



The first ever portrait of a
Jewish woman partisan

ליזא רופט!



Liza ruft!

A FILM BY

CHRISTIAN CARLSEN & PHILIPP JANSEN

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY **CHRISTIAN CARLSEN** EDITOR **PHILIPP JANSEN** CINEMATOGRAPHY **NOSSA SCHÄFER** **SUSANNE DZEIK**

SOUND **MARTIN NEVOIGT** COLORIST **ALEXANDER VEXLER** SOUND DESIGN AND MIXING **CLEMENS NÜRNBERGER** ORIGINAL MUSIC **JOY**

STUHR GRAPHICS **EVA GONÇALVES** PRODUCERS **CHRISTIAN CARLSEN** **PHILIPP JANSEN** **NOSSA SCHÄFER**

CO-PRODUCER **SIMON STEIN** EXECUTIVE PRODUCER **MONIKA RICHARZ** ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS **CHRISTOPH JETTER** **HANNELORE**

SKROBLIES PRODUCED WITH THE SUPPORT OF **ASTA UP** **STIFTUNGSFONDS NORA ASTORGA** **GEORGES UND JENNY BLOCH-STIFTUNG** **DR. NELLY HAHNE-STIFTUNG** **LINKSJUGEND [SOLID] SACHSEN** **FAMILIE GUTER-MOLVIDSON** **STIFTUNG** **BUBER-ROSENZWEIG-STIFTUNG** **STIFTUNG ERINNERUNG** **URSULA LACHNIT-FIXSON** **STIFTUNG** **STIFTUNG GUTES MIT SCHÖNEM VERBINDEN** **ROSA LUXEMBURG FOUNDATION** **SOLIDARITÄTSFONDS DER** **HANS-BÖCKLER STIFTUNG** **THE CONFERENCE ON JEWISH MATERIAL CLAIMS AGAINST GERMANY**

PRODUCED IN COLLABORATION WITH **FILMARCHÉ**

PRESS KIT

THE FILM

“Liza ruft!” is a moving and thought-provoking documentary film about the Holocaust, Jewish resistance and commemoration politics in Lithuania, and the first ever portrait of a Jewish woman partisan. Through interviews with Fania Brantsovskaya, her loved ones and former fellow partisans, “Liza ruft!” creates an intimate and vivid picture of an outstanding woman who continues to be both a victim of persecution as well as an agent of history with a mind of her own.

SYNOPSIS

Fania Yocheles-Brantsovskaya was about to begin her studies, when on June 22, 1941, the Germans invaded her hometown of Vilnius—known at that time as “Jerusalem of the North.”

Fania and her family were forced into the overcrowded ghetto, suffered slave labor and survived the “Aktionen” in which the Germans and their Lithuanian collaborators murdered a total of 70,000 Jews in nearby Ponary. Aware of the annihilation plans, Fania joined the Jewish resistance group *Fareynikte Partizaner Organizatsye* (FPO)—Yiddish for the United Partisan Organization. “Liza ruft!”—“Liza is calling!”—became the secret rallying cry of their struggle. One week before the Germans liquidated the ghetto, the FPO members escaped and joined the Soviet partisan movement in the nearby forest. Fania carried out sabotage missions and eventually participated in the Soviet army’s liberation of Vilnius. Although the Germans and their local collaborators had murdered her entire family, Fania stayed in her native country and contributed to its reconstruction under Soviet rule. After her husband’s death—she had fallen in love with Misha during the partisan struggle—and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Fania began to devote her life to the commemoration of the Holocaust and of Jewish resistance.

While this brought her recognition abroad, she became the target of revisionists and anti-Semites at home. A memoir written by Fania’s friend Rachel Margolis was exploited by the Lithuanian right-wing media. The memoir mentions that Fania took part in the battle of Kaniūkai in which 38 people were killed. The village had opposed the anti-Nazi partisans. A low point was reached in 2008, when the public prosecutor interrogated the then 86-year-old Fania as part of a war crimes investigation. Only after an international outcry were the investigations suspended. Soon after, Lithuanian politicians discovered that they could use Fania for their own purposes.

Ever since, Fania’s struggle for commemoration has turned into a complex balancing act. While her commitment to do memory work is threatened by depoliticization and alienation from her former fellow partisans, she remains in constant danger of renewed anti-Semitic attacks and a resumption of the legal proceedings.

FILM MAKERS' STATEMENT

Christian Carlsen (writer, director, producer) and Philipp Jansen (editor, producer) in a fictional interview.

How did you come to make a film on the Holocaust and commemoration politics in Lithuania?

Christian: I have been working for several years on the history of National Socialism and the Holocaust with a special focus on oral history. For some time, I have wanted to combine this with my aesthetic interest for the film medium. So, I proposed Philipp a collaboration. As I am especially interested in the aftermath of the Holocaust, in the entanglement of politics, memory and the individual survivor, it was clear that it was going to be a portrait. We just did not know on whom. When we met Fania at a talk in Berlin in 2011, we knew she was the one.

