

**Transcript****Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 42****Emily Hahn**

(Dead Ladies Show Music — ‘Little Lily Swing’ by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: It’s the Dead Ladies Show Podcast!

The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women — both overlooked and iconic — who achieved amazing things against the odds. And we do it through live women’s history storytelling in Berlin and beyond. I’m Susan Stone, and I’m here remotely with Dead Ladies Show co-founder Katy Derbyshire.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Hi Susan!

SUSAN STONE: And hello to all of you, our lovely audience of new and old friends. Thank you for being with us. So in this episode we have a rollicking tale from our other co-founder, Florian Duijsens. He’s an editor and an educator, a culture maven, and a damn good storyteller.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: He certainly is! He’s going to be telling us about an adventurous Dead Lady who was also a rather keen storyteller. She was a writer and world traveler driven by curiosity and passion. Florian will be talking about Emily Hahn.

SUSAN STONE: One note for you — at the start you’ll hear references to Florian’s own travel adventures — like Emily, he is a very keen traveler. Now, as you can probably guess, this presentation was recorded more than a year ago, as none of us are really going anywhere at the moment, except in our imaginations.

So here’s Florian from the stage of Berlin’s ACUD:

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: So Emily Hahn. As we were planning this show, I went to Shanghai just a couple of weeks ago [SHOWS SLIDE], so I started looking for a Dead Lady who had spent time there, so I could read up on her while I was in China. It wasn’t long until I came across the prolific Emily Hahn [SHOWS SLIDE] who was the China Coast correspondent for the *New Yorker* in the 1930s in Shanghai. Reading her biography and her memoirs, I found out her paths had crossed those of some Dead Ladies I have presented on this very stage. [Anna May Wong](#), for instance, was banned from the bowling club that Emily Hahn went to in Shanghai [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]. Not only was Hahn *friends* with [Dorothy Parker](#), she’d also been plotting to write a biography of writer and translator [Dorothy Sayers](#), this she was planning to do together with her friend Rebecca West who we haven’t presented yet. *And* she was inspired by explorer/travel writer [Mary Kingsley](#) to explore the Congo solo. She published an astonishing 52 books, I mean, plus 181 articles in the *New Yorker*, yet I, and I assume many of you, had never heard of her. [ASKS AUDIENCE] Who had heard of Emily Hahn? Which one of you confused her with Emily Post? [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Okay, anyway... So, how did she end up overlooked? Was it because a great number of her books are about women [SHOWS SLIDE], women like pioneer author [Aphra Behn](#), reporter Nellie Bly, or diarist Fanny Burney? Because she wrote novels maybe [SHOWS SLIDE] about sex work, interracial love, and abortion. Or memoirs about addiction, interracial love, or having a child with a married man?

Hahn was born in early 1905, the youngest of five girls and one older brother [SHOWS SLIDE], and would grow up in a quiet neighborhood in St. Louis [SHOWS SLIDE]. Though both her parents were German Jews, her father was an avowed atheist. Her mother, a proud suffragette, didn't stick to convention. She would ride to work wearing knickers. [SHOWS SLIDE]. Which are shorts. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]. Knickers are shorts. This is important to know! She believed in fresh air though, limiting her kids' reading time to thirty minutes a day, [SHOWS SLIDE] so Emily would hide her books up in a peach tree, climb the tree and read her books.

Nicknamed Mickey from an early age, she grew up intimidated by her sisters' beauty and boyfriends, so she fully intended to be *different*: "I would be a great animal sculptor, or a poet, or a violinist, or an exceedingly intellectual courtesan," she wrote. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] When her dry-goods salesman father moved them to Chicago [SHOWS SLIDE], a city more than three times the size of St. Louis [SHOWS SLIDE] teenage Mickey started wearing berets, spending her allowance on riding open double-decker buses by Lake Michigan. As she later wrote [SHOWS SLIDE]: "The wind from the great sea was never quite like ordinary air. It had a delicious foreign smell. But the most enchanting thing about the lake was that you couldn't see to the other side."

