

# Pola Negri: a silent film star rises anew



by Frank Levine

Her life began in obscurity, soared through the firmament of early Hollywood like Halley's Comet, then dimmed into relative seclusion in south Texas. She is Pola Negri, a silent screen legend.

She is entombed next to her mother, Eleanora, at Calvary Cemetery in Los Angeles, resting among other luminaries of her time, including actor John Barrymore, jazzman Ferdinand "Jelly Roll" Morton and Lou Costello of "Abbott and Costello."

She lived and died a diva, even chastising a young physician at her deathbed who didn't recognize her name.

But since her passing, a minor cult following grew up around her work, with her extraordinary life finally illuminated in a documentary by Polish-born director Mariusz K. Kotowski, and his Austin-based production company.

Mr. Kotowski's "Pola Negri: Life is a Dream in Cinema," produced in 2006 by Heidi Hutter through Bright Shining City Productions, presents the star to new generations. "She was a stunningly beautiful and brilliant actress, far ahead of her time," Mr. Kotowski says in his Austin offices. "She opened the doors for Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich."

## Background

Pola Negri was born Barbara Apolonia Chalupiec in Lipno, near Janawa, Poland, in 1897.

It was a muddy and miserable crossroads town, 45 miles northeast of Warsaw, barely breathing under harsh Russian rule. At the time, three buildings rose above the roughly hewn wooden houses and dingy shops — the church with towering spires on a hill, the domed synagogue slightly below, and a concrete-block government office.

The town would eventually have historic significance far beyond its size. It was part of the 1920 "Miracle of the Vistula," when the Poles halted the Bolshevik invasion of Central Europe. Its name was mentioned again on Sept. 1, 1939, when the German Luftwaffe bombed it on the first day of World War II.

Pola Negri's childhood reflected "Old World" realities. She lived in a semi-feudal world defined by class — ostentatious wealth in the hands of the noble few, and little sustenance in the hands of the impoverished many. As the daughter of Eleanora de Kielczeska, who came from a family of destitute nobility, and Slovak immigrant Jerzy Mathias-Chalupiec, Pola faced a dangerous and uncertain future. Two sisters died in childhood. Her father vanished following his 1905 arrest and imprisonment by Czarist troops as a revolutionary espousing Polish independence.

Pola and her mother left the rural squalor of Lipno for the urban squalor of Warsaw. Her mother washed dishes for daily bread, but sent Pola to Countess Platen's boarding school in Warsaw and later to the Imperial

Ballet School in St. Petersburg and still later to Warsaw's Philharmonia Drama School.

Pola left the school at 13 after contracting tuberculosis, returning a year later to enter the Imperial Academy of Dramatic Arts. She claimed to be 17, a fact eventually supported by the appearance of a birth certificate listing her "official" birth date of Jan. 3, 1897.

By the time she really was 17, she had changed her name to Pola, a diminutive of her given name Apolonia, and Negri, after the Italian poet Ada Negri.

Over the years, at least three other birthdates appeared, with Negri claiming in her 1970 autobiography, "Memories of a Star," to have been born on Dec. 31, 1899 — not surprising, given it was a date on the cusp of a new era.

## Career

In 1913, she made her spectacular stage debut at the Rozamaitosci Theater in Gerhardt Hauptmann's "Hannele," and soon appeared in her first film, "Niewolnica Zmyslow." Her stage presence attracted Alexander Hertz, a Polish film producer, who made several of her earliest films.

She went on to make eight films in Poland. Then she was spotted by pioneering filmmaker Max Reinhardt, who invited her to Germany. By 1919, she was an established popular actress in Europe, thus attracting the attention of Hollywood. Her stardom and her brief marriage to Count Eu-

gene Dambski, a Polish Army officer, opened many doors to Continental aristocracy, power and, eventually, to a new world.

The marriage lasted less than a year, but those high-profile contacts in German, Polish and Russian aristocracy would someday both help — and haunt — her.

## Hollywood

In 1921, Pola finally made her way to Hollywood with great fanfare. She'd been hired by German director Ernst Lubitsch, who cast her in "Passion" and "Gypsy Blood" (a version of the Bizet opera, "Carmen"). Famous Players-Lasky Corp., later known as Paramount, paid her \$3,000 a week, promoting her to American audiences as "The woman who plays and makes men pay."

In one of her first interviews, she told a Hollywood reporter her journey of a few thousand miles had propelled her "at least five years into the future."

Within a year, she was said to be earning \$10,000 a week. Audiences loved her private life, her brief affair with Charlie Chaplin and her headline-driven competition with Gloria Swanson, also in the Paramount stable. (They once reportedly had a cat fight with real cats). Their feuding, however, was all for publicity, as they were quite congenial friends in private.

Before the stock market crash of 1929, she reportedly had a personal fortune estimated at \$5 million with a mansion in Beverly Hills, a Chateau near Paris and a villa on the French Riviera.

Her financial success was due to several blockbuster movies. Among them: "Belle Donna" (1923); "The Cheat" (1923); "The Spanish Dancer" (1923); "Men" (1924); "Forbidden Paradise" (1924); "Shadows of Paris" (1924); "East of Suez" (1925); and "Hotel Imperial" (1927).

### Downhill

Soon after, however, her career began to falter. Some blamed her ill-fated affairs, the introduction of talkies and the "burden" of her Polish accent. Others blamed her outbursts at Rudolph Valentino's funeral in 1926, when she declared she was his betrothed while hurling her body upon his casket. Newspapers described her outbursts as publicity stunts and decried her as little more than an opportunist.

Her public image deteriorated further when, within a year of Valentino's death, she and Serge Mdivani, a Georgian prince, arrived together in New York on the S.S. Aquitanias, further confirming for many that her Valentino performance was just a publicity stunt.

Although her film "Barbed Wire" received good reviews later that year, the writing was on the wall. She married Mdivani and moved to France, only to divorce again in 1931 for "abandonment." She blamed Mdivani for losing most of her fortune following the stock market crash of 1929.

### Under suspicion

Few know that when Pola Negri arrived in the United States, she was not only an international movie star; she was also on U.S. government radar as a possible German espionage agent.

Documents uncovered in the U.S. National Archives reveal that on Aug. 11, 1922, the U.S. Department of State sent letters to J. Edgar Hoover, then assistant director of the FBI, and to U.S. Army intelligence describing Ms. Negri as a "German spy."

Suspicion about her loyalties dogged her for more than 20 years.

How this affected her career, no one knows. But she always seemed to show up in the right place and at the right time, especially in Germany in the days leading up to World War II. Some believe she may have been "flipped" by the feds — acting as a double agent — and thus working not for Germany but for the FBI. The theory is supported in part by Hoover's reported long-standing association with her, including an extensive exchange of correspondence in the 1960s.

"There were always rumors and unproved allegations," says Jeanine Basinger, chair of the Film Studies Program at Wesleyan University,

"But I doubt she was ever a spy."

### Talent

Pola Negri's diminutive body and facial animation expressed stunning power and emotion in unprecedented ways. In film, she projected strength, independence and the image of a sexually aware woman at a time when women were typically portrayed as helpless virgins, suffering mothers or evil prostitutes.

"She was very, very important to the film industry and enormously influential as a very strong, independent, female figure who made her own decisions in life," says Ms. Basinger. "She was a fantastic actress, with tremendous range and subtlety; but it was her off-screen antics, like having wolfhounds to match the color of her cars, her crazy temperament and her negative publicity that diminished the overall view of her as an actress and film pioneer."

But what she may have lost in Hollywood, she gained in the world, as her influence extended far beyond the silver screen.

Women around the world flocked to see her films, mimicking her flamboyant style, provocative dress and strong independence and, above all, her challenge of traditional male dominance. She was irreverent, painting her fingernails and toenails red, smoking cigarettes, wearing high boots and turbans, while displaying her financial independence in a whirl of furs, diamonds and pearls.

"She was the first to do many things... from the way she dressed, to the way she moved. She was the first to dance with a snake... something unheard of at the time," Mr. Kotowski says. "Many of today's female artists follow the ideas pioneered by Pola. Just look at MTV... Even Britney Spears used a snake in one of her videos..."

Unfortunately for her career, Hollywood typecast her as a vamp, and rumors swirled around her. Although she starred in a number of very successful films in the United States, the censorship of the the Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 (Hays Code), limited her roles. In a 1978 interview, Pola Negri boasted she was the first to bring sex to movies "but in a dignified and subtle manner."

### Rejection

Even before she left for Europe, Pola Negri had become a studio liability. Paramount did not renew her contract, refusing to list her name in their billboards and advertisements.

The whispers and rumors, however, did not diminish her artistic accomplishments. In France, she made "Fanatisme" (1934) before signing a contract with German film studio UFA in 1935. While in Germany, her films were highly regard-

ed, including "Mazurka" (1935), "Moskou-Shanghai" (1937), and "Madame Bovary" (1937).

More controversy was to come, however. Nazis claimed she was part Jewish and forbade her from working in Germany. But Adolph Hitler was so taken by her beauty and talent, he personally intervened to have the order rescinded.

After the outbreak of World War II, she returned to France, then sailed for the United States in 1941, where she was briefly detained and questioned.

### Life in Texas

After living in Los Angeles for years, in 1957 Pola Negri moved to San Antonio with heiress and former radio personality Margaret L. West. For a time, they lived in the downtown Menger Hotel, later buying a large home in the Olmos

Park district of San Antonio.

After the death of Ms. West in 1963, Pola Negri engaged in numerous civic activities, including membership on the board of directors of the San Antonio Symphony Orchestra and the San Antonio Little Theater.

Her personal library was donated to Trinity University in San Antonio, and a large collection of memorabilia, including rare prints of her early films, were given to St. Mary's University.

Near her bed, until her dying day, there remained a signed picture of the man she alleged was her long-lost love, Rudolph Valentino. It is inscribed, "To my imperative yet imperially darling Polita, *Que jaime plus my ma vie* (whom I love more than my life)." ■

*Frank Levine is a seasoned Austin Journalist.*

## All that remains

by Carolyn Banks  
Texas LifeTimes Editor

It is touching to see the things that the glamorous movie star Pola Negri left behind. The items are tucked away in several cardboard file boxes and rest on plain metal shelves in the library of St. Mary's University in San Antonio.

Ms. Negri's medical records are there — she died of complications of a brain tumor in 1987 — but Brother Robert D. Wood, responsible for the collection, feels they should stay off limits.

There are photographs and prayer books, along with several red leather scrapbooks with her name embossed in gold on the covers. She had paid Luce's Clipping Service to gather the reams of articles that mentioned her name.

Here are some headlines:

"A Creature of Fire!"

"Hail Pola as Venus of 1922"

"Europe's Most Beautiful Star Here at Last"

"Warsaw Dark Lady Who Rocked Hollywood"

When Pola Negri was 70, she appeared at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, where a 1925 film of hers was being shown, and gave an interview: "The past was wonderful," she said. "It was youth and exhilaration. I would not have missed it for the world. The present is age and a little wisdom. I am grateful to have survived long enough to have experienced it." ■



Curator Brother Robert D. Wood holds a photo of Rudolph Valrnino and his horse Jadaan in Pola Negri's photo album.

(Photo by Carolyn Banks)