Why?

Christian: Fania is an incredibly vivid and charming person, though also very willful and sometimes stubborn. Her childhood friend Rachel Margolis described Fania's behavior in the ghetto underground as "zeyer frekh"—as very audacious and cheeky. You can still feel that. And that is part of what makes Fania so interesting. This characteristic certainly helped her to survive. The event where we met Fania differed positively from most talks organized by state-run institutions in Germany. In the end, the partisans' "anthem" was played back. When Fania got up, everyone followed her example. Fania, who is not very tall, stood in the middle of the other podium guests and joined in the singing—in Yiddish, of course. That was very authentic and touching. One line goes, "This song a people sang amid collapsing walls / with grenades in hands they heeded to the call."

How did your project develop?

Christian: We visited Lithuania for the first time in 2011. After a while, we realized that the issue was much bigger and complex than expected. By then, I had thought of Fania's Holocaust experience and her partisan struggle—which by themselves are very impressive. But only in Lithuania we learned that Fania also used to be a communist, that she was one of only a few hundred survivors who stayed in her native country, that she suffered from Soviet anti-Semitism, that she was included in a war crimes investigation in 2008 and that her commemorative work continues to make her a target of local revisionist and anti-Semites. As Fania ever since developed reticence to talk about certain political aspects, we decided to travel to Israel. We especially wanted to meet with Rachel Margolis, whose memoir unintentionally brought Fania into the focus of the Lithuanian prosecutors. Still today, Fania's relation to Rachel is ambivalent. The Lithuanian far right succeeded in silencing and dividing the survivors.

How was working with Fania?

Philipp: The filming was very intense. Fortunately, we quickly developed a good relation with Fania. She is very optimistic and open-hearted to those who listen. She has experienced incredibly much, is very communicative and is, despite her advanced age, extremely quick. That made filming very challenging. Often, Fania was way ahead of our film team. Among the partisans, her comrades once told her to carry the heavy machine gun because she marched too fast. This hasn't changed.

Christian: The communication was also not easy. We deliberately decided not to use a Yiddish-German interpretation, because we wanted to reflect our encounter in the film. In addition, Fania had her very own ideas about the film which partly result from her fear that a politically too explicit film could revive the anti-Semitic campaign against her. We also included these disputes in the film.

You do not have a Jewish family background, do you?

Christian: No. My maternal grandparents apparently had a reserved attitude towards National Socialism. At least that's how the family narrative goes. With regard to my paternal grandparents, I was also told that they had opposed Hitler. Later, it turned out that they indeed had been against Hitler, but espoused some other far-right movement of that time. Only recently I learned that a distant relative even served as an SS officer in France. I hope to explore this soon. With respect to our backgrounds, we tried to work with particular sensitivity. I am very thankful that the survivors opened themselves to us and I am proud that they offered us friendship.

And what about your family, Philipp?

Philipp: I also don't have a Jewish background. I spoke especially to my maternal grandmother about her memories of National Socialism. Until her death, she managed to completely repress her own involvement. She denied to have noticed the disappearance of her Jewish neighbors and never questioned the origin of the numerous furs and other "gifts" my grandfather, a soldier, brought back from occupied Norway.

Was that, then, the motive for the film?

Christian: Partly, yes. If you are interested in politics, you have to face the history of Nazism. But for us it has as well a strong personal dimension. I think it is important to support the survivors in any way possible and to continuously reflect our dealing with the past. We tried to give the Holocaust survivors their voices back—without fostering clichés, superficial morals and dubious conclusions, but rather to deconstruct them.

How was working in Lithuania?

Christian: We also tried to find an adequate tone with regard to Lithuania. The Nazi collaboration and local anti-Semitism are central aspects of our film. However, we did not want to come as saviors to a country that Nazi

Germany had intended to wipe off the map. Although the Lithuanian collaboration plays a big role in the survivors' memories, there is no doubt that there was still a significant Jewish community in Lithuania, if Nazi Germany hadn't initiated the "final solution" and attacked the Soviet Union in 1941. During the filming, we experienced different reactions. While some people criticized us for interfering in local affairs, we also met Lithuanians who greeted us in German, before they accused Fania in an anti-Semitic way. However, our film is not made for Lithuania and Germany only. It reflects the complexity of the Holocaust and addresses a global audience.

With 113 minutes, "Liza ruft!" is very long for a documentary film. Why?

Christian: We deliberately decided to take this time. Fania just turned 93 years old and she still continues her mission. She lived through nine decades and seven different political systems. Periods of persecution were always followed by moments of liberation. This allowed us to explore the impact of politics, and how individuals react to it. However, "Liza ruft!" is not just a portrait Fania Brantsovskaya or a chronicle of the "Age of Extremes", but a proof that history is not something over and done with, but a continuum that includes current political conflicts and analysis. We actually have enough footage for another two movies.

