



FRÄULEIN  
Rabbiner Jonas

*The Story of the First Woman Rabbi*

ELISA KLAPHECK

# FRÄULEIN RABBINER JONAS

---

*The Story of the First Woman Rabbi*

Elisa Klapheck

o

*Translated from the German by*  
Toby Axelrod

An Arthur Kurzweil Book



**JOSSEY-BASS**

A Wiley Imprint

[www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com)

Copyright © 2004 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. All rights reserved.

Published by Jossey-Bass

A Wiley Imprint

989 Market Street, San Francisco, CA 94103-1741 www.josseybass.com

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise, except as permitted under Section 107 or 108 of the 1976 United States Copyright Act, without either the prior written permission of the Publisher, or authorization through payment of the appropriate per-copy fee to the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc., 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, 978-750-8400, fax 978-646-8600, or on the web at [www.copyright.com](http://www.copyright.com). Requests to the Publisher for permission should be addressed to the Permissions Department, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 111 River Street, Hoboken, NJ 07030, 201-748-6011, fax 201-748-6008, e-mail: [permcoordinator@wiley.com](mailto:permcoordinator@wiley.com).

This book is translated from the original German book *Fräulein Rabbiner Jonas* under the *Judische Memoiren* series published by Hentrich & Hentrich.

Photograph on page 15 by Silke Helmerdig.

Reproduction on page 57 is a gift of Jonas's former pupil Ilse Ehrlich-Kochanczyk to the author.

Reproduction on page 81, Památník Terezín © Zuzana Dvorská.

Reproductions on pages 82–85 are used by permission of Yad Vashem Archives.

All other photographs and reproductions are courtesy Stiftung Neue Synagoge Berlin-Centrum Judaicum (CJA).

Jossey-Bass books and products are available through most bookstores. To contact Jossey-Bass directly call our Customer Care Department within the U.S. at 800-956-7739, outside the U.S. at 317-572-3986, or fax 317-572-4002.

Jossey-Bass also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jonas, Regina, 1902–1944. [Fräulein Rabbiner Jonas. English]

Fräulein Rabbiner Jonas: the story of the first woman rabbi

/ Elisa Klapheck; translated from the German by Toby Axelrod.

p. cm. "An Arthur Kurzweil book."

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7879-6987-7

1. Rabbis—Office. 2. Women rabbis. 3. Jonas, Regina,

1902–1944. 4. Women rabbis—Germany—Biography. 5.

Jews—Germany—Berlin—Biography. 6. Judaism—Germany—

Berlin—History—20th century. I. Klapheck, Elisa. II. Title.

