.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=15451>

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.