

KINO LORBER

presents

Chichinette

The Accidental Spy

A FILM BY NICOLA HENS

Germany-France / 86 Minutes / 1.85:1 / DCP / Color

In English and French with English subtitles

Official Selection:

Official Selection - Haifa International Film Festival

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Synopsis

The untold story of Marthe Cohn, a feisty young woman who joined the French Army during WWII after Hitler's rise to power. After keeping silent for almost 60 years, Marthe now shares the extraordinary story of how she managed to beat the odds and fight the Nazis as a spy after her family fled to the south of France and a sister was sent to Auschwitz. She used her German accent & blond hair to pose as a German nurse and slipped behind enemy lines to gather essential information about Nazi movements for Allied commanders.

At the age of 98, she still tours the world for lectures and promotes her message to people of all generations. Her harrowing journey is told with reverence, while her joie de vivre shines through, filling the film with hope for the future.

Director's Biography

Nicola Hens main interest in each project is to shape the film's character by thoughtfully defining the audio-visual language in accordance with the subject and to find its very own and unique way of storytelling.

Initially focused on her work as cinematographer, Hens graduated from the prestigious German Film and Television Academy Berlin (dffb) as well as from Bauhaus-University Weimar, Germany, and studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Toulouse, France. She worked as a video journalist which brought her to initiate the intercultural film project Video Letters Germany-Senegal, using the art of short films for intercultural communication between teens on two continents. She has been a lecturer for media and filmmaking in the International Master program for Art & Design at Bauhaus-University since 2015.

As Director of Photography, she worked on the following award-winning films: *Death & the Maiden* (Awarded at DocAviv Israel and AmDocs Palm Springs), *Elisa* (Best cinematography at Cambridge Film Festival, Awarded at Venice Filmweek, Chalon Tous Court, Hamburg, & more) and *In the Shade of the Apple Tree*. Her mid-length film *Omulaule heißt Schwarz*, which she co-directed, premiered at DOK Leipzig in 2003.

Her debut feature film as director, *CHICHINETTE – The Accidental Spy*, was an official selection at Haifa International Film Festival and other festivals around the world.

The Jewish Spy Who Passed As A German

By Sandee Brawarsky

December 17, 2020



Like a well-trained, tight-lipped mole, for close to a half-century Marthe Cohn was mum about her experience as a French spy during World War II. Risking her life by going behind enemy lines, she was able to uncover crucial information about hidden German positions, ultimately saving hundreds of lives.

Her colleagues in the army intelligence service named her “Chichinette,” or little pain in the neck, for all the questions she asked. Cohn was, by her own admission, an unlikely spy. She was a woman, a Jew and quite small. But with her blonde hair, blue eyes and German fluency, she was able to pose as a German nurse searching for her Nazi fiancé.

In a new documentary film about her, “Chichinette: The Accidental Spy,” she says that after the War, when she married and moved to America, “Nobody spoke about the war. Nobody. People didn’t want to hear about it.”

Speaking by phone with The Jewish Week from her home in Los Angeles, she says that the first time she spoke of her wartime activities was in 1996, after she read about Steven Spielberg’s Shoah Foundation and felt it was the right venue for an interview. Soon after, she also recorded her story for the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Another reason she was reluctant to speak was that she didn’t have any documents. In about 1997, she traveled to France and visited the French military archives in the city of Pau and received her Army documents — officials told her that they didn’t know that she was alive. With her documents — and the honorary French medals she began to receive — she started to speak and to write, and in fact promised her older brother, who helped the family to survive in hiding, that she would write a book. She was able to tell him that it was accepted for publication before he died in 2001, and in 2002, she published “Behind Enemy Lines.” Even her husband hadn’t heard most of the story.

When I asked how it felt to finally speak out, she says, “It didn’t make much difference. I thought about it every day. I was constantly thinking all about what happened to me during the war. You do not forget it.” But she understands that it makes a lot of difference for others to hear her story, so she has given more than 1,000 talks around the world.

Cohn, in her late 90s in the film, is now close to turning 100. A vigorous presence, she has the schedule, memory, energy and sparkle of someone decades younger.

To watch her, you can’t help but wonder what you would have done in her tiny shoes. Even in the years before she became a spy for the French Intelligence service, she took great risks in southern France, whether helping Jewish refugees find places to stay, or helping people escape to the Free Zone, when France was occupied.

On camera, she says, “When I was in Germany, I was really a German. I played the role without noticing. For me, it was real.

“I didn’t have any feelings. The only thing was the mission.”