BM652.J6613 2004

296'.092—dc22

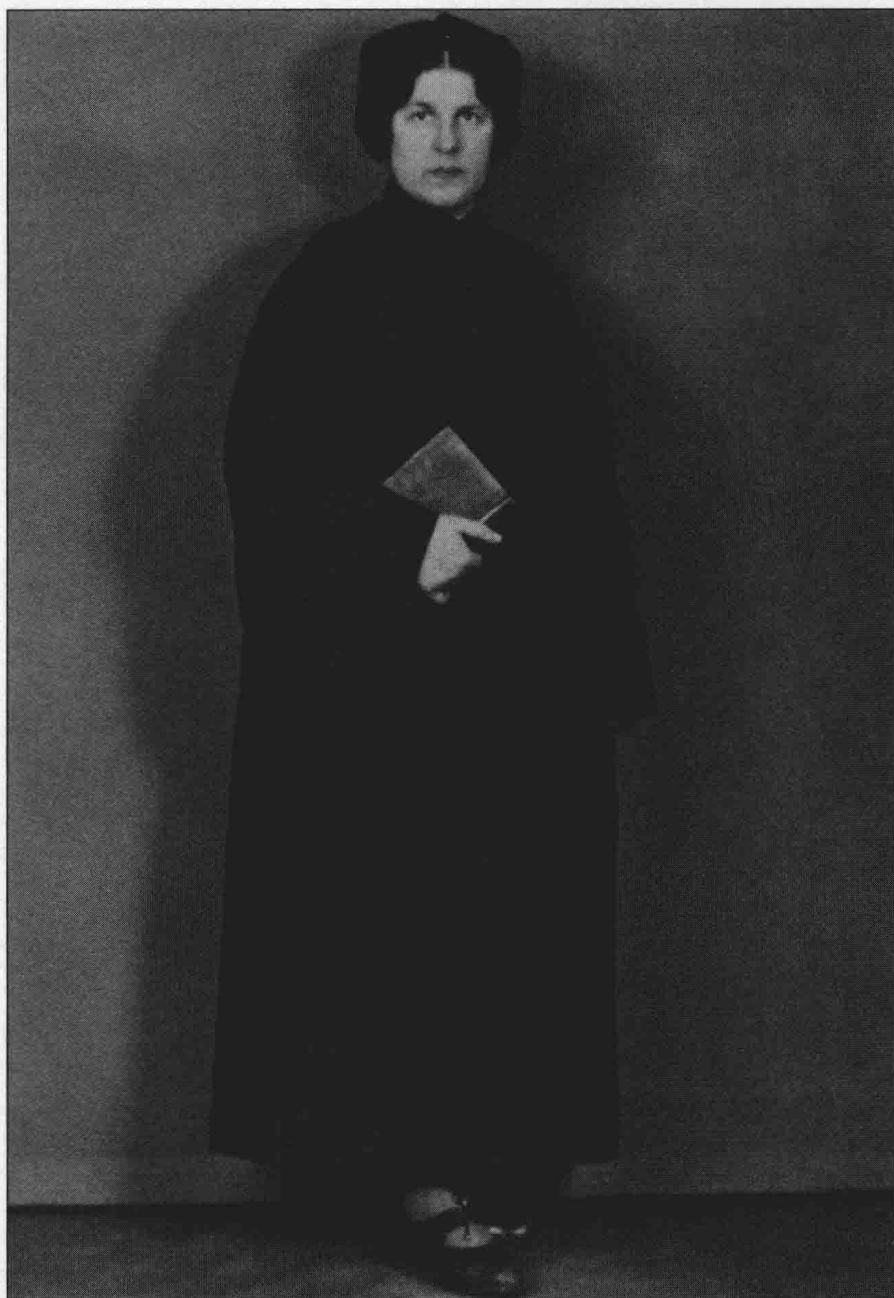
2004014533

Printed in the United States of America

FIRST EDITION

HB Printing

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



---

**Photo of Rabbi Regina Jonas, probably taken after 1939**

*This photograph of Regina Jonas was one of only two she placed with her documents. Jonas's rubber stamp on the back of the image includes the additional name Sara, which the Nazis forced all Jewish women to use beginning on January 1, 1939:*

*"Rabbiner [rabbi] Regina Sara Jonas."*

*Reproduction: Margit Billeb*

## FOREWORD

IT WAS IN THE EARLY 1960s, during my bar mitzvah lessons with Rabbi Martin Riesenburger in a room of the administration building of the Weissensee Jewish Cemetery in Berlin, that I asked my teacher about one Rabbinerin Jonas,<sup>1</sup> who supposedly had lived in our city. Somehow, the name must have come up in a conversation at home.

I clearly remember Riesenburger's answer: "You wouldn't understand. I will tell you later, when you are older." That is the kind of answer that every child loves, and I am still annoyed with myself that I did not persist with my questions. Riesenburger might well have been able to share many details from his close knowledge of the Berlin Jewish Community of the 1930s and 1940s.

Martin Riesenburger died on April 14, 1965. In his memoirs, *Das Licht verlöschte nicht* [The Light Did Not Fade] (recently rereleased),<sup>2</sup> the name of Jonas is not mentioned.

Nearly thirty years passed before I became aware that a collection of Regina Jonas's papers had survived, and that it existed within the holdings of the Gesamtarchiv der deutschen Juden [Central Archive of German Jewry], which in 1958 was moved to the German Central Archive in Potsdam (later called the State Archive of the German Democratic Republic) and in the spring of 1996 was delivered by the Federal Archive of Germany to the Centrum Judaicum.<sup>3</sup> Of course, the Jonas estate was not originally part of the Gesamtarchiv, but her documents were in that vicinity because, in all likelihood, a few days before her deportation to Theresienstadt on November 6, 1942, Jonas either had given her most important papers to the remaining Jewish communal administration for safekeeping, at Oranienburger Strasse in Berlin Mitte, or had given them to a trusted contact who then brought the material there.

Shortly before her deportation, Jonas had agonized over what to do with the papers, and she discussed it in her correspondence with her friend Rabbi Dr. Joseph Norden of Hamburg,<sup>4</sup> as Elisa Klapheck tells us in her biography of Jonas. "I have not yet heard that one cannot take papers along," Norden wrote in a letter, of which only a fragment remains. "Just



in case, I advise you to . . . them somewhere.” One automatically wants to fill in the missing word to read “deposit them somewhere.”

