

Excerpt from

THIS HOUR UNDERWATER

by

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Emiliano Poddi

**THIS HOUR
UNDERWATER**

Of all the artists, Leni Riefenstahl
is the only one who understands us.
JOSEPH GOEBBELS

We are so alike, you and I: both slaves
to our mission.
ADOLF HITLER

Where is my sin?
LENI RIEFENSTAHL

Although inspired by real facts and people, the story told in this novel is the product of the author's imagination.

You are breathing underwater and you don't even notice it, as if it were your true nature. At a depth of nearly 50 feet, you swim calmly, almost easily, and I let you do so. It's going well, Leni, everything's fine.

I can see your breath, I can see mine. It doesn't happen anywhere else, we're in the only place on earth where you can see a sight like that. We breathe in, we breathe out, and swarms of bubbles gurgle away from the regulator, those introflexed, disc-shaped underwater bubbles of ours that look a bit like jellyfish without tentacles – and you think that the only thing you let slip out of your mouth with me are these harmless jellyfish, right, Leni?

And to think that you have reasons to be on your guard, survival down here doesn't just depend on you. You have a limited reserve of air, you're connected to a breathing device, crushed by a pressure that is one and a half atmospheres greater than normal, at the mercy of fish that are bigger than you and much swifter, subject to the currents and ultimately me as well, Leni – down here you are in my hands.

But I'm sure that the thought of being in danger doesn't even cross your mind, on the contrary, by now you feel you belong more to this world than your own. Furthermore, it's so easy to enter into it. Just lean back from the boat and let the weight of the tank do the rest. The ocean receives you each time – I was about to say each time as if it were the first, and who knows, maybe it's true –, then it closes up again so swiftly that it seems anxious to protect you, to put tons and tons of salt water between you and your former world as quickly as possible.

A trace of your presence remains, however, your bubbles that explode on the surface giving the impression, to anyone outside, that

some volcanic activity, though modest, is taking place underwater. And there's the red balloon as well, I forgot, the signal buoy that's somewhere up there, 50 feet above us. But what do you care about a balloon? In the time it takes to equalize you're ready to turn into a fish, the Leni fish, and then it's a whole other story.

Fill the lungs to ascend, empty them to sink back to the bottom, use the internal organs like instruments of fluid dynamics, as if they were none other than swim bladders. Move forward using the fins' motion or allow the current to carry you to an expanse of staghorn corals. Then stay there floating as all of life passes in front of you, not the astounding centenarian life of yours that you scrupulously avoid talking about when it doesn't suit you, but that of the coral reef, which is no less spectacular: a soaring landscape of spires, pinnacles and futuristic towers, a metropolis of the future where frantic alien creatures try to eat one another and escape being eaten.

Yet there's something profoundly right about drifting there among the morays, barracudas and blacktip sharks, don't you think? Something that leads you to believe that it will never end, that you could really settle here in the reef. Forever, I mean. And you get the feeling that you no longer have any limits, that you would be capable of reaching the lowest depth of the ocean if you only wanted to – and there are times, in fact, when we divers do want that, when nitrogen narcosis clouds our minds and makes us believe that we can go farther and farther down, deeper and deeper.

Think about it, Leni: this insatiable desire for depth, a propulsion system that allows you to satisfy it, new physical laws, fluid trajectories, diluted motions, the feeling of omnipotence. All in all, it's understandable that a person would no longer have much of a desire to return to the surface.

And then the vigils, the circling around, the waiting. Not so much for the manta rays that we've dived in search of, but the waiting itself, the beauty of certain moments when absolutely nothing happens.

Of course, the manta ray descent will be our last dive, my extreme, desperate attempt to understand you, with all the rage I've purposely bottled up for you over so many years and with all the air I still have

left – and I have 180 atmospheres remaining, which is about sixty minutes of bottom time, after which there will be no more, so be it.

But sixty minutes can be enough, you know, Leni? Now you and I inhabit this underwater time that instead of only moving forward spreads in every possible direction, swells immoderately without encountering obstacles and expands in a kind of very slow present.

