

Anna Grusková

The Woman Rabbi (docudrama)

2nd Part of the radio version

Translated by Eva Riečanská

- Sound** **a walker, the same one as at the beginning of the first part, echoes can be heard in an evening street somewhere near the Danube river – in the background**
- Grusková Each time I'm sad I go for a walk to the Danube. It belongs to Bratislava, but it keeps escaping it. Dunaj, Donau, Duna, as you like it. Perhaps the whole city has floated away with the river. What has remained are contours, façades, banes, but we have thrown away, drowned, flushed away all that created the spirit of the place. Therefore, the legacy of the Jewish activist Gisi Fleischmann comes back to us with such difficulty. It's coming upwards from the Black Sea; it must overcome a strong counter flow.
- Gisi *Last night I dreamed about an iron man. I dreamed he lived in Bratislava. He was strong, handsome, the kind of a man every woman would want...*
- Captions** ***The Slovak Radio presents the triptych "The Woman Rabbi" from the cycle "Destinies in Slovakia" written by Anna Grusková; part two – "I can never think about personal matters."***
- Gisi *And then the dream continued. The iron man was on front of our house, and I know that he could see me just as I could see him. For a while, he stood still, then he pressed down the door handle...and then I woke up.*
- Varon *Bravo, Gisi. You should have become an actress. Theater is an amazing thing. You are watching, and you suddenly fancy the person on the stage. You don't have to say anything, do anything, there's something pure in it, it's beyond yourself, it simply came your way. You can't fake that, you physically sense*

it...and then, when you really feel it strongly, believe it...then the other feels it too.

Gisi *We didn't live to see the Messiah, so we set out for the journey to the Promised Land on our own!*

Sound ***the Zionist anthem, only as a signal, as an unexplained torso***

Gisi *No miracle happened...*

Varon *...We didn't find any oil...*

Gisi *...and we were striking the rock until blood poured out...*

Varon *...and there was light.*

Sound ***the Zionist music changes into dance music***

Gisi *(laughing)* *Awful music, can you hear! Let's not go inside! Please!*

Varon *Darf ich bitten?*

Gisi *When you like theater so much, wouldn't you want to come to be our director?*

Varon *You know I've never been to Bratislava?*

Gisi *(She stops – here in the rhythm of the conversation). This is typical for you Viennese. You don't care about our nice little town on the conflux of the Danube with wine...When you come I'll show you Zuckermandel, the house of that crazy sculptor Messerschmidt, you must have seen his loony busts in the Belvedere...they say from that house he was shooting at children because they were staring inside his studio...I'll show you the house where Hummel was born, we'll have coffee in café Luxor and then we'll got to a wine cellar...we can also go to the theater... to see the Jewish National Theater from Warsaw...*

Varon *(laughing) but that is entartete Kunst! Degenerated art...*

Gisi *What I like the best are markets with fruits and vegetables, especially in the fall. Women from Záhorie, Dolniaky and Prievoz come and I like to stroll, savoring the lookt of yellow apples, red tomatoes, green bell peppers, orange carrots...no French perfume can measure up to the aroma of Sauerkraut! *(laughing)**

Varon *Gisi, dear Gisi, take me to your small colorful town, we'll live together in an old houseboat on the Danube and when the time comes we will sail on it to Palestine...can you swim, Gisi?*

Gisi *But what about my husband?*

Varon *You'll have two! Women too can have more men, why should it only be the other way round!*

Gisi *All right, so tomorrow at the congress I'll say that in Herzl's posthumous works we found a thus far unknown text promoting polyandry as one of the cornerstones of Zionism! I doubt they've studied every letter of his works. They will certainly fall for this. And then you'll publish it in the newspaper and make it a world sensation!*

(both laughing)

Gisi *Thank you, Varon.*

Varon *For what?*

Gisi *Lately I have just been a chairperson, vice chairperson, activist, Hausfrau...well, that last one the least of these all...but I had to come here to Zurich to remember that I'm also a woman.*

Sound ***dance music grows louder in a dance swirl and then fades away***

Grusková Benno Weiser Varon was a young, smart Austrian journalist, writer and Zionist, and no wonder that the forty-five-year-old important representative of this movement Gisi Fleischmann fancied him when they met during the Zionist congress in Switzerland in 1937. He also came to Bratislava – purportedly he directed a Hanukah play there. On that occasion he also met Gisi's husband Josef and their daughters Juci and Lici. One year later he left Vienna and emigrated to Ecuador. From there he wrote he could get immigration visas for the whole Fleischmann family. Gisi received many of such offers, but accepted none. She was the one who helped others to emigrate. Nevertheless, she sent her daughters to Palestine already at the beginning of the war...

