

First Hand Films presents:

# POLISH PRAYERS

Switzerland, Poland / 2022 / 85 min.

## PRESS NOTES

**A film by  
Hanka Nobis**

**World premiere**

International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) 2022  
Luminous

Press materials can be downloaded [HERE](#)

## SCREENINGS IDFA 2022

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Sunday	13 Nov 2022	19:00	Tuschinski 3	Press & Industry
Monday	14 Nov 2022	18:30	Munt 13	World premiere
Wednesday	16 Nov 2022	12:15	Tuschinski 4	
Thursday	17 Nov 2022	17:45	Eye: Cinema 1	
Saturday	19 Nov 2022	20:30	Munt 10	

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## SYNOPSIS

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Antek, 22, grows up in a deeply religious and radical right-wing family in contemporary Poland. Catholicism, nationalism, homophobia and celibacy define his world. Over several years, filmmaker Hanka Nobis follows him, his friends and his family with her crew. She sees Antek enjoy his growing power in the Brotherhood, a small group of like-minded young men. But when he falls in love, doubts begin to set in - first about the prohibition of premarital sex, then about his view towards the LGBTIQ+ community and ultimately about the existence of God.



## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

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My intention was to make a film portraying the many faces of right-wing radicalism and to carry this out with an open heart. The first step towards change is understanding, and if both sides continue to propagate a simplistic narrative about the other, this change could take a long time...

The film is told through one young man who is set to become the leader of an ultra-conservative catholic group called the Brotherhood. Just as he's about to get promoted, he starts questioning the moral principles that for years he's been fighting for. When I met Antek, it was clear to me that he was hurt and that deep down he's quite a sensitive person. He chose to hide this by disconnecting from his emotions and following the rules set out by his family on religion and especially the archetypical view on masculinity. As he joined the Brotherhood his views got even more radicalised, but then a traumatic personal event happened when his parents separated. Antek has taken quite some time to come to terms with it.

We filmed for a long time, and I became a friend to the protagonists. I'm grateful that their development enabled them to open up to me. I was there with him when he met the women who accompanied him on his way and many situations where we were together on his journey out of the Brotherhood.

*Hanka Nobis, October 2022*

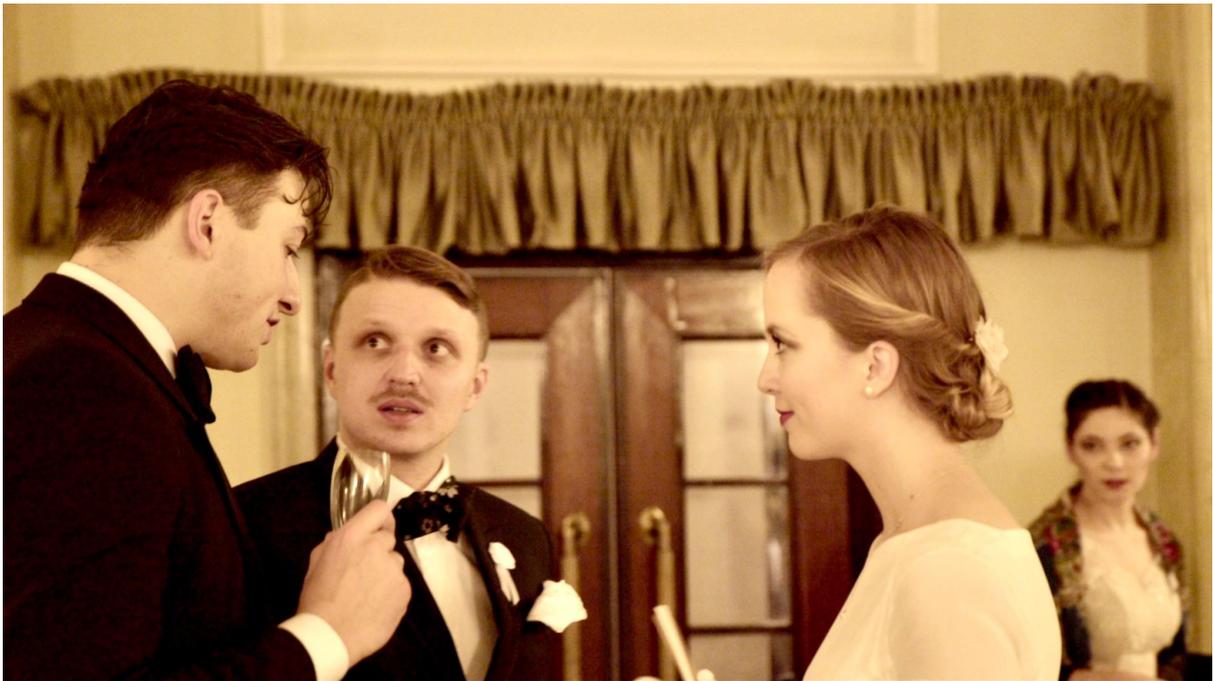
## ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