Your one hundred years contained in an hour.

And this hour underwater flows into me like an ocean – an ocean of time.

Maybe that's exactly how it will end, we will run out of our supply of air and it will not seem like a valid reason to return to the surface. Or maybe only one of us will come back up – *nur einer*, you said many years ago on the set of *Tiefland* – while the other will remain down here with the strangest creatures alive, her body lying at the bottom of the sea and hair swaying slowly in the current.

Spiral Coral

In the end, this is the beginning; coral is the origin of a great many underwater stories, including ours; everything was born millions of years ago from the freak alliance between a microscopic mollusk and a single-celled algae, between polyps and zooxanthellae. At night polyps release carbon dioxide in the form of calcium carbonate and during the day zooxanthellae use it to synthesize light, in turn releasing the glucose and oxygen needed for the polyps to secrete calcium carbonate. If not for this, there would not be a single sprig of coral in the Maldives. Better yet, the Maldives wouldn't really exist, there would be no atolls and coral reefs, and as a result there would not be all these fish and Leni and I wouldn't be here either; ultimately it was the microorganisms that brought us together.

Do you see it, Leni? Here, right in front of you.

At first she doesn't understand, she doesn't know what she should look at; then too the specimen I am pointing to is not immediately recognizable as coral, it's not one of those shaped like a small tree, so reassuring in their infant silhouette, their red a red so brazen that it seems didactic: the same shade as the nail polish that Leni, who turned 100 years old six months ago, persists in flaunting on her finger- and toenails – which, however, is not at all reassuring, and even less so is the fact that it looks so good on her. She even applied it this morning: before the dive, she polished her nails on the porch of her bungalow. She brushed it on, blew, admired the result from a certain distance, then continued putting on another coat of the coral red, all comprised in that sequence of gestures, and I was there watching, unseen.

Now she reaches out, and although I've told her more than once not to touch coral – it's prohibited, *verboten*, coral is very fragile, and it's

dangerous even for you, Frau Leni, you could hurt yourself or get snared on it – of course Frau Leni does whatever she wants and touches it, then she smiles at me, to the extent she can with a breathing tube in her mouth, seeking my understanding, and makes an ok sign with her fingers; I imagine that later, when we've resurfaced, she will try to justify herself as she's done in the past several days, I'm sorry, she'll say, it's just that I wanted to be certain.

Of what?

That it was really coral, my dear.

Helical and filiform, lodged in the middle of an otherwise deserted rocky expanse, it sprouts out of nowhere and coils around itself, spiraling upwards towards the surface, similar to a steel spring, or a gymnast's ribbon, or DNA. Leni watches it, and I watch Leni, because even down here it's she who interests me, much more than the coral, more than any specimen that inhabits this reef, more than any other living person I've studied in books at university and then seen with my own eyes.

Now she's the one I'm studying.

And I think I know what it is that keeps luring her to a depth of 50 feet, just off the reef of Gangehi islet, Ari Atoll: the very fact that down here – *unter Wasser* – things pretend to be something else and hardly ever appear as what they are. Yes indeed, I think that's mainly why she dives, because she thinks she can do it too. After all, she spent half her life camouflaging herself, and perhaps as early as 1972, during her baptism as a diver at age seventy, she may have sensed that the underwater environment would be congenial to her, that in the sea's depths you can disguise yourself much more easily than on terra firma – the reef lends itself especially well. Here the fish look like algae, the algae look like octopuses, the octopuses look like rocks and the rocks are not really rocks but coralline formations, and therefore living beings like us, like me and like Leni.

It's enough to make you dizzy, all that indeterminacy risks making you heady in the long run. Yet only here, in this world so devoid of certainty, without weight and without anything to hold onto, does the

ultra-centenarian diver swimming alongside me feel that she is truly at peace.