Of the correspondence between Rabbi Jonas and Rabbi Norden, only his letters remain, some of them torn fragments; Regina Jonas’s letters to Joseph Norden apparently have not survived. The epistolary pair were, as Elisa Klapheck describes in depth, very close friends; Norden’s letters provide ample and eloquent evidence. Jonas’s papers also contain a photograph, which—as I was able to determine—was taken in 1939 of Rabbi Joseph Norden and Rabbi Joseph Zwi Carlebach.<sup>5</sup>

Regina Jonas likely entertained the hope that she eventually would be able to reclaim her documents. But this was not to be: from Theresienstadt, Rabbi Jonas was deported to Auschwitz on October 12, 1944, and murdered there.



We will not cover all the details of Regina Jonas’s biography here. There are several new undertakings, and in particular the work of Elisa Klapheck in this volume, that serve this purpose.<sup>6</sup>

The life and work of Regina Jonas remain in the memory of several people who came into contact with her. As is often the case, eyewitnesses contradict each other. Günther Ruschin describes her as a “nice and humorous woman with large, dark eyes”;<sup>7</sup> my mother, Marie Simon (née Jalowicz), recalled the “odd manner” of Jonas the “martyr,” and then continued, “Everyone in the Old Synagogue knew she was a rabbi, and frequently members of the board referred to her as *Fräulein* Rabbiner Jonas.”<sup>8</sup> The word *Fräulein* [a diminutive] was expressed in an unpleasant, I would almost say a bit snide manner, but one must keep sight of the historical context: today it is common to refer to women—even unmarried women—as ‘Frau’ [Mrs.]. The argument was that all men are addressed as ‘Herr’—unmarried men are not called ‘Herrchen’ or ‘Herrlein’ [diminutive forms]. So why ‘Fräulein’? In those days, it was fully common to address or refer to single women, even if they had earned a doctoral degree, as ‘Fräulein Doktor.’ As everyone knows, the tone makes the music. It was all about the way this word *Fräulein* was expressed—not always but sometimes in a somewhat mocking way.”

As a very young woman, Marie Jalowicz had the impression “that Regina Jonas was fairly unsure of herself.” Her situation was certainly very difficult for, from the Orthodox standpoint, though Jonas was ordained, as a woman she could perform no cultic functions. “That is like

a contradiction in terms, but this contradiction could be mediated in that she made her contribution as a teacher of religion.”<sup>9</sup>

Clearly 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. As is often the case, the truth lies somewhere between the two. Jonas was, as her contemporary James Yaakov Rosenthal once said in reference to the Reform movement, a “fascinating phenomenon on the colorful palette of Berlin Jewry.”<sup>10</sup>

The fortunate coincidence through which Jonas’s documents were preserved has allowed the first serious examination of the life of the first woman ordained as a rabbi. She studied from 1924 to 1930 at Berlin’s Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums [Academy for the Science of Judaism]. It is interesting to note that, as far as we know, Regina Jonas pursued no other university education, in contrast to the common practice of rabbinical students in Germany, as required by Jewish educational authorities.

The centerpiece of Jonas’s documents is the required halachic dissertation that she delivered in the summer of 1930 to Eduard Baneth of the Academy for the Science of Judaism, and which received a grade of “good.” Maren Krüger wrote that Baneth “probably intended to grant her an ordination after an oral exam, but his death in 1930 thwarted this plan.”<sup>11</sup> But there is no proof for Krüger’s assertion! Only later did Jonas receive her ordination—on December 27, 1935. The question of whether an ordination would have taken place if the situation for Jews in Germany had not worsened after 1933 cannot be answered, but must be asked.

The manuscript of Jonas’s halachic exam, “Can Women Serve as Rabbis?,” which Elisa Klapheck correctly calls a “treatise,” seems in some sense to be an unfinished work. It appears clear to me that this is not the paper she handed in for her degree; it is also not a copy of that paper. It is likely that the many corrections on the manuscript were made by other people and then partly included in a final version. But it is also not out of the question that the many handwritten comments, corrections, and additions that undoubtedly are in Jonas’s own hand were added much later and for other purposes.

One must agree with Elisa Klapheck when she says in her Preliminary Notes, “Perhaps the work is only a draft that she presented to her acquaintances for their critical review, so she could rework it once again.”

Though this might not have been the final version, nevertheless the editor and publisher have decided to publish Jonas’s text with comments,

edited according to the highest standard. Elisa Klapheck verified the relevant quotes and explanations and placed them in a greater context, as far as it was possible for her to do so. As publishers of the first edition, we felt it would be acceptable if some citations were difficult to verify due to inexact titles and editions.