Sound **Break**

Lici I'm not going without you.

Gisi Your sister Juci will take care of you.

Lici How will she take care of me! How many months she hasn't sent a single line.

Gisi But you know Juci, you know what she's like, she's chasing "chattanim"¹ somewhere there! (break) You must leave. Lici. You know that I wish I could go with you. But who would take care of your ill father, of my mother? Would you be able to abandon me when I'm old and sick? Don't worry, my dear, we will manage. We will be reasonable, Lici. The two of us are big, beautiful and wise women and true friends and we'll find a common way and divide tasks. Mom will get you the visa, and you'll leave, meet with Juci, together prepare everything there and as soon as your father and grandma get better, we'll come to join you. You know I'm strong and I'll succeed...

Lici They say that everywhere you come you become a president.

It's a pity that Slovaks already have a president, things would look differently...! When you're so powerful, let me stay with you, father needs me in the store and I can also help you in the office.

Sound music, an oriental motif

Gisi No, do you remember how I told you that god is with us like a blossom on a tree that only blossoms at night?

Lici He's here, but we can't see him. We can't even see the tree on which it blossoms.

Gisi ...and when you have a sensitive nose and follow it...

Lici ...you will surely come to the tree and to that blossom!

Gisi Exactly, even in the darkest darkness. It is still light, Lici, you'll see the way.

Lici Mom, you're not sending me away because you fell in love with that young Viennese, who came here to direct that Hanukah play...?

Gisi (says nothing)

Lici Why you're not saying anything, mom? Are you angry with me?

Gisi I already forgot about him, my dear. Now I have other wooers.

Sound ***Musical break***

Lici My mother thought they would take care of me in Palestine because she took care of Jews in Europe. But that wasn't the case. At the headquarters of the Women's International Zionist Organization they told me that she just makes herself important.

I followed the scent of god's tree, but either it had not been in blossom yet or it was too late. For nine months I was lying with no help, neglected, seriously ill, I didn't want to write to my mother, I knew that the work she was doing was hard. I wasn't able to lie, so I didn't write anything. She found out from other people when she for a short while got out from the prison. Then they arrested her for another four months...

Grusková Nowadays, all Gisi's relatives are in Israel. In a nice, airy and clean house in Tel Aviv lives Gisi's niece Sonia Bachner, an elegant woman with a luminous face. Her memories about Gisi are still very alive:

Sound ***recording Disc 1; Bachnerová 1,00'*** *She had black eyes and black hair, she was always well groomed, tip top, as they say, a good-looking woman. She wasn't very tall, but she wasn't short either, she was of a medium size, neither fat nor skinny. We*

were very, very close...they threw us out from those good apartments and put us...we had an apartment in the Vydricka neighborhood, Vydricka was a street for prostitutes. What was interesting was that the only apartment in Vydricka with a bathroom was ours.

Gisi world come to visit us once a week to take a bath...but still she was there quite often...she only lived for WIZO, she wanted to take care of others...I know that my deceased father helped her also financially, as she didn't have any special income...

Grusková Sonia Bachnerová also remembers Gisi's husband Josef, who was her mother's brother.

Sound ***recording Bachnerová 1; 7'55*** *He was something wholly different, I don't think he supported her...he had something to do with the import of tea, coffee, spices and such things. In terms of*

business, he wasn't very successful...he was a husband of Gisi Fleischmann. He was a pleasant person and all that, but now I can imagine it wasn't very easy for him, I guess...

Grusková

...and she knew well Gisi's daughters Juci and Lici...

Sound

recording Bachnerová 1; 3'52 *Those girls were unlucky. One got married; he was a nice man but fell ill with tuberculosis, so she was a widow and never remarried. Juci had been married once than she divorced and at the end she had one friend but he also died...they were alone, didn't have anybody.*

Sound

steps on a floor

Grusková

Imagine we are on Klariská street in the humble apartment of Gisi Fleischmann where she lived with her mother Jetty. Jetty is peeling potatoes. Gisi is sitting with her legs on a table. She gets up and turns on a gramophone. We can here the Lohengrin overture. She sits down again.