She told me so herself, on the day of our first dive, a week ago. We were on the *dhoni* and we were putting on our wetsuits in the bow, when she unexpectedly spoke to me – by now I only feel good underwater, she said, my thoughts slow down, my mind empties of bad memories.

I was about to ask her what bad memories, but I bit my tongue. We had just met, I'd had the grit to welcome her on her arrival, to introduce myself, to smile at her, everything had gone well and now I had to be patient, wait for the right moment.

It must be the feeling of being suspended over a void, Leni said, and meanwhile the captain had slowed the engines, we were almost at the spot where we would dive together for the first time, beyond the outer reef, Leni and I alone in the middle of the ocean.

Or maybe, my dear, it's that slow sinking, dropping into a mysterious realm, and little by little a completely unexpected joy is released within you. Once you've tried it, you're under the spell of the submerged world. It's some kind of drug, don't you think so too?

I nodded, though in fact there was no need to. Now I know that Leni's questions are almost never real questions, but simply a rhetorical expedient to get you to side with her, a trick to make you think you can influence the course of a conversation that is actually firmly in those hands with the newly-painted nails; it's she who controls it from start to finish, you're just her audience.

That's right, my dear, a drug, and it's always like the first time. The variety of shapes, the colors, the living organisms: it's as if each time I dive, I discover everything all over again. Each time the same wonder, the same waking dream, opens up in front of you, am I right?

Were you right?

I don't know, it depends on how you look at it. Everything you say about diving is certainly something we can both agree to, and one can hardly remain unmoved by your fervor when you talk about it. Only, I'm not so sure the words you use are the most appropriate.

With images you have always been a phenomenon, but words are not your forte. When you shoot a film or take a photo you have a precise, unerring touch, so uniquely yours that even those who despised you as a human being were compelled to imitate it, even those who called you whore or Nazi or both.

But when you talk it's a completely different story, you often and willingly express yourself in clichés, you use stock phrases, you pile banality on banality, like the fact that your favorite time is sunset or that this island is a real corner of paradise; with words your taste suddenly becomes cutesy if not actually – may I say it? – kitschy.

All in all, you're still someone who titled her first underwater photo album *Coral Gardens*. And not so long ago, when a journalist asked you what exactly your famous aesthetic sense consisted of, you replied that as a child you liked to pick colorful little flowers.



But I didn't tell Leni that. On the day of our first dive I didn't say any of this, I kept silent while the captain turned off the *dhoni's* engines and she went on telling me about the incredible marvels, the enchanting wonders, the hush that completely envelops you underwater and protects you from the world outside, obliterates all your problems, all your worries. Then, out of the blue, she started reciting Heine.

Thalatta, thalatta, she recited, standing there in her wetsuit with fins on her feet. *I hail thee, o eternal sea, ten thousand times...*¹

I too knew that poem. Axel, the boy I went with back in college, read it to me; given the subject he thought I might like it, and in fact I did like it, I'd photocopied it and learned it by heart, and now I was on

¹ The opening lines of "Meergruß" by Heinrich Heine. Paraphrased from Emma Lazarus' translation, "Salutation to the sea," in *Poems and Ballads of Heinrich Heine*.

a traditional Maldivian boat silently spelling out the words as they came out of Leni's mouth.

Your billowy realm of waves glimmers like the ancient dreams of childhood, Leni declaimed, and speaks to me, sparking anew the memory of red coral trees, golden fishes, pearls, and colorful shells which thou dost secretly preserve below in thy limpid palace of crystal – im klaren Krystallhaus.

After a pause for dramatic effect, as if it were a new stanza of Heine's poem, Leni went on to enumerate the aches and pains that have afflicted her for many years now, and that only down under – *dort unten* – give her a little respite, so that it was her doctor who prescribed the diving. You don't believe me? Horst, you tell her too, please.

Horst is sixty years old, forty years younger than her. Broad shoulders, tall, well-built. When called upon by Leni – the signal is a tap on the biceps with the back of her hand – he usually merely nods, or at most gives brief answers sealed by a smile that is very difficult to interpret, and only then are you reminded of his presence. Tell her Horst, wasn't it Dr. Henkel who recommended diving? The pains disappear down there, don't they, Horst?

