Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 47
Milena Jesenská

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast! I'm Susan Stone. The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women — both overlooked and iconic — who achieved amazing things against all odds while they were alive. And we do it through women's history storytelling on stage - here in Berlin and beyond…then we bring you the very best of those stories here on the podcast.

At the moment, we're sort-of back on schedule doing shows in front of wonderful live audiences — mainly at our regular venue ACUD, a very Berlin place. It's a sort of slightly crumbling and graffiti'd arts and culture complex where you can find everything from electronic music and experimental film to a ceviche food truck.

But sometimes, we get invited elsewhere. Dead Ladies Show co-founder Katy Derbyshire and I were fortunate enough to grace the stage last month at the Collegium Hungaricum, the gleamingly elegant white and boxy Hungarian culture center in the middle of our fair city.

If you're a regular listener to our show, you might know that we've previously featured a couple of Dead Lady Translators — Willa Muir, and Dorothy L. Sayers. And so we were delighted to present a Dead Ladies Show on the occasion of the Translationale - literary translation festival - in October.

As you may recall, Katy is herself is an award-winning translator, and the publisher of V&Q Books, which presents contemporary German writing in English. Here she is with the story of translator Milena Jesenská, from the stage of Berlin's Collegium Hungaricum.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: I'm talking today about Milena Jesenská.

She's often known only as Milena, and sometimes as Kafka's great love. In fact, even her own daughter wrote a book entitled just *Kafka's Milena,* without the surname in the title.

But actually she was, in her own right, a very fascinating person, a writer, and a translator.

So, she was born in 1896 in Prague. Her father was a practicing dentist and professor of dental medicine and quite involved in the Czech nationalist movement.

She grew up in these two streets you can see here on these lovely two vintage postcards on the left. On the left is Ferdinand Avenue – in that colored picture – and on

the right Ovocná Street, and they were at the heart of the Czech community. As you can see, Prague at the time was a kind of a bustling metropolis: trams, and people walking around. Promenading the streets was a favorite hobby.

And I mention the Czech community – what's important to know is that at the time there were kind of two separate worlds in Prague: Czech and German. And there were Jewish residents who were more aligned to the German community. So it was part of the Austro-Hungarian empire when she was born.

Milena attended Central Europe's first girls' grammar school, the Minerva, which produced several generations of prominent Czech women. When it first started it was opened to train girls to go to university, but girls weren't actually allowed to attend university when it first opened. But by the time Milena started, they were.

Here she is, aged thirteen, looking very glamorous and melancholy by the side of the river, on the cover of Alena Wagnerová's biography, which was one of the sources I used. And three years later in 1912, her mother, also called Milena, died after a long illness. At which point the sixteen year old – other Milena – went pretty much off the rails, she became a total Manic Pixie Dream Girl. She hung out in cemeteries like Mary Shelley, she took drugs like Annemarie Schwarzenbach, she modeled for painters like Dora Maar, and she went shoplifting like Winona Ryder.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

My favorite anecdote is the time she stole her father's socks and gave them to a friend who was one of her father's students, so he obviously noticed when this guy was sitting in a lecture wearing his socks. Anyway, what's even worse is that she started hanging out with writers. Here in the Café Arco, which was a big meeting place for writers in Prague.

She was actually enrolled at the University to study medicine, but she didn't really go, she wasn't really into it. She couldn't cope with blood. In fact, she spent a lot of her time kind of promenading with her girlfriends, showing off their nice clothes, and crossing the divide between Czech and German literary Prague. She became the talk of society. It was a small world in Prague. And you can see here wearing an unusual tennis outfit, I would say. A lovely, huge bow tie with a black polka dot shirt and a long skirt - not sure how you'd play tennis in it. She's probably sixteen at the time.

A little bit after this, she fell in love with one of those literary dudes, Ernst Pollack, who was a German speaker, he was Jewish. He was ten years older than her and he worked in a bank. Her dad the Czech nationalist did not approve — he was also an anti-Semite — especially when she got pregnant in 1916, and had an abortion. Her father found out and quite kindly looked after her afterwards, but he was very, very angry. And when she refused to break off the relationship, he sent her to a private psychiatric clinic on grounds of moral insanity. Milena wrote later to Max Brod, "Psychiatry is a terrible thing when it is abused. Anything can be abnormal and every word is for the tormentor a new

weapon.” She made friends with a nurse though, so she got the keys and was still meeting up with Ernst in secret. So they planned to marry and move to Vienna and at some point her father gave in and gave his consent because she wasn't yet twenty-one. So she was released from hospital after nearly nine months. Off they went to the imperial capital of Vienna in March 1918. You can guess by the date, it wasn't a good time to move to Vienna. The First World War was coming to an end, there was hunger and violence. Milena wasn't a confident German speaker at the time, but she still hung out with writers, again.