Regina Jonas, who was not a feminist by today's standards, certainly is one of those characters in Berlin Jewish history who are of great interest to Jews around the world today. A manuscript and a collection of papers such as this, housed in the Stiftung Neue Synagoge Berlin—Centrum Judaicum, must not remain hidden and unexamined. It is one of our most important tasks to bring such material to the light of day. For doing just that, Elisa Klapheck—a competent member of the Jewish Community to which Regina Jonas also belonged and in which she was a blessing—deserves our gratitude.

Hermann Simon, Director  
Stiftung Neue Synagoge Berlin—Centrum Judaicum

## NOTES

1. Editor's note: *rabbinerin* is the female form of the title "rabbi" in German. There is no direct translation into English.
2. Martin Riesenburger, *Das Licht verlöschte nicht: Erinnerungen an ein Berliner Rabbinerleben* [The Light Did Not Fade: In Remembrance of the Life of a Berlin Rabbi], ed. Andreas Nachama and Hermann Simon, *Jüdische Memoiren*, Band 5 (Teetz: Hentrich & Hentrich, 2003).
3. On the Gesamtarchiv, see Barbara Welker, "Das Gesamtarchiv der deutschen Juden" [The Central Archive of German Jewry] in *Tuet auf die Pforten*, the book accompanying the exhibit by the Stiftung Neue Synagoge Berlin—Centrum Judaicum (Berlin: Hermann Simon and Jochen Boberg, 1995), 227 ff.
4. Born June 17, 1870, in Hamburg; deported to Theresienstadt on July 15, 1942; died there on February 7, 1943.
5. My thanks go to Dr. Ina Lorenz of the Institute for the History of German Jews, in Hamburg, for her collegial help in confirming the identities of those in the photo.
6. To mention two, Katharina von Kellenbach, "Jonas, Regina," in *Jüdische Frauen im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert, Lexikon zu Leben und Werk* [Jewish Women in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: An Encyclopedia of



Lives and Work], ed. Jutta Dick and Marina Sassenberg (Reinbeck bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1993); and Maren Krüger, "Regina Jonas. Die erste Rabbinerin in Deutschland 1935–1942" [Regina Jonas: The First Female Rabbi in Germany 1935–1942], in *Tuet auf die Pforten*, 146 ff.

7. Hermann Simon's conversation with Günther Ruschin, May 20, 1999.
8. Editor's note: *rabbiner* is the male form of the title "rabbi" in German.
9. Hermann Simon's interview with Marie Simon (née Jalowicz; b. April 4, 1922, d. September 16, 1998), on July 30, 1998; see details in "The Story of Regina Jonas" in this book.
10. See James Yaakov Rosenthal, "Jüdische Reformgemeinde zu Berlin" [Berlin's Jewish Reform Community], in *Die Berliner Privatsynagogen und ihre Rabbiner 1671–1971* [Berlin's Private Synagogues and Their Rabbis 1671–1971], ed. Max M. Sinasohn (Jerusalem, 1971), 39.
11. Maren Krüger, "Regina Jonas," 146.

*In memory of my mother,  
Lilo Klapheck, née Lang,  
who collected Rabbinic literature  
and left it to me*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NATIONAL SOCIALISM led to the murder of millions, but it could not destroy their spirit. More than half a century after Regina Jonas's death in Auschwitz, she taught and guided me—with her work “Can Women Serve as Rabbis?”—through the ages of rabbinical writings. This fascinating and intensive learning experience, when I worked on the German edition of this book in 1998, would not have been possible without Dr. Hermann Simon, director of the Stiftung Neue Synagoge Berlin—Centrum Judaicum, who not only provided access to Regina Jonas's archival material but also stood by me during my research and even involved his own family in the work. I was particularly grateful for the interview he conducted with his mother, Prof. Dr. Marie Simon (née Jalowicz), who shortly before her death recounted her impressions of Regina Jonas in the Alte Synagoge [Old Synagogue] on Heidereutergasse. I am also indebted to his father, Prof. Dr. Heinrich Simon, for his tremendous help in proofreading my translations from the Hebrew sources.

In addition, Prof. Dr. Rabbi Nathan Peter Levinson and Prof. Dr. Pnina Navè-Levinson were to a great degree responsible for bringing the German edition to life, through their professional guidance. Sadly, Pnina, a childhood friend of Marie Simon, also has passed away in the meantime. Shortly before her death, she, too, answered questions about Regina Jonas, from whom she took private Hebrew lessons in the 1930s.