Horst nodded, smiled, and after a week of observing that smile I still don't understand exactly what it means, just as I don't know if it's possible that a doctor would prescribe scuba diving to a centenarian. Nor do I even know what those pains are, exactly, that can vanish underwater – certainly not mine, down below my pain does not dissolve, rather it seems to become more real when I swim with her; the underwater pressure makes it more solid and concrete. Leni's presence sweeps away the time that has passed since the day it was generated, in the summer of 1941: it was born twenty two years earlier than me, my pain, and it is still alive, more alive than ever.

I didn't tell her that either, of course. It was enough that she'd started talking to me so easily and so soon, when we hadn't yet dived together. Something in my appearance – and I knew quite well what it was – must have moved her to trust me long before she was forced to do so, while we were sitting in the bow of a boat where technically

she wasn't my responsibility but the captain's. Down here she has to trust someone, at her age going down with a tank alone would not be allowed, medical prescription or not, and Horst, who is also her cameraman and has always accompanied her underwater, recently underwent a procedure on his inner ear and can't equalize, so no diving. Down here there's only me, Leni and a million fish.

A nice stroke of luck, an unexpected gift. Horst's labyrinthitis, I mean. After all, I merely wanted to meet you, Leni, observe you live, study you much closer than I'd ever done. I certainly didn't expect to accompany you underwater, I would have been satisfied with a more superficial association. And instead, see how strange life is sometimes? A week ago you didn't even know I existed, whereas now you might say that there's a deep, even measurable acquaintance between us: 60 feet, at this precise moment. And all thanks to Horst's vertigo. Besides, what can you do, you whispered to me on the boat – you started talking softly so he wouldn't hear you –, by now he's of a certain age, he has his little aches and pains. Then you loaded the tank, and your nearly 101 years, on your back and dived in.

Horst waits for us on board, patient and imperturbable, ready to welcome us with his inscrutable smile. He helps you hoist yourself onto the ladder, peels off your wetsuit, drapes a blue bathrobe over your shoulders – a color that matches your bathing suit –, dries you off, rubs your hair, but you quickly wriggle free and shake him off because you can't wait, still dripping you're already fiddling with the display on the underwater camera, you immediately want to show him the photos you just took and you can't wait a second longer – the patience endowed to this couple lies entirely on Horst's shoulders, Leni speaks and he listens, she gestures and he smiles, she commands and he performs.

Already on the evening of our first dive, at the restaurant, Leni had given Horst that sign, which I would come to know so well, and he'd invited me to join them in the area reserved for guests, the terrace overlooking the lagoon, whereas for us staffers there is a table close to the kitchens. I followed him trying to conceal my surprise, and meanwhile I wondered why Leni wanted me with her. Was it possible

she sensed something? And yet I'd been careful, professional, I didn't think I had revealed myself. No, she couldn't have known. It had to be simple courtesy, a way to express her appreciation for the work I was doing and that I would continue to do in the following days. When I reached their table, illuminated by an arrangement of hibiscus flowers and candles, Horst moved out a chair and I sat down across from Leni.

They talked about photo filters during virtually the whole dinner. And so I learned that Horst is an advocate of red filters, more respectful of true colors, and therefore best suited for waters where blue is dominant, whereas Leni prefers magenta filters that would be more appropriate for predominantly green waters. She argues that the magenta renders the photos more expressive by restoring the impressions – yes, the true ones, my dear Horst – of those who have seen the fish face to face, as Leni and I are seeing them now while waiting for the mantas to appear.

