

Leni- The Life and Work of Leni Riefenstahl by Steven Bach.  
Little, Brown 2007.

Leni Riefenstahl will be known forever in the history of cinematography as the filmmaker who created the quintessential propaganda film, *Triumph of the Will*. No-one who has seen this paean of celluloid praise to Hitler and the Nazi party could fail to be impressed by its style, presentation and filmic quality, even if at the same time loathing its uncritical approach towards, indeed its glorification of its subject.

This brilliant biography by Steven Bach makes it clear that there is much more to Ms Riefenstahl than *Triumph of the Will*.

Born in 1903, Leni Riefenstahl began her acting career in the heady, amoral days of the Weimar Republic. By all accounts she was an actress of meagre talents, but she compensated for her shortcomings by sleeping her way to every opportunity she could get. Bach makes her amorality crystal clear as he traces her early career, which, indirectly, brought about her first contact with the National Socialists and Hitler himself.

By all accounts, Leni's eye for the main chance was matched by an ability to spot a 'coming man,' and this happened most notably when she encountered Hitler for the first time. The central part of the biography traces in detail the relationship between Riefenstahl and the Nazi hierarchy, and of the way she played various leaders off against each other by cunningly using her relationship with the Fuhrer to keep them all on the back foot when dealing with her.

What makes this defining period of her life even more intriguing than would already be the case is the convincing argument that Bach advances for Riefenstahl's birth mother having been Jewish, and the fact that many of her amours while she was clawing her way up the show business ladder were Jews.

After the war her links with Nazism were a severe drawback to her new career as a photographer, and she went to strenuous lengths to disguise what she couldn't deny and lie about everything else. In her final incarnation she became the documenter of the Nuba people of Sudan on a visit to whom in 2000 at the age of 98 she was involved in a helicopter crash that contributed to her death in 2003 at the age of 101.

Steven Bach presents a superbly researched and excellently written biography of one of the most significant film makers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who was also a thoroughly detestable human being who allowed nothing to stand in the way of her achieving fame and fortune. This biography demolishes much of the phoney structure she erected around herself during her lifetime and ensures that posterity will be in no doubt as to precisely what kind of woman Leni Riefenstahl truly was.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh