

Queen of the Mountain

A film by Martha Goell Lubell



Video, 2005
56 minutes, Color

CREDITS

Producer/Director: Martha Goell Lubell
Writer/Script: Sharon Mulally & Carol Rosenbaum
Cinematographer: Peter Brownscombe
Music: Sumi Tonooka
Editor: Sharon Mulally
Cast/Characters: Tovah Feldshuh, Voice of Theresa Goell & Kathryn Peterson, Narrator



SYNOPSIS

Theresa Goell started her career as an archaeologist with four strikes against her: she was a female, divorced, a Jew working with Muslims and hearing impaired. But with unshakeable determination, Goell abandoned the comfortable yet restricted lifestyle of her conservative Jewish family in 1933 to pursue her passion at Nemrud Dagh, an isolated mountaintop in Southwestern Turkey that had eluded archaeologists for centuries. Nemrud Dagh had been shrouded in mystery until Goell's pioneering excavations. Struggling with a hearing disability, her work at the site was nothing short of extraordinary, bringing roads, tourists and employment to the impoverished local population. After living most of her life as an outsider, Goell became "queen of the mountain," gaining worldwide attention for her work and finding a new home among the Kurdish community there.

Lubell's tender film takes the shape of an epic adventure; Goell's saga comes to life through breathtaking National Geographic archival footage of the excavations, hundreds of family photographs and finally Goell's stunning oral history and letters, read by acclaimed actress Tovah Feldshuh. Lovingly restoring the legacy of this pioneering Jewish woman, QUEEN OF THE MOUNTAIN offers a unique and intriguing portrait of an eccentric spirit and a true American original.

FESTIVALS & SCREENINGS

- Brattleboro Women's Film Festival

DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Martha Goell Lubell produced and directed DARING TO RESIST with Barbara Attie. The film was broadcast nationally on PBS in 2000, 2001 and 2002 and screened at high schools, Holocaust organizations and film festivals including the Double Take (now Full Frame) International Documentary Festival at Duke University, the Human Rights Watch International Film Festival at Lincoln Center in New York, and Women in the Directors Chair Film Festival, Chicago. The film won first prize for Holocaust Biography, International Jewish Video Competition Berkeley, CA and Grand Prize Documentary, Atlantic City Film Festival. Lubell's recent credits include FACES OF THE HOLOCAUST and CROSSTOWN.

She was associate producer for the Discovery Network's Emmy Award-winning series "Teacher TV" during 1992 and 1993. Lubell has produced two series of documentaries for WHYY Public Radio: HARD TIMES FOR DREAMING and WHEN A PLANT CLOSES. She was a researcher for CBS News and ABC News from 1970 until 1975 in New York, Paris and Japan.

The New York Times

March 25, 2006

TV Review | 'Queen of the Mountain'

Examining the Life of Tess Goell, a Pioneering Archaeologist

By ANITA GATES

Tess Goell was the kind of American heroine that seemed to exist only in 1930's movies, played by Katharine Hepburn or Rosalind Russell. They were women bravely striding into what was largely believed to be a man's world — flying planes, battling city hall, working in formerly all-male offices or newsrooms. Goell strode into archaeology, a divorced, hearing-impaired Jewish woman amid Muslims in southern Turkey.

Her story, "Queen of the Mountain," a one-hour documentary directed by Martha Goell Lubell, a niece, has the feel of an affectionate family portrait, but that is not a complaint. The film, to be shown on Channel 13 tomorrow, is a strong, rich narrative with visuals to match.

Goell, whose real first name was Theresa, was born in Brooklyn in 1901, the second-oldest daughter of Russian immigrants. Her father wanted her to marry the rabbi's brother, and Goell did, but that didn't stop her from returning to her architectural studies at Radcliffe College afterward. She left her husband, Cyrus Levinthal, at home. She had a son, Jay, but motherhood didn't end her career dreams. Tutankhamen's tomb, filled with ancient treasures, was found in 1922, the same year she married, and it whetted her appetite to go digging into the past.

"She was self-motivated," Harriet Vicente, another niece, says in the film, "and that was a terrible thing in those days."

Goell had an additional problem. While she was still in college, doctors told her she was going deaf. She set out to learn lip-reading.

When Goell and her husband parted ways, she moved to Palestine in the 1930's. And then, after returning to New York in the 1940's, she went to Nemrud Dagh, in southwestern Turkey. Some students of ancient cultures had dismissed the 2,000-year-old mountaintop ruins there, from the kingdom of Commagene, because they were "too Oriental" for the classicists and too classic for the Orientalists. Goell thought that was what made the site interesting, with its colossal sculptures and reliefs of King Antiochus I and the gods. There were also huge stela with inscriptions in classical Greek.

"This is not material for a term paper," she had announced years before, when she was given a school assignment about the site. "This is really a life's work."

And so it was. An abundance of evocative old photographs and film bring her quest — she began excavations there in 1953 — to life. The actress Tovah Feldshuh reads from Goell's letters, but, thankfully, the film provides Goell's real voice too, in crackly old recordings. "It was a complete shambles," Goell says of her first glimpse of the Nemrud Dagh ruins, with a blend of amusement and remembered despair.

Goell died in 1985, without achieving one heartfelt goal: finding the tomb of Antiochus. But she had accomplished a great deal. As a friend, Frances Horowitz, says in the film, "She got where she wanted to get."