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### **Hanka Nobis**

Born in 1990 in Bialystok. During her MISH studies at the University of Warsaw, she dealt with migration according to: Mongolism / Tibetology, Cultural Studies, Ethnology, Polish Philology and Liberal Artes. In 2009 she began working in theatre, acting, assisting directors and later directing and producing video installations, as well as making costumes. Hanna Nobis works with all renowned Polish theatre institutions in Poland, with Jacek Poniedziatek, Anna Smolar, Michat Marczak, Pawel Łozinski, Krzysztof Skonieczny, Wiktor Rubin, Radoslaw Rychcik, Markus Ohrn, Jill Godmilow.

Nobis' first feature length documentary POLISH PRAYERS premiered at IDFA 2022 in the LUMINOUS section and had been at FIPA, WEMW, Munich DokFest, in Sheffield and presented at IDFA 2021 as a Work in Progress. It is supported by the Swiss Federal Office of Culture and Zurich Film Fund in, HBO MAX is co-producer and so is MDR with ARTE. She is currently working on her second film SONGS OF SISTERHOOD, also produced by First Hand Films.



# INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR HANKA NOBIS

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**Your film starts with this kind of male-only survival camp in the woods. How did you find this group and what was your initial goal when filming them?**

From the very beginning I was interested in some kind of an alt-right organisation. Or let's say the right side of the barrier when we were demonstrating on the left. So I started researching for groups. Radical, violent groups. This was a starting point for a short I was thinking of at that time. I was familiar with the figure of a guy from a poor family, with an alcoholic father, and who's joining workshops organised by a national camp. I went to join him for a while to try to feel his first contact with the men who impressed him. He was not the right protagonist though, the one with the sparkle. I started to focus on researching non-violent far right, also asking around my friends if they have any kind of contacts. One of them sent me this blog of a group of guys - a Brotherhood organisation. They proclaimed things like *'In times of masculinity crisis we need to gather to exercise bravery and train our belief'*. They use an interesting language, elegant, oldschool, a bit like history nerds, and there was something intense about it. It said that their organisation is built on three pillars: religion, intellect and military. I wondered what kind of people they were and wanted to know more so I wrote a message and set up a meeting. I wanted to convince them to have a girl joining them for research - and by the way, that I will have a camera with me.

The first obstacles happened fast as the guys were a bit shy talking in front of me. So I just observed them, when they explained things about anti-pacifism to one another, or things like that. I really did not know which direction it would take. Still, I had the feeling that I could open a door with it. There are a lot of things we do not know about the right side. They live happy lives and believe in the things that are natural to them. I never saw them in that way. Even though I am from the other side of the political barrier and I am not a believer, I do not share their world views in general. But there are things I do feel understanding for as I am discovering new perspectives.