Sound

Lohengrin – the overture as the background for the whole scene

Gisi

Under normal circumstances I would have never ever met them, but now when sixty thousands of our and hundreds and thousands of other "chaverim" have been deported behind the river Bug, and we exactly know what's happening to them, we can't stop. We have three factual reports that agree in crucial things and also correspond with what prisoners say. Sobibor, Treblinka, Belzec and Auschwitz are death camps. Mother, you're wise, you support me and I'm happy I can tell you everything, everything, everything although doing so I'm hurting you.

Jetty I understand, Gisi, that you can only use certain people for certain types of work. Those smugglers of people, secrete messengers and forgers of documents must be very courageous. But you can't dance with one face on two weddings! These people have no inhibitions when it comes to in other matters. And I don't like you're involved with them.

Gisi I don't like it either, believe me. And you know what the worst thing is? That when with help of these people, with many sacrifices and for large amounts, we get ours across the border, we take them away from tax officers, counterespionage or other "mishtaroth", some even scold you that they didn't get kosher food. Or they could not properly observe the Shabbat. Do you understand that? (both are laughing).

Jetty boy When they scold you next time tell them about one orphan, a who didn't know how to pray and so each day instead of saying the caddish for his father he would jump across a ditch. When you can't pray jump across a ditch. That's enough. God wants your heart, Gisi.

Gisi Don't worry, mother. I'll manage. My lips are close to god's ears. And not just that, with Weissmandel we came up with a European plan, do you understand, mother? All Jewish headquarters in Europe rescue only their own people, but we are thinking also about others. Together we can defend ourselves more effectively. We will stop the deportations. Yes, mother, it will be us who will stop the deportations! A to do that we need a partner, a very strong partner.

Jetty Doctor Vašek?

Gisi The Jewish king? Always drunk, money hungry, stupid Vašek from the Ministry of Interior? We bribed him a long time ago. The Europa-plan is a task for another "rashe". We'll bribe Willy.

Jetty Who's Willy?

Gisi The German advisor for the Jewish question in Slovakia, SS-Hauptsturmführer Dieter Wisliceny.

Jetty Your hands are shaking.

Gisi (fiercely) That's just excitement before the upcoming battle.

Jetty Gisi Genendel! Du wirst total meschüge! Do you realize what you're getting into? Life is not an adventure novel!

Gisi I'm not afraid of them! I can do it! I can do anything! If only you knew how much we see through them! All of them are

corruptible, all, all! In these days people are guided by two emotions: greed and fear! And we must take advantage of that!

Jetty *Come to your senses! Stop! Stop! Who goes to bed with dogs gets up with flees!*

Gisi *(between sobs) Mother...I...cannot...stop.*

Jetty *This is all our fault. We should have sent you to college just like your brothers. To marry and give birth to children is not enough for you...*

Gisi *Mother, you can be proud of me. Mother, if only you knew how much money I've raised...We need awfully much for our labor camps, as it is still better when people stay in camps in Slovakia, then if they go to Zewiah.*

Jetty *Who will save you when we will pass away? Your husband died, you didn't take care of him, always having been in those societies of yours, you sent your children away to get them out of your way...*

Gisi *Mother, don't...what I'm doing is very demanding, so that I can't think of personal matters.*

Jetty *And that precisely what's wrong. Even High Priest prays first for himself. Why don't you leave it to men?*

Gisi *They elected me the head of the Working Group!*

Jetty *They did, but only after they had seen that even rabbis listen to you! Sometimes I think that you're helping because you want have the upper hand. You want to be stronger, you want to be the boss and be superior to men!*

Gisi *But, mother!...*

Jetty *You got accustomed to wielding power...You help others, but you got addicted to it. You didn't want to stay in Paris, in London, you didn't want to move to Ecuador when Varon called you and your family, you won't go to Palestine to your daughters! Not because of me, or my illness, but because abroad you'd be nobody, a mere newcomer! Here you are a big boss, the head of an illegal group! You know what your privilege is? You're the first one – to get shot!*

Gisi You're mean, mother, if I didn't have an exception we would have been eating only these potato skins. Would you want that?

Jetty One should only do in life as much as she can handle. First you should take care of your own things, then you can care about others. Why do you think you must take care of the whole community, even more than that – all Jews in the world? Are you a rabbi? There are things between heaven and earth that should stay unknown to us. When we meet evil that is stronger than us, there's no use to fight it as it will destroy us. One should yield, hide, wait until it gets away. That's not cowardice, that's the only reasonable solution. I wouldn't go dancing with the devil even if he was the most handsome and seductive in the whole world because I'm not stupid: I know that evil is amusing, tempting, evil has golden buttons, beautiful lips and thick back curly hair. It's not gray like my apron and my everyday getting up into darkness, pulling myself together, daily trials and tribulations, taking out garbage, doing the dishes, annoying relatives... Evil knows exactly what to tell you, where to grab you, how to look at you. – *Gisi*, you already got wrinkles!