Philipp: We decided not to use comments or historical footage. Anyone who sees the film has to get engaged. But if you do, you get more out of it than from many other films. The rhythm is quite fast, and due to its protagonist, there are also very entertaining moments. Despite all, Fania stayed a very humorous person.

How did the funding go?

Philipp: Not very well. In Germany, film funding is hardly accessible for independent filmmakers. With regard to our interview partners, we were under a lot of time pressure, still we had to go the hard way and seek funding with cultural and political foundations. The result was disappointing. We felt more than once that our film's issues were no longer considered important. Politically, the subject was probably also considered too delicate. If you criticize the equation of Nazi and Soviet crimes, you are likely to be accused of defending Soviet communism. Thanks to some small foundations and a grant from the Claims Conference, we were able to finish the filming and parts of the post-production. We still had to cover a big part ourselves. Finally, a crowd-funding campaign helped us to take the last hurdles. Allow me to use the occasion to thank everyone who supported us.

What are your plans regarding the film?

Philipp: Starting this autumn, we will submit the film to festivals. We hope to find a TV channel and a distributor. There are numerous venues that requested to show the film. We will try to accompany as many screenings as possible.

Do you have any new projects in mind?

Christian: Not specifically, but we would like to make another film on the Holocaust. Possibly another survivor portrait or a more essayistic film. In any case, the focus will be on the aftermath of the Holocaust, on the triad of the survivors' primary experiences, memory and the politics of commemoration. There is still much to do.

QUOTES FROM THE FILM

"In Yiddish we say, 'Vi di Fis trogn mir.' This means, as long as I can walk, I consider it my duty to bear witness. This must never happen again. Because there are people who say there was no Holocaust. In Lithuania, it is said there were two Holocausts. That's also a problem. It's all very difficult. But I think what I can do, I do."

—Fania Yocheles-Brantsovskaya, former Jewish partisan

"Arad, Margolis, Brantsovskaya, Ginaite—four people. The press wrote, 'You have to compensate the Lithuanian people for what you did to them! You killed the Lithuanian people!' It is terrible. It is anti-Semitic. I don't have the words to express my feelings towards this whole story. I think that Fania has to have the same feeling as I have. Maybe worse, because she was in Lithuania, and I wasn't."

—Sara Ginaite-Rubinson, former Jewish partisan

"Just as the 'Genocide Museum' makes heroes out of the killers, the prosecutors were trying to make killers out of the heroes—that tiny number of Jews who escaped the ghetto and survived by joining the resistance."

—Dovid Katz Yiddish scholar and editor of *defendinghistory.com*

"There were thousands of Lithuanians killed or deported to the Soviet Union—all fully true. But you cannot equate it. It was not a Soviet policy to exterminate the Lithuanian people."

—Yitzhak Arad, former Jewish partisan and director of *Yad Vashem*

FILMMAKER BIOS

Christian Carlsen (writer, director and producer)

Christian Carlsen works as a freelancing scholar and writer. His ongoing research project, a cooperation with Gideon Greif (Israel), explores the reality and image of the Jewish "Sonderkommando" of the Auschwitz death camp. "Liza ruft!" is his first film.

Philipp Jansen (editor and producer)

Philipp Jansen took classes in philosophy, politics, and filmmaking. Her early works include the award-winning short film "Survive Berlin" (2005). Since 2008, she works as freelance editor. Most recently, she edited a portrait of the Holocaust survivor Walter Spier.

Nossa Schäfer (cinematographer and producer)

Nossa Schäfer graduated in Cultural and Gender Studies. In 2008, she began to study film directing at FilmArche, a self organized film school in Berlin. Her works include several short films.

Susanne Dzeik (cinematographer)

Susanne Dzeik works as an independent film maker and director of photography. Her work includes the prizewinning documentaries "Von Mauern und Favelas" (2005) and "Nach dem Brand" (2012).

ABOUT KASSIBER FILMS

Kassiber Films is an independent production company founded by Christian Carlsen and Philipp Jansen. The German word "Kassiber" is derived from Yiddish "kessaw" ("something written") and signifies a secret message sent by prisoners.

CREDITS

Written and directed by CHRISTIAN CARLSEN

Editor PHILIPP JANSEN

Cinematography NOSSA SCHÄFER, SUSANNE DZEIK

Assistant camera PHILIPP JANSEN

Color grading ALEXANDER VEXLER

Sound design and mixing CLEMENS NÜRNBERGER

Original music JOY STUHR

Production KASSIBER FILMS

Producer CHRISTIAN CARLSEN, PHILIPP JANSEN, NOSSA SCHÄFER

Co-Producer SIMON STEIN

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Genre DOCUMENTARY FILM

Country and year of production GERMANY 2015

Running time 113 MINUTES

Format 16:9 FULL HD

Filming locations LITHUANIA, ISRAEL, CANADA, GERMANY



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Text by Christian Carlsen