**The centre of the narration shifts fast towards Antek, who becomes the main protagonist of 'Polish Prayers' then. Why did you choose him among all the young boys?**

We went together with some boys to Ukraine for this survival camp in the woods. Antek appeared there for the first time with the group. He was new to me, I already knew the rest of the guys. So I asked someone from the group about him and they told me that he could not join for a certain time because of private matters and other issues. I was immediately interested, of course. So we were watching him, my DoP and I. Antek was kind of working with the camera, something about his eyes. He enjoyed it more than the others. There's this cleaning scene, for example. When he is washing his balls in front of us. He had no problem with that. I felt that there could be something deeper to him as a person, also because he was simply more open.

**How was the reaction of the boys being filmed by you in the first place? Also during the ball ceremony later on, or one of the anti-LGBT protests?**

There were definitely some talks about basic topics like me being a female and how I could never understand these males. They were not really convinced about the idea of me trying to portray them. They feared that my presence would change the energy of the group. At this point it might be good to mention that many of those boys did not have much contact with a female besides their mother or other blood relatives. Some of them had their stance on life and values and that was it, others seemed afraid of a feminist. So of course they thought this would never work in an authentic way. I simply argued by telling that I still want to try, especially because I am a woman. We all knew that I would bring my perspective to it. Those two sides had their boundaries, but eventually we started to cooperate. And a very interesting energy started to evolve. It became very private, no matter the location. Some of them even started talking more to me as I gained trust and respect for my work. Not from all of them, but some.

**Poland has been in a rather bad light in the media for several years now. Conservative politics, anti-abortion rights, LGBT-free zones. Where do you see the film positioned in the midst of these movements?**

I would also start with a question that goes through my mind when it comes to this: Is it possible to have the most extreme right and left side of media as both partners or supporters on the film poster? That was my question from the very beginning. I live in Poland, there are certain media on both sides which probably do not really know what the other is doing. That is where I position my film, I guess. You do not have many cultural products where you have insights into both directions - left and right - within the same person, as it turned out with Antek.

**Do you see „Polish Prayers“ in general as a political film? Or maybe a queer film?**

It would be interesting and also great to have it labeled as queer. But with all honesty, I do not know how to go there from my perspective. I am still in the process of thinking about a concrete way to talk about it and announce it to people. Still, I believe it is a political film. Everything is political in a sense. There will be many opinions on it, I guess. Especially when it comes to the timing of releasing it in Poland, there will probably be elections there. That will be interesting. I am a bit scared that the right side will reject me. The story can be viewed as this young person who turns sides, it could fall into the hands of leftists. But my intentions are not to put anyone on the spot here. For me cinema is about contrast, about movement. I tried to take care to portray every person with dignity, without any charges. If the audience will judge someone, that is up to them. I do not think that my film can change someone's political views completely. I see it rather like a liquid floating through the crack of a stone. It can influence you, perhaps. Set some impulses. That's it. From that point on, we can only deal with it on a private level. No matter if it means to be political, queer, both or other directions.

### **Were there any obstacles during shooting? For example, when Antek started to rethink his religious life?**

His journey shaped the formula of the film, of course. From the very beginning, Antek set his boundaries with the camera, with me and my team. For example, when he met his first girlfriend and wanted to get intimate with her, we wanted some light shots of these moments, but he did not allow it. So we had to show this intimacy in different ways. It was how it was. But I do not want to label those things strictly as obstacles. I feel very lucky to follow a cis-male, white dude like Antek and dissect him bit by bit. As a documentarist I believe in the first person narrative, obviously. But Antek gave me very fruitful ideas, like seeing the whole project as a diary of his personal journey. As simple as this.

