

Overview of the documentary Stepinac: The cardinal and his conscience (2020)

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Journalist and graduate political scientist Višnja Starešina has directed and written several documentaries so far: *Neprijatelj naroda* from 2015 (documentary on communist repression in the former Yugoslavia), *Zaustavljeni Glas* from 2010 (documentary about war reporter Siniša Glavašević and Vukovar in Croatian War of Independence), *Treći pohod* from 2008 (documentary about jihadists development in Bosnia during the Homeland War).²The common essence of all these documentaries is the genre of political documentary, the importance of the topic from the perspective of the Republic of Croatia, and at last, the choice of a controversial topic.

The documentary lasts 1 hour and 27 minutes, was shot in digital format and was premiered on channel HRT³ in 2021 on the day of St. Alojzije Stepinac, although in 2020, it was also shown in cinemas. The director isn't present in the movie itself and the questions asked are not heard, but only the answers of the people being interviewed.

The conversation with experts was with now-deceased historian Ivo Banac, the British historian Robin Harris and the American historian Esther Gitman. The discussions provided an expert historical analysis and reflection on the key issues of Stepinac's relationship with Ante Pavelić, Josip Broz Tito, and Edvard Kardelj, and ultimately on Stepinac's role in rescuing Jews in the In-

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²<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm4197736/>, Pristupljeno 10.4.2021. godine

³HRT 1, 10.02.2021.

dependent State of Croatia. Exteriors and interiors are divergent in each interview with the experts and aren't essential elements in this documentary. Banac is a well-known historian regarding the topic of communist repression, although I must say that there are also historians who dealt more directly with the subject of Alojzije Stepinac himself. Already mentioned, British Robin Harris is one of them since he wrote the book *Stepinac - his life and time*, and from his answers, it is evident that he masterfully conducts the documentary's theme. Both of them could perhaps be declared inconsistent on the issue of Stepinac because one is a Croat, while the other is a British who lives and works in Croatia and is very interested in its history. The afore-mentioned remark can't be addressed to the internationally recognized American historian of Jewish origin, Gitman, whose book is entitled: *(When courage prevails: the rescue and the survival of the Jews in the Independent State of Croatia 1941-1945)*. In the documentary, she presents an interesting, and full of prejudices, reaction to the university department in America when she revealed the subject of the research to them.

Another set of interlocutors are people whose lives are directly connected to Alojzije Stepinac. Specifically, this is the testimony of Ruth Dajč, who testified in the church court on February 17, 1993, about the role of Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac in her life and how he saved her. In terms of her testimony, the documentary brings more personal details and focuses more on the suffering of Jews during the NDH (The Independent State of Croatia). The documentary, in the form of a testimony, at one point becomes a research documentary as it explores the findings of a Jewish family from Israel whose mother and grandmother were one of the girls rescued thanks to Stepinac and the nuns. This opens up a more personal and emotional narrative of

the interlocutors in their search for the truth about the history of their family members.

The documentary brings archival footage (for example, recordings from the trial) properly arranged between conversations with all interlocutors and the narrator who reads directly Stepinac's speeches, which contributes to the authenticity of the documentary itself, because unlike the movie, the documentary aims to present its topic objectively and truthfully.

The documentary itself focuses on Alojzije Stepinac's role in the Independent State of Croatia, with a special accent on the attitude towards Jews and then on trial for Stepinac during second Yugoslavia. Precisely in this segment that Stepinac, from the perspective of Jews, is extremely important. In this context, he brings important awareness to Croats, who eagerly await his beatification as he is their role model in relation to religion, but also as a person who didn't give in to any regime to force him to do something against his conscience.

In the follow-up of this overview, we will present a few short questions by the author to the director and screenwriter Višnja Starešina.

How did you decide to make a documentary on the theme of Blessed Alojzije Stepinac?

