Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 51
Rosa Luxemburg

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast! 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… And then we bring you the very best of those stories here on the podcast. I'm Susan Stone, and I am joined in person – oh my gosh! – by Dead Ladies Show co-founder Florian Duijsens. Hi there!

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Hi Susan. It's really nice to be here. See, I even sound groggy because it's like – whoa, it's a real person.

SUSAN STONE: It's a real person! [LAUGHS] We are like 1.5 meters away, I think, with a very big microphone. But it's kind of a nice surprise to be in the same room as someone else.

For so many reasons, the world is a troubling place, but we hope you can still find some inspiration out there, from us or from other sources. And in honor of International Women's Day, we wanted to bring you the story of a woman who fought, loved, and sacrificed, in troubling times of her own – the revolutionary Rosa Luxemburg. And shout out to activist Clara Zetkin, one of the minds behind the creation of International Women's Day, who gets a mention as one of Rosa's dearest friends.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Our talk on Rosa comes from an inspiring woman too, Agata Lisiak – a very dear friend and a professor of Migration Studies at Bard College Berlin, though she is currently on leave as she's working on a book about Doreen Massey *and* Rosa Luxemburg! Doreen Massey is a social scientist and geographer, who you might hear some more about later on, and the whole project is being funded by the Volkswagen Stiftung. And, though I miss her in the classroom, I'm very excited that she's working on this book. Another impressive thing she does is lead an international project on transnational feminism, solidarity, and social justice by the Open Society University Network or OSUN.

Here's Agata from the stage of Berlin's ACUD:

AGATA LISIAK: I have to admit it's a bit – I mean, it's both exciting and intimidating to be presenting on Rosa Luxemburg in Berlin, because, you know, she lived here – this was her home. And now it is home to many amazing artists, activities, and academics who engage in

depth with her legacy. So, this brief presentation is just a tiny glimpse into her life and work. And you can think of it also as an invitation to learn more about Rosa later.

Rosa Luxemburg was a Polish-Jewish woman revolutionary at a time when possessing even *one* of those identities was bound with struggle. Literally and figuratively, she wore many hats [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]. She was an economist, political thinker, public speaker, journalist, publisher, activist, writer, teacher, translator, editor, party leader, and amateur botanist and painter. She was also a sister, a daughter, aunt, lover, mentor, and also a very generous, caring, and fun friend.

Born Rozalia Luksenburg in 1871 in Zamość, in Russian-occupied Poland, she grew up the youngest of five children in a family her biographers usually describe as 'assimilated middle-class Jews'. When she was two, the family moved to Warsaw in search of better educational and professional business opportunities. Soon after, Róża, as she was commonly called, fell ill with a hip disease which was misdiagnosed, wrongly treated, and left her with a permanent limp. A bright, curious, multilingual child, Róża was homeschooled by her mother and later admitted to a Russian *Gymnasium* for girls as one of very few Jewish children (there was a quota.) Antisemitism was rampant in the Russian Empire, frequently erupting in pogroms, such as the one in Warsaw in 1881, which Luxemburg likely witnessed first-hand.

High on Marx and sensitive to the plight of workers in rapidly industrializing Polish cities, the teenage Luxemburg joined a clandestine group called *Proletariat* – an act of courage bordering on death wish, really, as socialists were brutally punished at the time. In 1885, for example, the women leaders of the *Proletariat*, Maria Bohuszewicz and Rozalia Felsenhardt, both only a few years older than Luxemburg herself, were imprisoned and later sent to Siberia, where they died of tuberculosis. While some of her male comrades could use pseudonyms or grow beards in an attempt to trick the tsarist police, Luxemburg's options at disguise were quite limited: she stood out as a very short woman with a noticeable disability. So, like many left-wing radicals of her time, she fled to Zurich. She had another good reason to go there: unlike in the Russian Empire, in Switzerland women could study, and Luxemburg had academic ambitions. Her loving family, with whom she'd remain close throughout her life, was supportive of her decision.