I will never forget the many inspiring hours spent with Israel-Meir Miller, the Ba'al Koreh [Torah reader] of the orthodox Joachimstaler Strasse Synagogue in Berlin, who studied Talmud, Rambam, Tur, and *Shulchan Aruch* with me for an entire summer. I will always cherish the memory of those supremely Jewish moments of exhilaration when, after hours of intense concentration, suddenly we would crack the nut of a particular Tosafot. I also wish to thank the head of the Library of the Jewish Community of Berlin, Arkady Fried, who helped find the relevant rabbinical texts, using his CD-ROM collection.

One of my best experiences relates to my contact with Dr. Katharina von Kellenbach, who researched Regina Jonas long before I did. She

shared her notes and research—up to the deportation lists, which she found only after intensive efforts—with the comment that “we women can only move ahead if we work together.” Also greatly inspiring were my many conversations with Lara Dämmig and Dr. Rachel Monika Herweg, who with me initiated Bet Debora Berlin, the historical first conference of European female rabbis, cantors, scholars, and other spiritually interested Jewish women and men, which took place in May 1999. At the conference, I also received important tips from two former students of the Academy for the Science of Judaism, Shoshana Ronen (née Susi Elbogen) and Ilse Perlman (née Selier). Much unexpected inspiration came from friends, including Reingard Jäkl, who deciphered some of Regina Jonas’s more difficult handwriting.

My great thanks go to Alan Rinzler and Arthur Kurzweil, who immediately recognized the importance of making this book available to an English-speaking public. A particular learning experience was the cooperation between Toby Axelrod and me. Toby not only translated this book into English but also engaged me in reconsidering how to present a German theme to an American audience, making me more aware of my subjective German perspective and of the occasional need to take a different approach. Her influence made its way into the final text.

Furthermore, I am indebted to Andrea Flint for her sensitive thoroughness in editing and proofreading and to Rebecca Allen for her careful and expert review of the sources cited by Regina Jonas in her treatise.

When I started six and a half years ago to place queries in German-language newspapers read by survivors of the Shoah, I didn’t expect such a great response. My thanks go to the following eyewitnesses who, from 1998 onward, shared in letters and conversations their recollections of Regina Jonas, whether recounting firsthand experiences or those of family and friends. An asterisk indicates the person corresponded by letter with Dr. Katharina von Kellenbach.

- Shalom Albeck (Jerusalem, Israel)—son of Prof. Dr. Chanoch Albeck, former lecturer at the Academy for the Science of Judaism
- Rabbi Ted (Theodor) Alexander (San Francisco, United States)—son of Hugo Alexander, former president of the board of the Rykestrasse Synagogue
- Gad Beck (Berlin, Germany)—former slave laborer under the Nazis, together with Regina Jonas
- Eva Berg (née Fischer) (Bustan Hagalil, Israel)—pupil of Regina Jonas

- Jack Brotzen (Oceanside, United States)—son of Karl Brotzen, former member of the board of the Neue Synagoge of Berlin
- Herta Budwig (née Ciefer) (Berlin, Germany)—pupil of Regina Jonas
- Bernhard H. Burton (original name Burstein) (Manhasset Hills, United States)—former patient of the Jewish Hospital in Berlin
- Ruth Callmann (San Francisco, United States)—pupil of Regina Jonas
- Margaret H. Collin (Tucson, United States)—sang in the choir of the “Neue Synagoge”\*
- Else Davidsohn (née Coper) (Hamburg, Germany)—schoolmate of Regina Jonas
- Ilse Ehrlich-Kochanczyk (Griesheim, Germany)—pupil of Regina Jonas
- Karla Emanuel-Rosenstock (Wembley Park, Great Britain)—daughter of a friend of Regina Jonas
- John Fink (originally Hans Finke) (Chicago, United States)—pupil of Regina Jonas
- Rita Friedman (née Nagler) (Berkeley, United States)—pupil of Regina Jonas
- Ursula de Hecht (née Behrendt) (Buenos Aires, Argentina)—pupil of Regina Jonas
- Hanna Hochfeld (San Francisco, United States)—daughter of Rabbi Dr. Joseph Norden
- Siegbert Kaffe (Santiago de Chile, Chile)—pupil of Regina Jonas
- Miriam Knöpfle (née Magafiner) (Albuquerque, United States)—pupil of Regina Jonas\*
- Gisela Lavie (née Müller) (Haifa, Israel)—pupil of Regina Jonas
- Dr. I. O. Lehman (Cincinnati, United States)—classmate of Regina Jonas at the Academy for the Science of Judaism\*
- Gerda Levinsohn-Marcus (née Schustermann) (Jerusalem, Israel)—pupil of Regina Jonas who encountered her later in the Theresienstadt concentration camp
- Prof. Dr. Rabbi Nathan Peter Levinson (originally Lewinsky) (Jerusalem, Israel; and Berlin, Germany)—encountered Regina Jonas when he was a rabbinical student