They'd become more and more animated over the question of filters, until it seemed that they'd forgotten me, as I secretly hoped they would so that I could observe them undisturbed. What struck me about their discussion was not so much the dedication they showed for their photographs, but rather the fact that they cared almost nothing about the subjects portrayed in those photos. To hear them talk, especially Leni, one would think that the jellyfish, sea cucumbers, marine snails and other fish were there just so she could photograph them. And in fact, when they are not there, when an octopus, grouper or moray eel is not in the burrow where we thought it would be, Leni takes it personally. She gets angry, and flicks her hand as if she were chasing something away; for her it must be an intolerable affront, to be snubbed like that by an octopus, she who has photographed Andy Warhol and Mick Jagger.

When the octopus is there and lets itself be framed by her lens, it is still a subject that, as it is, isn't at all good enough, but must be retouched, in post-production or right then and there, thanks to one of her beloved magenta filters that, once back on the boat, will enable Horst to grasp all the nuances of the skin pigment, the marbled gray of

the tentacles, the pinkish white of the suction cups, that elastic and somewhat amorphous sensation that octopuses give you when swimming in half water – that’s why I like magenta filters, Horst, and that’s why you should like them too.

They remembered me just at the end, when they stood up from the table and arranged a time for the second dive, which would be not the next day but the day after that. Leni needs to recuperate, Horst whispered to me while she was looking for something in her purse, and as he did so he’d moved closer and brushed my hand – on purpose, I thought. Then, still in a low voice, practically whispering in my ear, he’d added that there had to be at least forty-eight hours between dives. Finally, of course, he’d smiled at me.

Why did he do that? And why whisper? Simply out of consideration for Leni or was there something else?

In any case, what mattered to me was that Leni and I would dive two more times at most, three in total, half the number I had expected, so I would have to make better use of the short time allotted to me. I couldn’t keep to myself as I had during dinner hoping to draw something out, I had to take the initiative and call the shots, I thought as we parted.

Horst had wished me good night and Leni had stroked my cheek, and it was as if the sun had seared me at that spot. I’d felt my skin tingling all night; I hadn’t closed my eyes thinking about how my mother would have reacted if she’d known that one day – on March 13, 2003 – Leni Riefenstahl would stroke my cheek as you would a granddaughter, and yet it had happened, already on the first evening Leni had touched me just as she’d touched the spiral coral a short time ago, with the same arrogance, the same confidence of being entitled to do it – I’m sorry Mama, forgive me, I just couldn’t avoid it.



She was afraid of losing me.

If I think about the time when I was little, that's one of the feelings I remember best, that she was always afraid of losing me.

On crowded streets my mother immediately grabbed for my hand. Look, she'd say to me on Getreidegasse, that's Mozart's house, and since there were always hordes of tourists around there, the two things ended up being associated in my memory, that house being Mozart's birthplace and her taking me by the hand.

I guess it's like that for any mother, the fear that your child will get swallowed up in a crowd and lost forever is entirely natural. But there was something different about the way my mother did it, a kind of urgency that as a child I couldn't explain.

It wasn't her only fear, she had many others, and they all concerned me. That I didn't eat enough. That I might have a bad heart like Uncle Matthias, whom I never met – for many years that was all I knew about him, that he had heart trouble. That I might feel different from other children, whether gypsies or *gaže*, non-Gypsies, because they all had a family and I only had her. That something bad might happen to me when I was in kindergarten, then in school, and later even in university, in any case far away from her and beyond her reach. That I would have an accident underwater, once I started diving. Or indeed that I might get lost in the street, among the crowds jamming the sidewalks and squares of Salzburg – the fear that if this happened she would never see me again.

We had our own way of holding hands, she and I: I'd made a fist and she would completely enclose it with her hand, as in rock, paper, scissors when "paper covers rock". At that point she pressed once or twice with her fingers, two quick squeezes that I recognized and instantly returned with a smile. It was a coded message, it meant that no one else held hands like the two of us. It meant that we were special and that our bond had always been there, from the beginning. My mother told me that my birth was due in early November, but one night, in mid-October, she'd dreamed of giving birth to a beautiful baby girl. In fact, the next day her waters had broken and at midnight I came into the world with a clenched fist against my forehead. When

the doctors placed her daughter in her lap, the first thing she'd done was wrap her hand around that tiny fist that I kept clenching as I wailed. Then, following an ancient tradition of her people, she'd leaned close to my ear and whispered my name to me.