Convinced she would be a sculptor [SHOWS SLIDE] like her sister-in-law, Nancy Coonsman, she enrolled at the University of Wisconsin in Madison [SHOWS SLIDE]. The arts program had a science requirement though, and since she'd heard exciting things about one particular chemistry prof, she signed up for his class, or tried to, only to be denied entry. She wasn't in the engineering program, which didn't allow women. This is when her mother's spirit and Mickey's own stubbornness kicked in:

"Before the registrar's office closed that afternoon, I had transferred myself to the College of Engineering, enrolled for the chemistry course I wanted, and sent off a confused letter of explanation to my parents. From that moment until graduation, I completely forgot that I had not always, from my earliest youth, intended to become a mining engineer. [LOUD LAUGHTER] Every day offered fresh reason for forgetting. I was awfully busy for the next three years, up to my neck in mechanics and drafting and calculus. It was enough to make any girl forget a little thing like art. As I look back on it now, I am amazed that I passed any of those examinations. Half the time and energy I should have given to my work was used up in the effort to prove that I could hold my own without being in the way."

After college, no one would hire a woman mining engineer, so she took a road trip to New Mexico with her friend Dorothy and her new Model T Ford. [SHOWS SLIDE] This at a time when most roads were unpaved and motels had not yet been invented, not to mention that young women certainly did not travel alone. They bought a gun, slept in the car, and Dorothy cut her

hair so that when she wore a cap it looked like she had sideburns. “My parents complained that I was never the same after that summer in the Model T, and no doubt they were right,” Mickey would later write. “I was restless and discontented at home, and, as they said, anything served as an excuse to get away somewhere, even if it was only a weekend in Milwaukee.”

On her return, she was stunned to find a job offer as a mining engineer. The reality of working as one was disheartening though, as she was paid less than her male colleagues. Mickey distracted herself by writing, smoking cigars, and making homemade gin, ultimately quitting her job to become a tour guide out west. She moved to the artist colony of Taos [SHOWS SLIDE] in New Mexico, rented an adobe hut, got a horse named Tom, and started writing for a greeting-card company. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Needless to say, her family worried, [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] and one day her mom showed up, offering to pay her grad-school tuition if only she would agree to move to New York. Tempted by the possibilities, Mickey started at Columbia in 1928, living near Times Square [SHOWS SLIDE] and teaching geology at Hunter College to pay her bills. Terrified of getting stuck in a dead end job, she jumped at the chance to write articles for local papers, writing to her mom: “It came at just the right time, I was all worked up about what a useless bum I turned out to be, and I was already to accept that gracefully. I had a mental picture of myself as a picturesque and beautiful beachcomber dying all over Honolulu of a combination of hashish and theosophy.” [AUDIENCE LAUGHS].

Mickey got a monkey [SHOWS SLIDE], who she named Punk [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] and took to all the speakeasies. Then, an acceptance letter from the *New Yorker*! [SHOWS SLIDE] Funny thing though: she hadn’t sent them any work. In fact, her brother-in-law had been sending them excerpts from her letters for years. [FLORIAN AND THE AUDIENCE LAUGH] “Little arias of the casual,” Roger Angell wrote in her obituary many many years later. The first one that appeared in the *New Yorker* starts as follows: “‘You know,’ I suddenly said, much to my own horror, ‘you’re a funny person to be married to him.’” An intriguing opening, especially when you know Mickey actually said it to Leslie Nast, who was the young (and lesbian) wife of the *New Yorker* competitor Condé Nast, who now own the *New Yorker*.