Luxemburg became, effectively, a migrant. Even if she was not framed *explicitly* as a migrant at the time – remember, the stigmatizing German term *Migrationshintergrund*, or "migration background," wasn't yet a thing – her commitment to radically reimagine the world was arguably enhanced by her own experiences of migration and exile. Just as her life, the political

projects in which she believed exceeded imperial and national borders and fed off her deep conviction of the importance of internationalism.

[SHOWS SLIDE] A woman of many talents and interests – and sporting a new haircut [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] – Luxemburg initially studied botany, zoology, and mathematics, but later switched to political science, economics, and history. She also became absorbed in socialist activism, which is how she met this determined-looking hipster guy over here [AUDIENCE LAUGHS], Leo Jogiches, a famed organizer and tactician from Vilnius, with whom she'd end up sharing much of her life and work. In 1893, they co-founded the Social Democratic Party of the Kingdom of Poland – the first in a string of parties, newspapers, and other political initiatives they would lead together.

Although they never married, in her letters to Jogiches, Luxemburg refers to herself – only half-jokingly, I'm afraid – as his "capable little wife." I won't recap their turbulent, secretive, long-term, and mostly long-distance relationship here. You can read up on it in her correspondence. But just to offer you a single glimpse: in 1895, while in Paris for her doctoral research and running the Polish socialist newspaper *The Workers' Cause*, Luxemburg sent Jogiches a letter worthy of Beyonce's steamiest lyrics [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]. I need to prepare for this. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

> Ah, you Gold! I have some very fearsome intentions for you, you know! Really, while I've been here, I've been letting it run through my head a little, the question of our relationship, and when I return I'm going to take you in my claws so sharply that it will make you squeal, you'll see. I will terrorize you completely. You will have to submit. You will have to give in and bow down.

[AUDIENCE LAUGHS AND CHEERS]

Back in Zurich, Luxemburg defended her dissertation on the industrial development of Poland, in which she observed that "the interests of the Russian bourgeoisie are interwoven with those of the Polish bourgeoisie in the most diverse ways." Consequently, she argued, rather than striving for national independence, the Polish proletariat should unite with the Russian proletariat to topple both tsarism and the Polish-Russian capital. Throughout her life, she persistently rejected the project of Polish national self-determination – a cause supported even by Marx, Engels, and Lenin.

In her doctorate, Luxemburg also noted that:

> It is an inherent law of the capitalist method of production that it strives to materially bind together the most distant places, little by little, to make them economically dependent on each other, and eventually transform the entire world into one firmly joined productive mechanism.

She would later compellingly elaborate this theory in her 1913 opus magnum, *The Accumulation of Capital*.

With impressive experience in both theoretical discussions and socialist work on the ground, the freshly minted doctor had her eyes set on Berlin, which, as the headquarters of the newly legalized Social Democratic Party, the SPD, was the place to be. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

But Luxemburg couldn't just randomly move to Germany, she needed a residence permit or, better yet, German citizenship. Her fellow Pole-in-exile, Olympia Lübeck, stepped in to help by ordering her son, who was German by way of his father, to marry Rosa. Very on-brand for Polish mothers, I assure you. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] The newlyweds parted ways right after the bogus ceremony, and Luxemburg was free to go.

Her quest to find an affordable apartment in Berlin in 1898 will ring painfully familiar to many in the audience:

> You have no inkling what it means, in Berlin, to search for a place to live. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] (She wrote to Jogiches) … the dimensions of things here are such that you spend hours on a couple of streets, especially because you have to run way up, many storeys high, one building after another … —and it's mostly in vain. The rooms are generally dreadfully expensive everywhere. … There's no sense in dreaming, not even for a moment, of having a separate bedroom.

I'm sure she'd be ecstatic to hear about the positive outcome of last week's referendum [AUDIENCE CHEERS] on the expropriation of corporate landlords in Berlin. Yes! [APPLAUSE] What a groundbreaking achievement. She would also be gravely disappointed – though not surprised – that the SPD, who won the local election, [AUDIENCE BOOS] seems reluctant to abide by the *vox populi* on this matter. We'll see. We'll be watching them.