- Prof. Dr. Pnina Navè Levinson (née Paula Fass) (Jerusalem, Israel; and Berlin, Germany)—pupil of Regina Jonas
- Lieselott Lilian Levy (Philadelphia, United States)—pupil of Regina Jonas\*
- Hanna and Dieter Renning (Turlock, United States)—Rabbi Dr. Joseph Norden's granddaughter and her husband
- Günther Ruschin (Berlin, Germany)—encountered Regina Jonas in the Levetzowstrasse Synagogue
- Ernst Joshua Samosh (North York, Canada)—brother of a friend of Regina Jonas
- Meta Schiowitz (née Wolny) (Berlin, Germany)—pupil of Regina Jonas
- Margot Schramm (née Camnetzer) (Pembroke Pines, United States)—pupil of Regina Jonas
- Ruth Sherman (née Epstein) (Burbank, United States)—neighbor of Regina Jonas in Krausnickstrasse
- Herta Shriner (née Lewin) (New York, United States)—pupil of Regina Jonas
- Prof. Dr. Marie Simon (née Jalowicz) (Berlin, Germany)—encountered Regina Jonas in the Alte Synagoge
- Susanne Spatz (née Flörsheim) (Newton Center, United States)—pupil of Regina Jonas
- Gisela Stone (née Langer) (Century Village, United States)—pupil of Abraham Jonas\*
- Hans Walter (Mansfield, United States)—pupil of Regina Jonas
- Gerda Zielke (née Roth) (Berlin, Germany)—pupil of Regina Jonas
- Betty Zinvirt (Berlin, Germany)—granddaughter of Margot Kurzweg, a pupil of Regina Jonas

With their recollections, these witnesses have contributed to preserving the memory of Regina Jonas.

E.K.

*Fräulein Regina Jonas, our first female preacher  
since Deborah, who not only is a gifted speaker  
but also can preach well, often and with humor—  
and who has pleased absolutely everyone.*

—Dedication in a book that the medical doctor  
Arje Jehuda presented to Regina Jonas in 1931  
in the summer resort of Bad Reichenhall

*I have always wondered why our rabbis do not speak  
in a lively manner—your talk at the end of the holiday  
gave me my answer. A speech can only affect people  
when one works together with them,  
feeling and suffering. Jews will understand such  
sermons, and when your listeners say to each other  
upon exiting the temple, “Wasn’t she right,” and  
“She was indeed right,” then it is not only recognition  
but also gratefulness.*

—From a letter from congregant Alfred Salinger  
to Regina Jonas on May 25, 1942



---

**Photo of Rabbi Regina Jonas, presumably taken at the beginning of 1936**

*This photo of Regina Jonas appears to have been taken shortly after her ordination in December 1935. On the reverse is written "18. Febr. 36, Iranische Str. 3. Jüd. Altersheim, Rosenberg" [February 18, 1936, Jewish Senior Home, Rosenberg, at Iranische Str. 3] together with a Hebrew citation from Exodus (3:14):*

*"I shall be who I shall be."*

*Reproduction: Margit Billeb*

## CONTENTS

|                                 |     |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| List of Photos and Translations | vii |
| Foreword                        | ix  |
| <i>Hermann Simon</i>            |     |
| Acknowledgments                 | xv  |

### PART ONE

---

|                                |    |
|--------------------------------|----|
| My Journey Toward Regina Jonas | 3  |
| The Story of Regina Jonas      | 16 |

### PART TWO

---

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Preliminary Notes: On the Halachic Treatise of Regina Jonas | 97  |
| Halachic Treatise: Can Women Serve As Rabbis?               | 100 |
| <i>Regina Jonas</i>   |     |
| Glossary  | 193 |
| Structure of the Talmud (According to Maimonides)           | 203 |
| Additional Halachic Compendia and Commentaries              | 207 |
| The Author  | 209 |
| Name Index  | 211 |
| Subject Index   | 215 |