We also had another method to avoid getting lost: my mother would make a sound, kind of like sucking in her breath, that I was able to recognize even at a great distance. If we were in a park, for instance, and I was playing with other children, as soon as I heard that drawn in breath of hers I would immediately stop playing and look around until our eyes met. It was as if, with her mouth, she was able to create a draft of air capable of drawing me to her, a current that I merely had to let transport me. Come, she would tell me, gesturing, it's time to go, or not, she didn't want anything, just for me to turn in her direction, for me to always know where she was. The beauty of it was that the other children did not react to the call, they never even gave the impression that they'd heard it. I instead stopped doing whatever I was doing at the moment, as if my mother's audible signal were traveling on frequencies that no one in the world could pick up except me.

But unlike the way we held hands, that call wasn't exclusively ours. My mother had not invented it, but rather inherited it. Her mother Juliana – my grandmother – used it to communicate from a distance with her and her brothers, with Uncle Matthias who had a bad heart, with Uncle Willi and Aunt Agathe, whom I knew nothing about except for their names and the fact that they too recognized the call that made me raise my head in the park to try to locate my mother. Then I found out *where* my grandmother, whom I never knew, had come up with that stratagem, a place crammed with scores of people – many more than in front of Mozart's house – where the risk of getting lost forever was indeed real, it was not one of those fears that assail you for no reason in everyday life. In that place being separated for even a few minutes could cost you dearly, so it had to be avoided at all costs, you had to keep your children within earshot, make sure they could hear your call at any time.

And now that I'm down here with you, Leni, I can't help but notice how similar our breathing is to that call, it's a sucked in sound too, immediately followed by a gurgling of bubbles, then another indrawn breath, then more bubbles, and so on until there will be no more air to breathe in and out.



In the meantime you've started swimming again. I've followed you and checked the pressure gauge –150 atmospheres, about 50 minutes. The last dive with Frau Leni. And now we've just come across a transparent little fish swimming at the bottom, you can only see its spine, as if it were an X-ray of itself: it must be a postlarval surgeon fish, no longer newly hatched and not yet mature.

Leni watches it, barely breathing, and I watch her while her back is to me and she doesn't know she's being observed. Or maybe she knows, but doesn't care, she considers me necessary and all in all harmless, for her I am "the fish girl," as she described me two days ago on the porch of her bungalow, merely the marine biologist thanks to whom she can still descend 50 feet and take her sensational underwater photographs.

And it's true, Leni. It's true that I'm a biologist, that I know the reef around Gangehi and the hideouts of the fish. It's all true, but it's not the whole truth, there are many things you still don't know. You know that until three months ago I was at another atoll, also in the Maldives, on an islet 90 nautical miles from this one, but you don't know that I intentionally transferred to Gangehi when I knew you were coming here. You think it was chance that brought us together and instead it was my doing. Just as you can't know that when it turned out you'd need an underwater guide, I immediately volunteered – I could do it, I tossed out to the diving guys, I don't mind, I even speak her language.

You know that my name is Martha, like the dancer in *Tiefland* you played yourself more than half a century ago; when we were introduced you flinched, I saw it, what do you think? After all this time, Martha is a name that still affects you, but you can't even remotely imagine that my mother gave it to me precisely because of *Tiefland*, just as you can't know who my mother was, and even if you knew, it doesn't necessarily mean that you would remember her.

Now you know where we're going because I point the way with gestures, as I did during the previous two dives, – over there, beyond that expanse of soft corals, in a depression of the seabed where mantas are sometimes found – but you don't know where I come from, you have no idea who I really am, you think you can camouflage yourself but it never occurs to you that I too can camouflage myself. So then come with me Leni, I know everything about you, and you follow me without having the slightest suspicion.