Gisi Mother! (laughing) Mother! You haven't noticed? For a long time I'm not a little girl!

Grusková Gisi's mother Jetty lived longer than her daughter, although she was seriously ill. Sonia Bachnerová recollects:

Sound **recording Bachnerová 1; 5'53** After the war when I visited her she was in a very bad shape, and she was a wise woman, she asked: Where is my Gisi? And I told her, look, these days people are coming back from all kinds of places, she'll return, you'll see, she'll return...we knew Gisi had died, but that's what we told her and she replied: My Gisi, if she was alive she would have written to me already...I will never forget those words.

Music **Lohengrin or the Zionist anthem**

Grusková In a small exhibit about Slovakia in the Holocaust memorial Yad Vashem in Jerusalem we can also find a caricature of Gisi Fleischmann. In the picture by Ernest Auerbach we can see Gisi

with an oversized head depicted as Joan of Arc on a horseback. In front of dominant Gisi dressed in an armor shuffle smaller figures of men from the Working Group – all her co-workers, including two rabbis joined in some kind of a joyful dance. The humorous spirit of the picture contrasts with the plaque containing biographic data, where we also find an excerpt from a letter that Gisi wrote to her daughter in Israel:

Gisi *If I manage to go through this tough period I believe I will be able to say that my life has not been useless. The destiny of the Israeli folk is worth all personal suffering.*

Sound ***the Zionist anthem or some waltz with clapping hands***

Gisi *I was just looking for some address, I was kneeling when the doorbell rang, I got up and went to the door. I left everything as it was – things taken out of drawers, papers lying all around also on the floor, a pile of envelopes, boxes with undelivered mail that moths liked so much...would you believe that moths eat also paper? I noticed they don't fly all the time, they have periods when they are not around and then they suddenly debouch....then I start to tidy up, the rhythm of my cleaning is determined by moths, also at home in the larder, in closets...once a small spider landed on my dress, one of those that fly in the air during the Indian summer and bring luck, and I killed him in panic. I thought it was a moth. God first brings one to this world just to start working on one's demise – it begins with childhood diseases, continues with adolescent fanfaronade, competition, menopause, and so it goes until the very end. We are in a constant battle with god who decided to destroy us, and in the end he does it...*

Sound ***airplanes, airport – a trip to Israel***

Grusková Since Gisi's daughters Juci and Lici died childless, the son of her brother David – Avri Fischer, carries on the family tradition. Avri or Abraham Fischer lives with his wife Yardena in kibbutz Kfar Masaryk. He came to Israel in 1949. I will never forget the dignity of this still beautiful couple, their humble and deedful way of life.

Sound **recording Avri Fischer photographs; 16'50** As I am the only one who survived from the whole family, the generation of my parents and their brothers and sisters, I feel some kind of responsibility to carry on their name for the future. I hope that as we have a son and a daughter and six grandchildren we could follow in the tradition or in what is called the heritage of our family. I do hope that the future will be not only bright and good, but that it also will be some kind of compensation for everything that our family lost in the past generations or in the generation parallel to mine – like Juci and Lici, and I hope that also our children and grandchildren too will find happiness in their lives. I hope as well that they will remember not only us, but also their grandparents and other relatives whom they have heard about, more or less, and that this will have the kind of dimension important in each family.

Sound **steps of young people, joyful, carefree, they can fade into contemporary dance music (I have a nice recording from one modern restaurant in Tel Aviv, it was filled with young people)**

Sound **the sound fades into the humming of the Danube from the beginning of this part – may be?**

Credits You were listening to the second part of the triptych “The
Woman Rabbi” from the cycle “Destinies in Slovakia” written by
Anna Grusková. Performed by Emília Vášáryová, Szidi Tóbiás, Róbert
Roth, Rebeka Poláková, Viera Topinková. Dramaturge Viki
Janoušková, Advisor PhDr. Katarína Hradská, Music
Cooperation Lýdia Vojtková, Sound Peter Daniška, Directed by
Róbert Horňák. Produced by the Center for Literature and
Drama of the Slovak Radio in cooperation with the Ezra
Foundation in 2008.