### **How did the relationship between you as a director and Antek as a protagonist develop throughout the years, and how is your connection now after the film is done?**

I think we became friends and still are. During his birthday party he dedicated a song to me, although his girlfriend was there. Now he is in a very exclusive, close relationship. Somehow, naturally, we stopped filming once that started. She was not eager to be in front of the camera, and so his relation towards filming shifted. I do not know if that's the thing that will make him happy forever, but I feel that the two of us have something completely different. Outside any blood relations or so. He was the protagonist of my first documentary film and I will always be grateful for that. The trust we built is very generous. He gave us such an access to his life. And of course we are currently in contact as Antek is coming to Amsterdam for the world premiere. It's very exciting.

### **What was the reaction of Antek's family towards a film about him?**

I have with each of them, his mum and his sister, totally separate relationships. His mother is a hard worker, doing three different faculties at a time. She decided to separate from her husband, Antek's father, and was very judged by Antek for it. For several years he did not really see her as a human being, from my perspective. He could not understand her position, while his dad did not work at all and she was earning the money for the family. Pretty the Easter European mother figure we have met way too often along the way. She is so open towards life, I have very strong feelings towards her. She even gave some smaller ideas when it came to certain things. Like which radio station should play in the back to make certain scenes more effective.

She taught me a lot. When it comes to his father, he is not a big fan of the film. Witnessing how his son loses his belief in religion and God hit him hard. He could not really comprehend it fully, I would say. It seemed like he simply had not the tools to understand it, just like he doesn't understand his wife leaving him. I hope he will find a way of understanding someday. In the end, he still is a loving father. With the smaller siblings we just agreed with the parents to show them briefly, without putting them in the credits.

## **How did the collaboration with the film's producer Esther van Messel happen?**

It was like a miracle. I did not meet any collaborators on the Polish side. Esther and I met during the Warsaw Film Festival at a DocLab meeting. I was screening some work-in-progress material. She was doing a workshop for producers where my initial producers - friends of mine - took part in. They liked my project back then, but were exhausted by doing docs. They have already moved on to feature films. So I pitched the film with some other friends to different people over time, also to Esther, but it always got rejected. I reached the point where I thought that perhaps I need to become my own producer for this film. Then during the pitch in Warsaw Esther saw the raw material and even demanded applause from all participants. She liked it! We had a funny back and forth conversation about who's who of the film. Who is the producer? Who directs it? And all the time I had to answer that it was just me. It was the first time I got such positive feedback after two years. After so many people only focused on the difficulties with it, Esther saw the potential as a sales agent. But she wanted me to have producers, so we set up a meeting with a friend of mine who showed a bit of interest. He was super late for the meeting, so I called him to ask where he was. On the phone he was like: 'Ask her to produce your film. She has the contacts, maybe she can get some money.' It seemed a bit crazy, but I asked. Esther was surprised, of course, as her experience is focused on sales. The next day she said yes. It was just amazing.

## **,Polish Prayers': tell us about the idea behind the title of the film.**

It was Esther's idea in the end. It put kind of a pressure on me, so we talked ideas over and over. There are those karaoke night moments during the film which stuck in my head, the boys' singing sounded more like a prayer. I think the title drew itself from that. From another perspective prayers are something that bring people together. Creating human bonds. And I am saying this as someone who was raised Catholic and prayed with her Grandma every night, but does not believe in a catholic God or the church. But I miss those prayers with her, she died this year and was very grateful for her family and life. Those small rituals I miss sometimes. I hope the audience will not simply laugh at those 'karaoke prayers'. There is a depth in them.

# PRODUCER'S STATEMENT

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After 20 years of international distribution and sales, and five of theatrical work in all the language regions of Switzerland, we developed a tradition of Executive Producing. Assessing around 1000 projects a year, we pick roughly 10 for world sales. We got trained to look out for quality, which is our passion, also at the most early stages. In 2018, I produced a TV film with SRF and ARTE and then sold it all over the world. I liked the inspiration and decided to pursue the adventure – not letting go of the international work, au contraire, combining the two. After all, we're in pole position at First Hand Films for international production. In November 2019 I met Hanka Nobis very briefly – and was intrigued by her pitch, curious to learn more.