Take 1: Quotations

1902

“I was expecting a handsome baby boy. She arrived. I burst into tears seeing that ugly monster, her face shriveled like an old apple, her hair sparse and spiky, and what’s more, she was cross-eyed.”

Bertha Riefenstahl, Leni’s mother

1922

“I am convinced that you have no talent for dance and that you will not progress beyond mediocrity.”

Alfred Riefenstahl, Leni’s father

1923

“A dancer of extraordinary talent; a true, original embodiment of the art of dance. She is able to assume all the grace of a tremulous poppy and a bowed lily.”

Münchener Neuesten Nachrichten, Bavarian newspaper

1923

“After tonight, I believe in you.”

Alfred Riefenstahl, Leni’s father

1926

“An admirable performance by Leni Riefenstahl. She moves gracefully and has a beautiful face, pure and solemn.”

Paul Gordeaux, film critic

1926

“As an actress, she’s worthless. She’s not even very photogenic. As for her leaping here and there, it borders on the unbearable.”

Berliner Morgenpost, Berlin newspaper

1928

“Leni, for heaven’s sake. If I tell you to look to the left, why do you look to the right? You’re acting now. You’re not the director.”

Georg Wilhelm Pabst, director

1929

“She came to the set of my film to flirt with Mr. Pabst and that made me nervous. She had great legs, and that made me nervous too.”

Louise Brooks, actress

1929

“If that slut shows up on my set again, I swear to God I’m quitting.”

Marlene Dietrich, actress

1930

“Put that project out of your head, Leni. *The Blue Light* is a piece of rubbish.”

Arnold Fanck, director

1932

“Congratulations, *The Blue Light* is a great film.”

Charlie Chaplin, director and actor

1932

“The Führer has read your letter and asks that you come to Wilhelmshaven tomorrow, for a day. What shall I tell him?”

Wilhelm Brückner, Adolf Hitler’s aide-de-camp

1932

“When we’re in power, you’re going to make my films.”

Adolf Hitler, Leader of the Nazi Party

1932

“Admit it, you are in love with Hitler.”

Joseph Goebbels, future Minister of Propaganda

1932

“She was not Hitler’s lover or mistress, but she was cunning enough to let people think she might be.”

Walter Frentz, cameraman

1932

“She must become my mistress. I need her... My life is hell without her.”

Joseph Goebbels, future Minister of Propaganda

1933

“We were having a good time in a sauna when the phone rang. It was Göring, he said Hitler had been appointed chancellor. Thinking it was a joke, I passed the phone to Leni, who learned of the beginning of the Third Reich that way, naked as a jaybird.”

Hans Ertl, cameraman

1934

“I want the film about the party congress in Nuremberg to be made by Fraulein Riefenstahl. That’s an order.”

Adolf Hitler, Chancellor of the Reich

1934

“At times it almost seemed as if the Führer was looking to her to know what he should do. Madame Riefenstahl, someone pointed out, is the only person in Germany who can brag about giving him orders.”

Lucien Lemas, journalist

1934

“Wonderful images from the party’s film. That Leni is good at it. That woman, if only she were a man!”

Joseph Goebbels, Minister of Propaganda

1936

“With her abundant red hair tied back with a colorful scarf, Leni Riefenstahl walks through the Olympic Stadium to keep an eye on everything. When the Führer arrives, the director smiles at the VIP gallery.”

Pascal Copeau, journalist

1936

“In the stadium, all you see is her, everywhere you look.”

Bella Fromm, journalist

1936

“Do you think anyone will still be interested in seeing a film about the Olympics in two years?”

Joseph Goebbels, Minister of Propaganda

1938

“At the opening of *Olympia*. A resounding success. Masterful work by Leni Riefenstahl. One is electrified by its power, its depth, its beauty.”

Joseph Goebbels, Minister of Propaganda

1938

“What a joy to watch the astounding Negro Jesse Owens loping past his competitors like a panther.”