Newly settled in Germany, Luxemburg wrote:

> I feel as though I have arrived here as a complete stranger and all alone, to “conquer Berlin,” and having laid eyes on it, I now feel anxious in the face of its cold power, completely indifferent to me.

In many ways, she did conquer Berlin. For one, she made herself indispensable to the German social democratic movement. As one would expect, she had little patience for mansplaining. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] This is how her introductory meeting with the SPD secretary Ignatz Auer went down. Brace yourselves:

> I began by saying I had just arrived, had seen a good bit of the Polish movement, and concluded that there was hardly any electoral agitation going on, that everything was slumbering, etc. Whereupon the fellow tried, with his deep bass voice, to expostulate … “That’s wrong” [“Das ist falsch”], actually things were going quite well, he said, and rattled on in this vein for several minutes. I heard him out like a well-brought-up person, and when he had finished I explained to him clearly: “You have told me nothing new. I am much better informed on this question than you are, because I have direct relations with comrades in Poznań, Breslau, etc., and also here in Berlin.” I told him then that the reason I had come to talk with him was not to complain to him about the Polish movement, for that would be senseless, but I came with a completely practical goal in mind. And then I explained: “I would like to help all of you in your work, to this end I have obtained German citizenship, and I came [to see you] in order to take an active part. I of course have my own action plan in this respect, but I would prefer not to start out on my own without reaching an understanding with the German party leadership.

[SHOWS SLIDE] Competent, brilliant, and hardworking, Luxemburg quickly became close to top party figures – pictured here enjoying a picnic – and, significantly, developed friendships with their wives, whose work for the movement was often overshadowed by their powerful husbands. She also found a lifelong ally and cherished friend in the women’s rights activist Clara Zetkin.

Like Zetkin, Luxemburg rejected bourgeois feminism, which has landed her a lasting if erroneous reputation of someone uninterested in women’s rights. Nothing could be further from truth. As she wrote in 1902:

> Whoever needs convincing that women are just as capable as men of experiencing … citizenship … would do well to study the history of the liberation struggles that have shaken Russia since the abolition of serfdom.

A decade later, she put it even more bluntly:

> Women's suffrage is the goal. But the mass movement to bring it about is not a job for women alone, but is a common *class* concern for women and men of the proletariat. … In advanced capitalist, highly industrialized, twentieth-century Germany, in the age of electricity and airplanes, the absence of women's political rights is as much a reactionary remnant of the dead past as the reign by the Divine Right on the throne.

A fiercely independent thinker, Luxemburg cultivated her right to disagree with the prophets of socialism. In fact, she first became widely recognized in Germany and in the Second International by convincingly arguing against one of the main theorists of socialism at the time, Eduard Bernstein. Luxemburg pointedly rejected Bernstein's revisionist stance in her polemic, "The Social Reform or Revolution". She wrote:

> Legal reform and revolution are *not* different methods of historical progress that can be picked out at pleasure from the counter of history like one chooses hot or cold sausages. They are different moments in the development of class society which condition and complement each other, and at the same time exclude each other reciprocally.

Clearly, she wasn't one to shy away from dialectics!

Knowing how women politicians were – and continue to be – treated by their male colleagues, opponents, the media, and general public, it's hardly surprising that Luxemburg, in addition to xenophobic and antisemitic attacks, was also the target of outrageous misogyny. Here's one example: In 1910, Victor Adler, the founder of the Austrian Social Democratic Workers' Party, shared his take on Luxemburg in a letter to the founding father of German social democracy, August Bebel:

> The poisonous bitch will yet do a lot of damage, all the more because she is as clever as a monkey while on the other hand her sense of responsibility is totally lacking and her only motive is an almost perverse desire for self-justification. Imagine, Clara already equipped with a mandate and sitting with Rosa in the Reichstag! That would give you something to laugh about.