*New Yorker* editor Harold Ross congratulated her for being the bitchiest writer he knew, apart from perhaps Rebecca West, and he then rejected her next three articles. Mickey commiserated with her new friend Dorothy Parker, crying in a bathroom. She would suffer depression on and off during her life, but now, in 1929, just when the stock market had crashed [SHOWS SLIDE] and New Yorkers were lining up for soup kitchens, it all got too much, and Mickey decided to take an overdose of sleeping pills. Her sister found her in time, thank god, and Mickey decided to start over in London. There she made a lot of new friends, mostly gay dancers, who would introduce her thusly: “This is Mickey from New York. She’s STRAIGHT.” [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Meanwhile her first book came out: [SHOWS SLIDE AS THE AUDIENCE LAUGHS OUTRAGEOUSLY] *Seductio Ad Absurdum: The Principles & Practices of Seduction – a Beginner’s Handbook*. The press was clamoring for interviews with this satirical – it was satire – and sex-positive flapper, and Mickey delivered, stating: “I don’t mean that there should be no relationship between the sexes. But there should be *various* relationships”.

Mickey knew she had too much competition on the flapper writing circuit, so she borrowed some money and set off for the Belgian Congo [SHOWS SLIDE] carrying only the barest of essentials (and heaps and heaps of typing paper). [SHOWS SLIDE] She traveled into the heart of the country, staying with a white friend who worked there as a doctor and, as she found out, had taken three local women for wives. Mickey lived there for a year, broke, unable to leave, learning the Swahili dialect, helping out at the clinic, adopting Angelique, a pet baboon, and caring for an abandoned orphan [SHOWS SLIDE].

When she learned of her host's abusive tendencies towards his wives, however, she decided to skip town, carrying only a few of her things and make her way to Tanzania on foot, with a dozen local guides. There were no roads, they did not know the way, but they survived, and Mickey headed back to the crisis-stricken New York. Mickey went up North to Woodstock where she wrote [SHOWS SLIDE] *Congo Solo: Misadventures Two Degrees North* a rather censored memoir of her year in Africa [SHOWS SLIDE] and she also wrote *With Naked Foot*, a novel which told the *real* story of the local women suffering at the hands of white men. The press was stunned that she didn't follow the usual sort of explorer narrative [SHOWS SLIDE]: "Not one attempt at rape?" they pleaded. "No mutiny in the camp? And nowhere that you could have called yourself the 'First White Woman to Set Foot?'"

Her father meanwhile was deathly ill, but the doctors wouldn't end his suffering, so Mickey used her medical training from the Congo to end his life with a morphine injection. Twenty-eight and unsure what to do with her life, she started seeing a slick married Hollywood screenwriter [SHOWS SLIDE], who gave her a job writing dialogue in LA for a bit. One day, he got drunk and beat her for smoking a joint. Shattered, she decided to join her sister [SHOWS SLIDE], who was also struggling in her marriage, on a trip to the Far East. From there, she planned to go on back to Africa. They were only supposed to be in Shanghai for a week or maybe less, but Mickey decided to stay [SHOWS SLIDE].

In 1935, Shanghai drew both celebrities and refugees. You didn't need a passport, and a tailored suit cost one dollar. Still, there were only 60,000 foreigners in a city of four million, and Mickey the author was a celebrity, especially charming Victor Sassoon [SHOWS SLIDE], a Jewish businessman and hotelier who made his millions trading in Shanghai. He liked to take revealing pictures of the local ladies, and Mickey happily obliged [SHOWS SLIDE].

The picture that I'm showing you is slightly revealing. The actual nudes were supposedly destroyed in some teenage... not a prank but a temper tantrum, a teenage temper tantrum by Mickey's daughter, who was very embarrassed that these pictures existed. Mickey got an apartment [SHOWS SLIDE] in a Chinese bank building, she started writing for *The New Yorker* and a local paper and became one of the few foreigners to socialize with the Chinese elite there. At a literary party [SHOWS SLIDE] she quickly fell for the poet, publisher, and utter dreamboat Shao Xunmei, who charmed her by improvising – yes! [AUDIENCE AND FLORIAN LAUGH AS HE REFERS TO THE IMAGE OF DREAMBOAT XUNMEI ON SLIDE] Sorry he's very distracting! – Who charmed her by improvising the following epitaph for a famous writer: "Villagers, please don't fuck. Here lies Pearl S. Buck." He soon introduced her to his lovely wife

and children [DISAPPOINTED SOUNDS FROM AUDIENCE], and to smoking opium [SHOWS SLIDE].