For instance, that photo you can see here is the interior of the Café Herrenhof in Vienna, one of their hangouts. And it's not to my taste - it's a little bit chintzy – but, I don't know, maybe you could sit there and have a good literary conversation. And her first husband was a bit of a cokehead, unfortunately, and he had terrible writer's block. He was a critic, but he never managed to write anything. He believed in open relationships, and he moved one of his girlfriends in with him and his wife for a little while. When Milena had an affair with his friend Hermann Broch, he didn't like that. I don't know, strange, as if he had double morals. And he asked them to break it off.

So Milena was not happy in Vienna, and she needed ways to supplement Ernst’s quite meager income at the bank. Apparently she did some translating for Freud. And then she began writing for Czech newspapers. These were mainly observational pieces about life in Vienna, and fashion columns, because she was really into clothes. And the next idea she had was translation, which is where this guy comes along - Kafka - with his beautiful ears. So she vaguely knew him in Prague, and on a visit back there in Autumn 1919, she chatted to him in a café. And then when she got back, she wrote and asked him for permission to translate some of his stories. This is the first one, “The Stoker”, it’s called an English, and German “Der Heitzer”, and it was published in the Czech magazine *Kmen* in April 1920 as “Topič.” The story is a precursor to the novel *America*.

Kafka was very impressed. He wrote, “I'm deeply moved by the faithfulness with which you've done it, sentence by sentence. A faithfulness I wouldn't have thought possible in the Czech language, as little as I would have suspected your beautiful natural qualification for it.” It's nice, isn't it, as translators to hear that praise from the writer? This correspondence grew into a passionate love affair by letter. Unfortunately though, Kafka was on the fence really, he changed his mind from: “Please send me the translation. I can't hold enough of you in my hands,” to “I hardly dare read the letters, I can read them only in snatches, I can't stand the pain the reading of them causes me,” to “Please don't write anymore.”

They did actually meet twice after that, but it ended badly. Milena still loved Ernst for some reason, and Franz was afraid of intimacy in a way that Milena just was not. Milena kept the letters though. And in 1939, she gave them to the German writer Willi Haas. He published them in German in 1952, and in English in 1953. So you can see here the English first edition, beautiful red cover. And as you can see, it's just called *Letters to Milena* — this is a translation by Tania and James Stern, by the way. Willi Haas wrote a

preface and an editor's note to that collection. In neither of them, and nowhere in the book, does he mention Milena's surname, and I think, that is the one of the main reasons why she's become so invisible as her own person. Also because her own side of the correspondence was lost.

Kafka and Jesenská remained in touch, though. She wrote in a letter to somebody else that she'd seen him on his deathbed in a sanatorium outside Vienna in 1924. You might think, if you only know *Letters to Milena,* that she only translated Kafka but no! She also translated Rosa Luxemburg's letters to Sonia Liebknecht. And there's the scruffy looking first edition there, I believe, on the screen. And the book on the right, which doesn't look very much very fun, is by her friend Otto Rühle. It's basically a guide to raising children the radical socialist way.

She also translated from English with a little help, her English wasn't strong. Here's two things she translated from English, Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Master of Ballantrae,* in a rather grubby first edition here with two nice gents, I mean, she was into clothes, so maybe she liked that cover. And one you've definitely heard of is JM Barrie's *Peter Pan*, I'm showing you the absolutely gorgeous Czech cover here: a modernist beauty with these wonderful animal shapes and hot air balloons - a beautiful book. What she would do is, she would pitch translations to magazine editors and publishing houses. And they would often be serialized, so she translated a whole novel to be serialized in magazines, or published as a book of its own. And she chose these texts according to her interests. I think today we'd call it a 'portfolio career,' alongside journalism.