[AUDIENCE BOOS]

Bebel – famously the author of *Woman and Socialism* [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] – replied, somewhat defensively, that even "with all the wretched female's squirts of poison I wouldn't have the party without her". [AUDIENCE HISSES]

Okay, now's a good time for two bits of Dead Ladies trivia:

Victor Adler's wife Emma was a journalist, translator, and author of many books, including one on the women of the French Revolution. Like Emma Adler, Bebel's wife, Julie, was a dedicated social democrat; she ran the party finances, her husband's company, *and*, obviously, the household, while August was in prison under the anti-socialist laws. She also co-founded an educational initiative for working-class women and girls in Berlin. Just so you know.

Back to Rosa. The series of uprisings and mass strikes in the Russian Empire, known as the Revolution of 1905, were, in many ways, a breakthrough for Luxemburg in that it further sharpened her perspective on the future of socialism and helped her develop a theory of spontaneity. Tirelessly pushing against the reformist mainstream in the German social democracy, she argued for a mass strike as "the most powerful weapon of the struggle for political rights". She also criticized Lenin for his "uncompromising centralism" and insisted that "the mistakes that are made by a truly revolutionary workers' movement are, historically speaking, immeasurably more fruitful and more valuable than the infallibility of the best possible 'Central Committee.'"

Or, as the performance artist Taylor Mac would put it: perfection is for assholes. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Despite some crucial disagreements, Luxemburg and Lenin had much respect and admiration for each other, and they seemed to enjoy hanging out. In a letter to her lover Kostya Zetkin (yes, that's Clara's son [AUDIENCE MURMURS IN SURPRISE] – pictured here looking a bit shy next to a beaming Rosa), Luxemburg wrote that her cat

> [Mimi] impressed Lenin tremendously [AUDIENCE LAUGHS], he said that only in Siberia had he seen such a magnificent creature, that she was a *barskii kot*—a majestic cat. She also flirted with him, rolled on her back and behaved enticingly toward him, but when he tried to approach her, she whacked him with a paw and snarled like a tiger.

Another important chapter in Luxemburg's life was the SPD party school where she taught, as the only woman professor, between 1907 and 1914. Luxemburg's teaching was engaged, creative, and what we would today call interdisciplinary. As her student Rosie Wolfstein later recalled: "[Luxemburg] tapped along the walls of our knowledge and thus enabled us to hear for ourselves where and how it sounded hollow." Based on the extensive research she conducted in preparation for the lectures, Luxemburg developed two manuscripts: *Introduction to Political Economy* and the already mentioned *Accumulation of Capital*.

As you may have guessed by now, Luxemburg's politics were feared and punished by the state. She was first jailed in 1904 for allegedly insulting Kaiser Wilhelm II in one of her electoral speeches. She also spent three months in a Warsaw prison for her involvement in the 1905 revolution. [SHOWS SLIDE] This is her mugshot from that time. And, in 1914, after a powerful anti-war speech, she was sentenced for incitement to disobedience and would stay in prison for most of World War I.

Her ailing health was exacerbated by prison conditions. In order to fight the recurrent bouts of depression, Luxemburg kept herself busy: she penned copious letters, kept a garden, did some birdwatching, she drew, studied, translated, and continued to write articles and pamphlets, which she somehow managed to get out of prison.

She was energized by the news of the 1917 Russian Revolution and praised it "for its unprecedented radicalism." "What's coming from there is a message of healing," she wrote to a friend. From behind the bars, however, she watched the developments in Russia with growing concern and composed an incisive critique of the Russian revolution in which she warned that:

> Without general elections, without unrestricted freedom of the press and of assembly, without a free struggle of opinions, vitality withers away in each public institution—it becomes a pseudo-vitality in which bureaucracy is the only remaining active element.

In the margin of that unfinished manuscript, she left a note that has since become her most widely cited quote:

> Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for members of the Party—however numerous these may be—is no freedom at all. Freedom is always only freedom for those who think differently.

The November 1918 revolution, which started with a mutiny of sailors and workers in the port city of Kiel, reached Berlin on the ninth. The Kaiser abdicated and the mainstream wing of the SPD, in an attempt to avoid a radical or "Russian-style" revolution, swiftly declared Germany a republic. A few hours later, Luxemburg's close comrade Karl Liebknecht announced "a free *socialist* republic of Germany." Months of bloody struggle were to follow those clashing proclamations.