We started to cooperate during the pandemic, developed a structure for the story and a pitch, and got to know each other virtually. By the time the film was financed we had met in real life for maybe one hour. Perhaps this explains the not-so-normal Swiss-Polish co-production, which would not have been possible without the amazing support in Switzerland (Zurich Film Fund and the cinema section of the Federal Office of Culture, with SRF, German speaking and RTS, French speaking Swiss TV), and our main co-producers HBO MAX, and MDR in collaboration with ARTE.

There is something raw and refined, something tender and thorough in Hanka Nobis' work. She sees everything, feels all of it and has empathy for every being alive. She's smart and dedicated and passionate, and sometimes I wonder if I worked all my life just to get to this point where I can produce the films she wants to make. POLISH PRAYERS is a film looking for questions, and SONGS OF SISTERHOOD, Nobis' next one, will be dealing with what happens after understanding some of the answers. While doing my work on global sales, and producing other projects as well, I will never forget the impact this young woman and her stories have on my life, career, and company. I just hope she will tell many, many more stories from this world.

*Esther van Messel, First Hand Films, October 2022*

# ABOUT THE PRODUCTION COMPANY

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**First Hand Films** is an award-winning international sales company, a theatrical distributor in Switzerland's four language regions and a producer based in Zürich. Run by Esther van Messel since 1998, FHF works with ambitious and accessible projects worldwide, combining intelligence, practical knowledge and experience.

Today, **First Hand Films** have been seen by many millions of people all over the world, in cinemas, on TV and online. Accessible & passionate one-offs, features, series, slots, theme nights, new media: around 250 hand-picked titles from all over the world in a constantly renewed catalogue.

We get to work when the good stories open up universes we never knew existed, when the story takes us through hell and back, when it walks rainbows with us, and we learn something about a complex and beautiful world. And when all emotions convey a statement, a political one, a human one, the filmmakers' very own one. When there is authenticity in the plot and fantasy in the images. And when we come back to find a world that will never look the same again.

In Switzerland, we operate as theatrical distributors for fiction and documentaries, releasing around half a dozen films a year, from Swiss films to Cannes Caméra d'Or Cannes and Oscar winners. Back in 2009, we took *BURMA VJ* to an Academy Award® nomination in 2010, and in 2014, we received an Honorary Award by the MiradasDoc festival for "having been able to rejuvenate the language of documentary filmmaking and bring it closer to our living rooms."

## **Filmography (until 2020)**

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|------|--|--|
| 2024 | <b>SONGS OF SISTERHOOD</b><br>Hanka Nobis, CH/PL, 90'/52' - FHF Production   | <b>CONQUERING THE ART BUSINESS</b><br>Caro Wloka & Sarah Rathgeb, CH, 52' - FHF Production                                       |
| 2023 | <b>THE PERFECT MEAL - THE SCIENCE OF THE MEDITERRANEAN DIET</b><br>Andreas Merkouris & Andreas Apostolides, GR, 52'/72'/5X26' - EP FHF | <b>SHE THEY US - TOWARDS AN EQUAL FUTURE (WT)</b><br>Zaïde Bil, Sam Peeters, Heleen Declercq & Ischa Clissen, BE, 5x45' - EP FHF |
|      | <b>CALL ME DANCER</b><br>Leslie Champaine & Pip Gilmour, US, 90'/52' - EP FHF  | <b>MY MAYSOON</b><br>Batoul Karbijha, NL, 55'  |
| 2022 | <b>POLISH PRAYERS</b><br>Hanka Nobis, CH/PL, 90'/52' - FHF Production  | <b>THE JOURNALIST AND HER JAILERS</b><br>Adithya Sambamurthy, DE, 83'/52'  |

**300 TRILLION - A 300-TRILLION TRAP**

Rudolph Herzog, DE, 80'/52' - EP FHF

**THE WITCHES OF IRELAND**

Paula Kehoe, IR, 6x25'