Jean Fayard, journalist

1938

“The steamer docks, Leni Riefenstahl lands in New York. What can I say? She’s as pretty as a swastika.”

Walter Windchell, journalist

1941

“We were all in the camp. She arrived with the police and chose people. I was there with a lot of other children and we were just what she was looking for.”

Rosa Winter, deportee at Camp Maxglan

1941

“Frau Riefenstahl felt a special joy in contact with the children Reinhardt and Winter.”

Anton Böhmer, SS Commander

1941

“The treatment of the gypsies during the filming of *Tiefland* went beyond mere kindness. Leni had truly fallen in love with these people.”

Bernhardt Minetti, actor

1941

“I ran away from the set without asking permission, I had learned that my mother was about to be deported to Ravensbrück. I found her at the police station. Then Leni Riefenstahl arrived with an SS in a high-ranking uniform. She was furious, and demanded that I apologize on my knees. When I refused, she said, “Well then, the Lager.”

Rosa Winter, deportee at Camp Maxglan

1944

“I promise you that Germany will rise from the ruins more splendid than ever.”

Adolf Hitler, Chancellor of the Reich

1945

“Your papers!”

An American soldier

1945

“Baby, I know all the movies, I used to go every night and I’ve never seen you. If you were a star, I’d know it.”

An American soldier

1945

“So you don’t know what they are, then? They’re photographs taken in concentration camps. Haven’t you ever heard of Auschwitz?”

An American officer

1945

“Miss Riefenstahl, it is not a crime to have slept with Hitler. We just want to know if Hitler was sexually normal or impotent, what his genitals looked like and so on.”

An American doctor

1948

“After careful investigation, it has been established that there are no political charges of any kind.”

Denazification Tribunal, Villingen

1958

“Dear Miss Riefenstahl, forget your film. The opposition against you is too fierce and – forgive my sincerity – I believe that you will no longer be able to practice your profession for the rest of your days.”

Herbert Tischendorf, film producer

1962

“*Leni buna nuba, nuba buna Leni* (Leni loves the Nuba, the Nuba love Leni).”

Song of the Nuba children, a people in Sudan

1964

“*Leni basso, Leni basso* (Leni has returned, Leni has returned).”

Nuba men and women

1969

“Leni, your photographs of the Nuba are simply sensational. We want to feature them in a story for the Christmas issue.”

Henri Nannen, editor of the weekly *Stern*

1972

“For her Berlin ’36 film, Leni Riefenstahl had eighty cameramen and assistants, a Zeppelin and Hitler’s support. To photograph the Munich Games, she had a Leicaflex and only one assistant (Horst Kettner) – no Zeppelin, no privilege.”

The Sunday Times, British magazine

1974

“She doesn’t care about politics, she’s only interested in beauty.”

Andy Warhol, artist

1974

I’ve seen *Triumph of the Will* fifteen times.”

Mick Jagger, rockstar

1992

“Her memoir is boring, poorly written, with a boundless narcissism. Leni Riefenstahl is so blinded by her own light that she sees nothing, absolutely nothing, around her.”

Ian Buruma, literary critic

1995

“Today she is found in action in the Maldives, bursting with health and sensuality, with a lover forty years younger, busy making a sensational underwater film.”

Gérard Lefort, journalist

2002

“Leni is deeply hurt by these accusations. Her enemies are using the gypsies to ruin her birthday and eclipse the release of *Impressionen unter Wasser*. She had no idea that her gypsies would be killed. She got along very well with them, no one ever treated gypsies better than she did.”

Horst Kettner, Leni’s companion

2002

“Leni Riefenstahl’s life is a series of frames moving through one hundred years of a morally lacking existence.

Antoine de Baecque, film critic

2002

“The opening of *Impressionen unter Wasser*, in a grand Berlin theater, is applauded as though the audience had innocently admired those multicolored fish.”

Lorraine Millot, journalist

2002

“Once again, today as in the past, Leni Riefenstahl dances with sharks.”

G rard Lefort, journalist