Released from the Breslau prison, Luxemburg rushed to Berlin, where she threw herself with full force into the revolution and worked tirelessly on the production of the newspaper *Die Rote Fahne*. She urged Clara Zetkin to contribute:

> We want to have your name in our paper right away. Write something perhaps about women, that is so important now, and none of us here understands anything about it.

Her final letter to Zetkin a few weeks later, dated 11th of January 1919, conveys a sense of dread:

> Wait a little while about coming here, until we have quieter times again, to some extent. To live in the present turmoil and hourly danger, the constant changing of living quarters, the strain and the rushing around, is not for you. … I hope in a week or so the situation will have clarified itself in one way or another and regular work will again be possible.

The following day marked a deadly end to the *Spartakusaufstand*, a week-long uprising supported by Luxemburg and Liebknecht's newly founded Communist Party of Germany. Just three days later, both leaders were captured by a far-right paramilitary unit commissioned by the ostensibly social-democratic, yet clearly counter-revolutionary government to extinguish the radical opposition. Brutally beaten and shot in the head, Luxemburg's body was thrown into the Landwehrkanal. Liebknecht was murdered the same night, Jogiches assassinated two months later.

As the anarchist Emma Goldman summed it up, "Luxemburg and Liebknecht, who had helped to build up the Socialist Party of Germany, were crushed by the régime of their orthodox comrades risen to power."

A few years later, Vladimir Lenin, channeling an ornithologist, wrote:

> Eagles may at times fly lower than hens, but hens can never rise to the height of eagles. Rosa Luxemburg was mistaken on –

Many things, apparently [AUDIENCE LAUGHS], which he goes on to list here:

> But in spite of her mistakes she was—and remains for us—an eagle. And not only will Communists all over the world cherish her memory, but her biography and her *complete* works … will serve as a useful manual for training many generations of Communists all over the world.

In fact, Verso is painstakingly working on the publication of a multi-volume English translation of her complete works, yet, Luxemburg would have likely scoffed at the eagle comparison: the blue titmouse was her bird.

In a letter to her friend and secretary Mathilde Jacob, sent from the Wronke prison in 1917, Luxemburg wrote:

> On my grave, as in my life, there will be no pompous phrases. Only two syllables will be allowed to appear on my gravestone: “Tsvee-tsvee.” That is the call made by the large blue titmouse, which I can imitate so well that they all immediately come running. And just think, in this call, which is usually quite clear and thin, [PLAYS RECORDING OF BLUE TITMOUSE BIRD CALL] sparkling like a steel needle, in the last few days there has been quite a low, little trill, a tiny chesty sound. And do you know what that means, Miss Jacob? That is the first soft stirring of the coming spring. —In spite of the snow and frost and the loneliness, we believe—the titmice and I—in the coming of spring! And if out of impatience I don’t live through it, then don’t forget that on my gravestone nothing is to appear except that “Tsvee-tsvee”.

Her wish was only partially granted. The gravestone reads: Rosa Luxemburg ermordet 15 Januar 1919. So, no pompous phrases indeed, but also no avian onomatopoeia.

The memory of Rosa Luxemburg is very much alive in Berlin, with many places named after her, plaques where she lived, public art devoted to her ever-inspiring work. In her native Poland, Luxemburg’s legacy remains contested, to say the least. A few years ago, following a new law aimed at cleansing public space of any signs of communism, this plaque commemorating her birth was removed from a house in Zamość. There have since been some heartwarming grassroots attempts to restore it, but nothing permanent yet.

I'm happy to report, however, that Luxemburg's memory lives on in the Jeżyce district of Poznań, where she briefly stayed in 1903. The plaque on Szamarzewskiego Street is now aptly accompanied by graffiti that reads "Patriarchat zabija" [AUDIENCE CHEERS] – the patriarchy kills.