**TWO KIDS A DAY**

David Wachsmann, IL/FL, 50'/90' - EP FHF

**THE ILLUSION OF ABUNDANCE**

Erika Gonzalez Ramirez and Matthieu Lietaert, BE, 58'

**UP TO G-CUP - INSIDE THE FIRST LINGERIE SHOP IN IRAQI KURDISTAN**

Jacqueline van Vugt, NL, 54'/81'

2021 **FREEPORTS**

Martin Gronemeyer, DE/AT, 52' - EP FHF

**A-HA - THE MOVIE**

Thomas Robsahm & Aslaug Holm, NO/DE, 108'/90'/58' - EP FHF

**THE STORY OF LOOKING**

Mark Cousins, UK, 87'

**LOST BOYS**

Joonas Neuvonen & Sadri Cetinkaya, FI, 52'/92'

2020 **TOWN OF GLORY**

Dmitry Bogolyubov, RU/DE, 82'/52' - EP FHF

**DAY ZERO**

Nils Bökamp, DE, 3x43' - EP FHF

**THE NEGOTIATORS - HOW TO MAKE PEACE**

Rosalind Bain, ES/AT/CH, 80'/56' - FHF Co-Production

**VERIFIED COUPLE**

Joscha Bongard, DE, 74'/52'

**INVISIBLE FRONTLINERS**

Hedi Bäbler, CH, 52' - FHF Production

**JAFFA: A GUIDE TO GENTRIFICATION**

Keren Shayo and Lavi Vanounou, IL, 68'/56'

**THE RIVER BETWEEN US**

Carl Gierstorfer, DE, 90'/52'

**TRUST ME**

Emil Trier, NO, 93'/52' - EP FHF

**THERE IS A BORDER IN MY BACKYARD**

Jens Loftager, DK, 75'/43' - EP FHF

**IT IS NOT OVER YET**

Louise Detlefsen, DK/DE, 52'/92'

**THE ELK FOREST**

Ane Helga Lykka, NW, 57'

**IDOMENI**

David Aronowitsch & Ahmed Abdullahi, SW, 90' - EP FHF

**DIVORCE DENIED**

David Ofek and Mia Webb, IL, 59'

Full filmography of First Hand Films online: <https://www.firsthandfilms.com/films/>

# CREDITS

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Director	Hanka Nobis
Writers	Hanka Nobis, Esther van Messel
Production	Esther van Messel (First Hand Films)
Script	Hanna Nobis, Esther van Messel
Director of Photography	Miłosz Kasiura
Chief Editor	Bigna Tomschin
Producers	HBO Max, First Hand Films
Co-Producers	Offhand Films, MDR in collaboration with ARTE ,SRF
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MDR	Evelyn Wenzel - Production Manager Thomas Beyer - Commissioning Editor
ARTE	Catherine Le Goff - Commissioning Editor
SRF Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen	Urs Augstburger
RTS Radio Télévision Suisse Department of Documentaries	Steven Artels - Commissioning Editor Bettina Hofmann – Commissioning Editor
Funding	Bundesamt für Kultur, Switzerland Zürcher Filmstiftung, Switzerland
***	
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Additional Sound	Filip Charitonow, Błarzej Kanclerz
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Colorists	Jürgen Kupka, Paul Breuer
Conforming, Online & DCP	Ueli Müller
Sound Mix & Mastering	Ralph Krause
Music Supervisor	Pirmin Marti
Graphic Design	Barbara Jaszczuk
Production Managers	Daniel Schneider, Sarah Rathgeb
Production Assistant	Lena Radoch
Project supported by	DocLab Poland

## **FORUMS & MARKETS**

POLISH PRAYERS has been pitched at FIPA, WEMW, Munich DokFest, in Sheffield and presented at IDFA 2021 as a Work in Progress – World Premiere at IDFA 2022 in the Luminous selection.