Mickey fell into a luxurious routine, writing her articles plus editing a few journals for Xunmei [SHOWS SLIDE]. Though her family was pleading with her to come back, as the Japanese army had just invaded and was occupying Manchuria and other parts of Northern China, Mickey liked her life [SHOWS SLIDE]: the jade jewelry, the tailored clothes, the massages, the lovers, the 10 or 11 pipes of opium a day, plus she'd just gotten a new monkey. [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] Oh this is her looking glamorous [REFERS TO SLIDE] and this is Mr. Mills, her monkey. All this would change by 1937, when the Japanese invaded the rest of China and conquered Shanghai [SHOWS SLIDE]. Mickey moved to the city's foreign enclave, where she was safer [SHOWS SLIDE]. But the Japanese considered Xunmei an enemy, as he was connected to Chinese guerilla fighters. [SHOWS SLIDE] Frantic, he asked Mickey to marry him (polygamy still being legal in China at the time), so that his printing press and other possessions would also belong to her, an untouchable foreigner. Mickey said yes, knowing that the document wouldn't hold up in court outside of China anyway.

Eager for a new book project, Mickey asked her husband to introduce her to the Soong sisters [SHOWS SLIDE], China's richest and most influential women of the 1930s, one of whom married Sun Yat-sen, another Chiang Kai-shek. I think the latter also went to Bennington in the US. The next few months Mickey flew in and out of warzones near Chungking to do research [SHOWS SLIDE] and interview the three sisters. In the meantime, Chinese friends were disappearing left and right [SHOWS SLIDE]. Mickey was 35 [SHOWS SLIDE] her teeth hurt, her periods were becoming irregular, and she was turning yellow; her addiction was catching up with her. She tried to quit: "It wasn't as bad as I'd expected. My stomach was upset and my legs hurt. Still, it wasn't so bad. I didn't want to lie down and scream — it could be borne. The only really bad thing was the terror I felt of being lost, astray, naked, shivering in a world that seemed imminently brutal..."

A friendly doctor set up rehab treatment, and Mickey got through it. Needing a change, she moved to Hong Kong [SHOWS SLIDE], from where she would continue her research. In a flat next-door lived [SHOWS SLIDE] Charles Boxer, the local head of British intelligence and author of scholarly books on historical trade in the region. He'd long admired her work, and now confessed he admired her as well, promising to marry her as soon as he divorced his estranged wife. [KNOWING LAUGHTER] Scandalously, she soon shackled up with him.

It was 1941, but even though many of the wives were being shipped off to safety, Mickey wanted to stay at Charles's side, especially since she was pregnant. Two weeks past her due date, the doctor decided on a cesarean, asking Mickey: "How much of this do you want to feel, before we help you?" Stunned, she responded: "Did you think I was doing all this to write a book about it?" The doctor shrugged. "Why yes, isn't that the idea?" They called the baby [SHOWS SLIDE] Carola Militia Boxer. Charles came from a very military family. Soon after, his wife filed for divorce, yet they would have to wait longer than the mandatory six months before they could get married. On Christmas, the Japanese attacked Hong Kong [SHOWS SLIDE], and within three weeks, the governor surrendered. Severely injured in the battle, Charles was soon

imprisoned and Mickey ordered to leave. She scrambled [SHOWS SLIDE], claiming she was Chinese. She was, after all, married to a Chinese citizen. The Japanese in charge knew that this wasn't entirely kosher, they had had dinner with her and Charles many times before. But they let Mickey stay as long as she would teach a few elite Japanese officers English. The food they paid her with would prove indispensable.

Though her book on the Soongs [SHOWS SLIDE] and her stories about a character she based on Xunmei did very well in the US, her healthy bank account was inaccessible from occupied Hong Kong. She had to rely on the cash and jewelry she had on hand to provide for Carola, herself, and her servants, all of this with black-market trading. Everyone was urging Mickey to get out, but she couldn't leave Charles, who she'd been sneaking much-needed food to in his prison camp [SHOWS SLIDE]. "Making sure that [Charles didn't starve] was my whole existence, save for the effort I put in at home to seeing that Carola, too, was adequately fed," Mickey wrote. "My universe shrank to the dimensions of a digestive tube. There was nothing else to think about, no world outside, nothing."