Book recommendations, yeah? So, for Luxemburg *Einsteiger*innen*, I recommend Kate Evans' really wonderful graphic novel, *Red Rosa*. It's strongly researched, entertaining, and it gives a good sense of both her life and work. For fans of the Dead Ladies Show – meaning everyone, obviously – I recommend Jacqueline Roses' *Women in Dark Times*. She has a very powerful chapter on Rosa Luxemburg there, and also other chapters on Marilyn Monroe, Charlotte Salomon, and many other amazing women. And if you're in need of a door stopper, then there is [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] the J. P. Nettl 1,000-page-long biography that many other biographers rely on. More than anything, however, I recommend that you read Rosa Luxemburg – and you can find many of her writings online for free in various languages, for example, on marxist.org. There is also, of course, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, which has amazing resources on their website, so definitely check it out. And, if you prefer to watch a movie than read a book, then there is Margarethe von Trotta's 1986 biopic with Barbara Sukowa as Rosa Luxemburg.

Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Agata Lisiak on Rosa Luxemburg, recorded by Simone Antonioni at ACUD. Still the very best name in show business! You can see photos of Rosa, and learn more about her life at our website, deadladiesshow.com/podcast, as well as on our social media channels, @deadladiesshow.

SUSAN STONE: You may or may not know that we have a Patreon that helps to support our show, where we have special audio features we call our Dead Lady Book Club. And, in our latest, Patrons can hear Agata join me to talk about the book *Women in Dark Times* by Jacqueline Rose, which you just heard mentioned in the presentation.

So, I'm going to unlock that for a few weeks for everyone to access, so if you're not yet a patron and you've been wondering what we've got going on over there, you can have a listen! There are also mini Dead Ladies Show talks, and a multitude of great readings produced with music, and book recommendations by or about Dead Ladies. That's over on

patreon.com/deadladiesshowpodcast. And we'll have a link for you in the podcast notes. And I want to say thank you and welcome and welcome back to our Patron, Emma Duval!

Florian, you love to recommend books over there. Any faves that you'd like to tempt people with?

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Um, I know, it's always a really fun challenge to come up with something that will appeal to the very select and wonderful, elite audience we have over there. And, while I talk a lot about singers, and I certainly cannot *not* recommend Mariah Carey's wonderful autobiography –

SUSAN STONE: She's alive.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: She's alive! So, this won't go on the main channel. But on the niche Patreon channel, I think I can talk about this stuff. I've also talked about several songs, I would say? I've talked about Taylor Swift songs (and those are songs about Dead Ladies), I've talked about singers. But I think the novelist that I would most recommend in dark times to read is Sylvia Townsend Warner, who is often forgotten and often rediscovered. She was a wonderful lesbian writer who left – aside from wonderful letters to both her partner and her editor at *The New Yorker* – left behind wonderful, wonderful books, including *Lolly Willowes*. And my favorite of hers are her stories about elves, which are completely bonkers, and which nobody believes ran for years and years and years in *The New Yorker*. Check out any of her stories on elves, you're going to love them.

SUSAN STONE: It sounds very fun. I mean, I'm really looking forward to *Lolly Willowes*, which I think is about witches, maybe?

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Exactly. It's about a woman who takes up witchcraft, thinks she's made a deal with the Devil, and then adopts this kitten who she thinks is the Devil's messenger of some sort, then of course she names it 'Vinegar.' It's very bonkers and very delightful – Sylvia Townsend Warner, everybody.

SUSAN STONE: That sounds great. You know, it's something for cat lovers, something for Satan worshippers, something for everybody. And for our German-language listeners, *Lolly Willowes* is translated into German – I saw it in our local lovely bookstore, Ocelot, just the other day. So check that out if you want to read it in German, too!

And Florian, as you mentioned at the start of the show, Agata is currently working on a book

about Rosa Luxemburg, and she's also toiling away on a podcast series coming out in the near-to-distant future. And I'm pleased to be working on that with her, so do stay tuned. There is a Dead Lady involved!

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

SUSAN STONE: The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced, and edited by me, Susan Stone.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Our theme tune is 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon. Thanks to everybody out there listening! We'll be back again next month with another fabulous Dead Lady!

KATY DERBYSHIRE ON TAPE: Support for this episode of the Dead Ladies Show podcast comes from the Berliner Senat.

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