The idea of making a documentary about Cardinal Stepinac matured long and gradually. I was born in that area, not even ten kilometers from Krašić, and one of his nephews also called Alojzije Stepinac, taught me physics at the elementary school in Karlovac. I knew some of his cousins at that time of deep

socialism, but at that time, I did not know to what extent the communist regime politically marked them because they were - relatives. I came up with the idea of a documentary about the cardinal at the time when I was preparing the documentary "The Enemy of the People," a film about the post-war liquidations of the Croatian bourgeoisie by the communist regime, whose protagonists were children and relatives of the then "missing." Three of the six main interlocutors were in various ways directly related to Cardinal Stepinac. The father of Bishop Josip Mrzljak, Vladimir Mrzljak, working as a civil servant in Vukovar, was taken away after the partisans entered the city and then "went missing," meaning, of course, that he was executed somewhere, was the nephew of Alojzije Stepinac. Ljerka Ognjanovac's father, Zlatko Ognjanovac, was a well-known choirmaster and musical animator in the Krašić area and, of course, associated with Archbishop Stepinac, and in the first days of the postwar period, he was arrested, killed, and "went missing." The father of our great singer-songwriter and chansonnier Lada Kos, Vinko Kos, was the secretary of the Croatian Writers' Association, and during the NDH, he worked closely with Archbishop Stepinac on caring for orphans, went with the Bleiburg column, and "disappeared." In fact, it turned out - wherever I would touch the Croatian past during the Second World War, and after it, I would always come across - Stepinac. And so it has remained to this day. Even today, key topics in Croatian history and Croatian statehood itself are still being discussed surrounding Cardinal Stepinac. I think that's enough for one movie.

What are the audience's reactions to the documentary?

The audience I heard reacted great. The other one ignored me. But the reactions from critics and the profession were also excellent. Except for a few expected exceptions, which are still determined by the aesthetics and ideology of Jakov Blažević or Aca Vasiljević, as its more modern versions.

How did you choose the interlocutors in the documentary?

The basic idea was to show Archbishop Stepinac in the context of time, and especially in the international context. Without that, it is not possible to fully understand Stepinac, and his international dimension was very poorly researched and almost unknown in our country. Somehow he was squeezed into the confines of a local archbishop, but a square in Manhattan, New York, is named after him, and if you go researching the archives, you'll find more than 20,000 articles about him in the American press alone, mostly from communist persecution, but also a few news stories about his anti-racial sermons during the NDH and one of the best Catholic high schools in the USA bears his name. The interlocutors were chosen so that they could shed light on the Croatian, the international, and human dimensions of Cardinal Stepinac. In fact, the list of interlocutors was open until the very end of filming. And so it was only in editing that the story of rescuing the Jewish girl Renata, whom I came across during filming, eventually became a small but one of the most impressive parts of the film.

What political documentaries or documentaries of other directors, in general, have influenced your work as directors and screenwriters?

My documentaries are determined primarily by the story I want

to tell through the film as a medium. These are typically historical themes with a story that is different from the usual mainstream, bringing something new and communicating with the viewer: both at the level of cognition and the level of emotion. Of course, I also watch documentaries by other authors, but they are not the ones where I look for role models. I have my own movie.

What are the difficulties in the process of writing a screenplay for a documentary, given that it is a rather different and more open concept than a screenplay for a feature film - for example, you do not know what exactly which interlocutor will say and what you can use?

I wouldn't call it difficulties, or at least I don't experience them that way. For documentaries like the ones I make, it is extremely important to have a good theme or story that the film can carry, and it is good to research. The script here is a template, which is changed and upgraded through work on the film. Researching documentation and archives and preliminary interviews with a wide range of interlocutors and potential participants in the film are the fundamental tasks actually. For example, in foreign productions, entire teams of various professionals who prepare research for screenwriters and directors, are engaged in such projects. In my case, I do it alone. If you do a good and thorough investigation, it will also help you in choosing the interlocutor in the film, as well as in conducting conversations with them. Then there aren't many surprises anymore. But yes, the documentary is actually in the making until the final editing. Therefore, editing documentaries can take months and sometimes years.

What are your further plans in the form of directing new documentaries and writing new screenplays?

Just recently, my producer Ivan Maloča from Interfilm, and I, as a screenwriter and director, submitted the documentary project “Looking for Renata” to the HAVC competition. It is actually a story I came across in Israel making a film about Stepinac, the story of a Jewish girl Renata Bauer who miraculously survived the Holocaust in the NDH, emigrated to Israel after the war, and decided to conceal her entire past. Today, her descendants are trying to find Renata’s family roots in Croatia together with me and find out - who was Renata and how did she survive? It’s one of the most fascinating and emotional stories I’ve come across in my journalistic and documentary work, and I hope we can turn it into a film.