By 1943, the Japanese were urging her to come write propaganda in Tokyo, and her situation became desperate; a prisoner exchange on a Swedish boat [SHOWS SLIDE] her only option left. After 8 years in China, Mickey was finally going back to America, carrying a daughter who spoke fluent Cantonese, but hardly any English [SHOWS SLIDE]. Charles was still held in the camp. On arrival in New York, she immediately bought a typewriter and started filing stories, asking a promising young doctor called Spock [SHOWS SLIDE] how to help her undernourished daughter. Simple, he said: "Spoil her." [SHOWS SLIDE]

Mickey published a memoir, *China To Me*, detailing her affairs, her addiction, her unmarried motherhood—all of it. With her foul mouth and fat cigars, she became a celebrity, earning \$20,000 in 1944 alone, which would come out to about \$300k today. Mickey was not doing well though, despite her nice townhouse. [SHOWS SLIDE] Rumors were swirling about Charles having been killed, [SHOWS SLIDE] she suffered a mysterious tropical disease, and briefly got addicted to morphine, going cold turkey right on time when, in 1945, she finally received the following letter from Charles:

[FLORIAN PUTS ON A PLUMMY BRITISH ACCENT] "It is quite impossible to put down in writing all of the million things that I want to ask you and I won't even try, but please let me know: a) do you still feel I am the same as in 1943, or have you got someone else? b) if you still feel the same, where and when shall we meet and marry? c) like Darcy [SHOWS SLIDE] in the trial—or is it the penultimate chapter?—[of] *Pride and Prejudice*, my own sentiments and feelings are unchanged, but one word from you will silence me forever on the subject." [AUDIBLE SWOON FROM AUDIENCE] I know! He sailed to New York [SHOWS SLIDE], and within a week of this reunion picture from *LIFE* magazine, they married, moving to his ancestral estate [SHOWS SLIDE] in Dorset, England.

Mickey was no housewife though. [SHOWS SLIDE] "It isn't that I can't mop and dust and sweep and cook and wash and iron. [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER] I can! I even like some of it, the cooking and ironing. It's just that there are often so many other things I would rather be doing at that

particular moment that I grow first resentful, then furious [...] One day of dusting, making beds, and washing Carola's clothes leaves me in a state of boiling rage, which is [no] less hot because I can't find a suitable object to vent it on. You can't square off and kick a *house* in the pants."

In 1948, Mickey was pregnant again, aged 44. Another girl: Amanda. But Mickey suffered postpartum depression, and dreary England didn't help. By 1950, arch-gossip Walter Winchell was reporting that Mickey and Charles were getting a divorce. But instead they decided on an unusual solution, sticking to it for the rest of their lives. For 90 days each year, Mickey would be with Charles in England (the maximum before having to pay income tax), the other days she'd be in the US or traveling. [SHOWS SLIDE] Carola would go to boarding school, Amanda would stay with her nanny.

Free to write [SHOWS SLIDE] Mickey became a staff writer at the *New Yorker*, filing stories from Brazil, Malaysia, Taiwan, the Azores, Turkey, India, Pakistan, Nigeria, South Africa, Kenya, Japan, etc. She would have an office there for an astonishing 45 years [SHOWS SLIDE], arriving every weekday at 7am to write countless articles and piles of books before she died of complications during a surgery for a shattered femur in 1995, aged 92. Books on Mata Hari [SHOWS SLIDE], diamonds, bohemianism, Ireland, D.H. Lawrence [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER ESCALATES AS THE LIST GOES ON] Chinese cuisine, angels, zoos, female primatologists, and her own personal favorite, *Look Who's Talking* on animal-human communication.