There are many films dealing with unknown aspects of the Holocaust. For Isaac Zablocki, senior director of film programs at the Marlene Meyerson JCC Manhattan, “the bottom line about this one standing out, is her. Marthe Cohn is just such an engaging character. Her storytelling and sense of humor really drew me in.”

Cohn attributes her sense of humor “to my very fast thinking. Every time I was in deep trouble, I got out of it. I found the right thing to answer at the right time. That happened many times during the war.

“If I weren’t an optimist, I would not have survived. I always thought that we were right and the Germans were wrong, and because we were right, we were going to win. That’s optimism.”

She was born in Metz, in the Lorraine region of France, close to Germany. Her grandfather was a rabbi in Metz, and she was very close to him. The filmmaker takes the Cohns back to her grandfather’s synagogue, where the current rabbi says a memorial prayer. She recalls that she wanted to learn Hebrew beyond the alphabet to study the prayers and Torah, and was told that that was only for boys.

“My Judaism was imprinted in me as a child,” she says. As a spy, she “was not consciously thinking about God. I was thinking about my survival. I don’t remember praying — I had no time for that. I was constantly on the alert.”

In the scenes of her childhood, Cohn’s parents and siblings are sometimes seen in animation. As the director, Nicola Alice Hens, explains, she didn’t want to use random archival footage, or reenactments, so she sought to create animation that would not be cute, for “the story is not cute at all.”

The family fled to the South of France, although her sister was arrested and ultimately sent to Auschwitz, where she was killed. Cohn was able to get to Marseille to study nursing and then to Paris; she had a fiancé who worked for the Resistance and was executed. She too tried to join the Resistance but was rebuffed. After France was liberated, she joined the French Army, where she was recruited for the Intelligence Service. She remembers that when she tried to cross the border — from Switzerland into Germany — and she attempted many times before making it through, she thought of her late sister and fiancé as she forced herself to say, “Heil, Hitler.”

After the war she wanted a normal life. She married an American she met when they were both studying in Geneva, and in February they will be married for 62 years. Major Cohn is a doctor, and for many years she served as his research assistant. These days, he accompanies her for all of her touring, and jokes that his job is now to carry the medals and prompt her.

The director first met Cohn at a presentation of another film at Goethe House in Los Angeles in 2015. When Cohn approached Hens after the film, Hens was immediately impressed. They arranged to meet in Berlin a few weeks later when Cohn was speaking. Soon after, Hens asked if she could follow her around with a camera.

“She’s an exemplary character. She lives in the present, makes decisions in the present,” Hens says in a telephone interview from Berlin. As to what keeps Cohn so youthful, she says, “She stayed very curious. As soon as there’s something new to discover, she’s in.”

The film premiered in Haifa, and has been shown in Berlin and elsewhere in Germany. Hens says that people relate to the fact that Cohn helped other refugees and was a refugee herself, and that people acted toward her with kindness, “doing what was morally right. That’s how she survived. That makes people think.”

Growing up in Dusseldorf, Germany, Hens says that she studied a lot about World War II in school, but stories of Jewish resistance were not familiar to her.

“It’s interesting to see how things maybe are repeating and to notice how short human memory is,” she says, noting that the film may help get people to do some “rethinking about important issues like racism, anti-Semitism and being against people who are different from most of the people they know.”

Hens, who is not Jewish, says that about 15 years ago she did a film in Israel and keeps going back. “There’s somehow a connection,” she says. “Of course I am thinking about how I would have reacted, and in the back of my head, how did my grandparents deal with this? That’s probably one of the reasons why I’m trying to cover this time in film.”

Cohn doesn’t like to speak of messages. “Adults don’t need them — they should know on their own what to think.” To young people, she says, “Be engaged and do not accept any order that your conscience would not approve.”

About Kino Lorber

With a library of over 2,800 titles, Kino Lorber Inc. has been a leader in independent art house distribution for 35 years, releasing 30 films per year theatrically under its Kino Lorber, Kino Repertory and Alive Mind Cinema banners, garnering seven Academy Award® nominations in nine years, including documentary nominees *Fire at Sea* (2017) and *Of Fathers & Sons* (2019). In addition, the company brings over 350 titles yearly to the home entertainment and educational markets through physical and digital media releases. With an expanding family of distributed labels, Kino Lorber handles releases in ancillary media for Zeitgeist Films, Carlotta USA, Adopt Films, Raro Video, and others, placing physical titles through all wholesale, retail, and direct to consumer channels, as well as direct digital distribution through over 40 OTT services including all major TVOD and SVOD platforms. In 2019, the company launched a new streaming channel KinoNow.com which features over 600 titles from its Kino Lorber library.