Going back to her life story, eventually Milena left Ernst Pollack in Vienna and returned to Prague. She left with this Austrian guy who was a communist, Count Xaver Schaffgotsch. There's a lot of difficult names in this talk! Her divorce came through in May 1925. Schaffgotsch's came through the next year, but they didn't last unfortunately – obviously he was also married, to somebody else. I'm showing you here the most common photo, and a really gorgeous photo that was taken in 1925 after she went back to Prague, at the Fotostudio Praha on Wenceslas Square. It was probably a kind of autograph card for the newspaper *Národní listy* where she was working. You can see her very characteristic signature - which I really like - very sharp.

Her return home was triumphant. She really enjoyed life in the newly independent Czechoslovakia, much more than Vienna. She reveled in her new celebrity, which she had in this small world as a journalist. She worked for all sorts of newspapers across the political spectrum from quite conservative to communist, even an illegal newspaper at one point. And it's quite hard to tell from her many articles where exactly her political allegiances lay. Often, she seems to be writing for her perceived audience rather than saying what she really thinks. But her political leanings did change over time as well.

Once she got to Prague, she got a new job editing that sophisticated illustrated magazine *Pestrý týden*. And I'm showing you here some lovely drawings by her friend the artist V.H. Brunner. Milena is the one on the left on the on the phone, chatting on the

phone with her hair standing on end. And on the right, you can see her inspecting some material for the magazine. They were great friends, these two.

So, she was hanging out with all the cool kids in Vienna. And along the way she met the emerging architect Jaromír Krejcar, who came to be associated with Bauhaus. And, this is another cartoon - she was that famous that you know, people did cartoons of her in the papers - showing Milena, Jaromír, and their daughter Jana who was called Honza, in a sparsely furnished Modernist flat. They don't look terribly happy. Jaromír and Milena made friends with, and were very close to, a lot of Czech communists. I just want to show you Honza as an adult, because I love this photo so much. In this beautiful patterned dress, with this dude, look at that guy! He looks like a young John Lennon. This is 1949, with the philosopher and poet Egon Bondy.

Back to Milena though, this is her in the ‘30s. You can see she's changed a lot, her face has really filled out, that long hair has gone. What happened? She had a difficult time at the end of the 20’s. She was very happy to fall pregnant in 1928. But while she was pregnant, she broke her leg skiing, as you do when you're pregnant. And during that time, her increasing communist tendencies got her sacked from the magazine for ‘unconsidered propaganda in favor of the Soviet Union’. She was hospitalized for quite a long time before and after the birth, and more medical problems resulted in a permanent, limp, constant pain, and unfortunately a morphine addiction. She grew increasingly radical and earnest. It's not quite clear; I couldn't work out whether she actually joined the Communist Party. Certainly though, Jaromír, her second husband, went to work in the Soviet Union and while he was there, he not only grew disillusioned with the Stalinist Soviet Union, but also fell in love with somebody else. And he returned rather shocked.

As repressions intensified, Milena began looking after her fellow communists. She would take them in, and one of them who she took into her home was this guy, Evžen Klinger, who was Hungarian Jew from Slovakia. He was living under a pseudonym. He was also quite handsome, apparently. I'm not listing them all, she had a lot of handsome partners. But unfortunately, their relationship lost her more work, because he was considered a Trotskyite. So she couldn't work for the hardline communist newspapers anymore, either. I did read that they translated some Hungarian together; so unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, I couldn't find the name. I’m afraid I'm not going to mangle any Hungarian this evening, sorry.

So she eventually went into rehab in 1937. And she and Evžen distanced themselves from the Communist party line, and they got some work with the liberal paper *Přítomnost*. That is the most difficult word this evening, and I've finished it now, so that's good. It was kind of a second journalistic heyday for her.

Of course, in 1937 The Nazis were already in power in Germany, and there were a lot of refugees heading for Prague, who she had a lot of dealings with. She wrote: “The task of the reporter is sometimes similar to that of a hyena. The journalist travels with a

notebook and writes other people's troubles to make news. Inevitably, I must seem like someone from another safer world, who comes pen in hand to write of their suffering."

But she didn't just write, she also helped people. She was always an intensely devoted friend. I'm showing you her here, Milena and her lifelong friend Staša Jílovská. Here they are in 1925, in beautiful '20s clothing, in a sort of light-dappled forest clearing, looking very happy. As I said, she cared for refugees herself, she took them into her home, she fed them. And once the Nazis arrived in the remaining Czech territories in March 1939, she helped them to escape again.