If you want to know more about Mickey, her memoirs [SHOWS SLIDE] are a great place to start. *No Hurry to Get Home* provides the greatest overview of her life, *China to Me* and *Hong Kong Holiday* tackle her years in the far East. [SHOWS SLIDE] There's also a great biography by Ken Cuthbertson called *Nobody Said Not to Go* [AUDIENCE LAUGHTER]: *The Life, Loves and Adventures of Emily Hahn*, and *Shanghai Grand*, by Taras Grescoe, which focuses on her love triangle with Xunmei and Sassoon.

I'd like to leave you with some words from her history of the American women's movement, which was called *Once Upon a Pedestal* [SHOWS SLIDE] and she ended it as follows:

"So there, at the start of 1974, we stand, down on the floor with the boys. Women now have a chance to arrange their lives both economically and biologically. There are still many awkwardnesses, of course, but things are definitely looking up. We've had the vote for a long time, and in law we also have equal rights, though as to that there are still some ragged edges to be trimmed, a lot of discrimination to expose. We have a long time to wait, of course, before everything is all right—I find it impossible, myself, to keep out of my approach to life anger against men— but Utopia is on the way, given luck and vigilance, vigilance..."

<APPLAUSE>

SUSAN STONE: Florian Duijsens on Emily aka Mickey Hahn.

So recently one of our Twitter pals, Spies & Vespers, posted a picture of Emily Hahn, and when I told them we had an episode coming up about her, they said "Are you going to talk about her

as a spy.” And I said to Florian, “Did you talk about her as a spy?” And he said “No.” [KATY AND SUSAN LAUGH].

So yeah, that wasn’t really part of the story. But I was intrigued by this question, so I did a little searching. And then I found this really fabulous *New Yorker* article from 2017, featuring Carola Vecchio, who is Emily’s oldest daughter, who was mentioned. So it was written by Taras Grescoe, who is the author of *Shanghai Grand* and that’s one of the books that Florian cites at the end of his talk. And in his research Grescoe talks about finding a mysterious square of white silk amongst Hahn’s papers in the Lilly Library in Bloomington, Indiana, of all places. It was typed from edge to edge with messages. And it had been found sewn into two year old Carola’s dress when mother and daughter traveled to the US from occupied China in 1943.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: But that’s crazy!

SUSAN STONE: It is, it is quite crazy! And I mean, it really is like typed with these little letters from corner to corner. So Hahn was suspected of spying for the Japanese government, and she was then detained for several hours, and that silk square was sent to Washington for FBI investigation. Now, in the end, the typed lines revealed not coded secrets, but lines of poetry and names and heartfelt messages for friends and relatives of Hahn’s circle, many of whom were being held in US internment camps right. Now, Hahn’s daughter Carola said of the incident: “For my mother, it was all a big adventure.” And she also said that she didn’t mind being used as a prop for smuggling any more than she took offense at being fictionalized as a boarding school girl named Monica in her mother’s short stories for *The New Yorker*. So Hahn herself once said, “I use people, people who mind should stay away from writers. I think that they do on the whole.” [KATY LAUGHS]. Oh, those writers! By the way, if any of you are fans of the books, films or social media accounts from *Advanced Style*, do you know them Katy?

KATY DERBYSHIRE: I do.

SUSAN STONE: They’re all quite fabulous, and they document these fashionable elderly ladies and gents, you may have actually seen Carola Vecchio, so she’s appeared several times in the various photos wearing golden gloves, or a flowered hat that actually once belonged to Emily Hahn, or elegant Chinese robes that really harken back to the place of her birth, which was Hong Kong.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: We’ll have links and photos for you at our website [deadladiesshow.com](http://deadladiesshow.com) and on our social media @deadladiesshow — and make sure you check out Emily’s menagerie of monkeys and some of her rather amusing book covers.

If you enjoy our podcast, please share us with friends, family, and more!

SUSAN STONE: The delightful music in the background is our theme song, Little Lily Swing by Tri-Tachyon.

The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire.



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

Thanks to Katy and Florian and everybody out there listening! See you next time!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Bye Bye! See you next time/hear you next time. Whatever! Just cut that bit...

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

Support for this episode of the Dead Ladies Show Podcast comes from the Berliner Senate