Most of her friends left, certainly the Jewish and the Communist ones, including Evžen and Jaromír, but Milena felt it was more important to stay behind, which meant, sadly that she was arrested by the Gestapo in November 1939. Probably not for the helping people escape, probably for her writing. And she was imprisoned in Prague, and then taken to Dresden. And during her time in prison, she wrote many, many letters to her father and daughter who are now reluctantly living together. They were lost in the '50s, but they were found again in a Czech secret police archive after the Iron Curtain fell. This is one on a letterhead from the prison that she was in, in Dresden. It's written in German, to her father, I presume so that the prison authority could censor what she was writing.

She was tried in Dresden. They had no evidence, they had to acquit her, but they didn't send her home. Instead, they put her into what the Nazis cynically called 'protective custody' in Ravensbrück concentration camp. When she found out that was where she was going, she smuggled out a note: "From one straw mattress to the next, using the toilet in front of 12 people. No water. Bed bugs. Loneliness. Crazy longing for Honza." Milena Jesenská died in the camp of kidney failure on the 17th of May 1944. Even there though, even through pain and illness, she helped others for nearly three years. She developed another deep friendship with Margarete Buber-Neumann, who survived the camp and wrote a biography of Milena, although again, her surname wasn't in the title. The two of them had trouble with some hardline Communist fellow prisoners. But Milena found gentler work in the camp infirmary. She managed to save lives by adjusting medical records, to prevent women from being used for medical experiments that were going on there. She and Margarita protested to the camp authorities about some of the more egregious cruelties and crimes. And that actually, unbelievably, led to the arrest of a Dr. Rolf Rosenthal who had been stealing gold from the corpses of Sinti and Roma women he killed using barbiturate injections.

Milena Jesenská's friends held a party for her 47th birthday on the 10th of August 1943. She was given embroidered handkerchiefs, a cloth heart with her name on it, a figurine made out of a toothbrush, and flowers. Flowers were one of her lifelong passions. There are actually a lot of beautiful stories about her rebellious youth, when she would roam around Prague stealing flowers from parks, and apparently she picked enough flowers to fill Ernst Pollack's room in his lodgings with flowers, but he wasn't impressed.

This is a photo taken by my friend Karen Margolis, who you might know. She's a former Dead Ladies presenter, and another translator. It shows Milena Jesenská's plaque in the Ravensbrück Memorial Center, which commemorates her as a mediator between Czech, Jewish and German lives and worlds. And I'd like to remember Milena Jesenská in that role too, specifically as a translator.

From a young age, she refused to see her beloved Prague as only belonging to one culture and one language. She was always curious about German and Jewish life and letters in the city. I think her smuggling of people across borders ties in there too, metaphorically at least. In 1938, she went to the mainly German Sudetenland soon before it was occupied by the Wehrmacht, and wrote: "Ordinary people are very grateful when they hear a Czech speak German. The fact that these Germans love their language - and I don't see why we should not accept this - means that they are German, not that they are inevitably Nazi." And even from her Dresden prison, she wrote to her father: "… and yet I have met wonderful and lovable Germans in this Germany."

She bridged cultural divides, explained Austrian and German culture to the Czechs, and to some extent, in the other direction. And I would say she deserves to be remembered by her full name for her full life: Milena Jesenská, journalist and translator. Thank you.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

SUSAN STONE: Katy Derbyshire on Milena Jesenská. Thank you Katy. We'll have images and more info for you at our website, deadladiesshow.com/podcast, and on our social media channels, @deadladiesshow.

Thank you to everyone at the Translationale, the Toledo Program, and Weltlesebühne for having us, including Linde Nadiani, Eva Profousova, and Aurélie Maurin, as well as the evening's sign language interpreter Oya Ataman and the tech, Betty Kapun. Special thanks to Zoltan Demeter, who recorded the audio you've been listening to. Translationale and Toledo are supported by the Deutscher Übersetzerfonds as part of the Neustart Kultur Programm.

If you're in Berlin, come see us at our next live event — very soon — on November 30th. That event will be 2-G plus - meaning you'll need to show proof of vaccination or recovery as well as a recent negative Covid test for entry.

Our podcast will be back again next month to bring you another fabulous Dead Lady. The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire.

The podcast is created, produced, and edited by me, Susan Stone.

Our theme tune is "Little Lily Swing" by Tri-Tachyon. Thanks for listening!

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

KATY DERBYSHIRE ON TAPE READING CREDIT: Support for this episode of the Dead Ladies Show Podcast comes from the Neustart Kultur Programm, and its Translationale Festival.

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