Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 72
Miriam Rothschild

(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 while they were alive. And we do it through women's history storytelling on stage, here in Berlin and beyond.

Then we bring you a special selection of these stories here on the podcast. I'm Susan Stone, and I'm joined by Dead Ladies Show co-founder, Katy Derbyshire. Hello there!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Hi, Susan, lovely to be here on the sofa again.

SUSAN STONE: Lovely to have you! Well, in this episode we're going to hear from who? It's our other co-founder, Florian Duijsens. He's an educator and a translator who is frequently fascinated by British eccentrics.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Oh, yes.

SUSAN STONE: So yep, there's going to be another one. There will also be fleas, owls, code breaking, global politics and other adventures.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: And so much more. Florian will be telling us all about Dame Miriam Rothschild, a zoologist, entomologist and botanist, and generally an enthusiastic lover of the natural world. Here he is recorded live from the stage in Berlin.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: I first encountered Miriam Rothschild in a 1987 New Yorker profile by Kennedy Fraser. I didn't read it in 1987 — I'm not that old. I read it in [SHOWS SLIDE] *Ornament & Silence, Essays on Women's Lives from Edith Wharton to Germaine Greer.* I also didn't read it when that came out. I read it because it's a cool book. You should all read it. It's really good.

So Kennedy Fraser stays overnight at this overgrown stately home where Miriam was born and then at that point, almost 80 years old was living again. Fraser woke up, quote: [SHOWS SLIDE] "I opened the leaded casement and leaned out. Wisteria and clematis lay in waiting, pressing to get in. In the distance unfurled an old familiar dream, a rolling green ridge, hazily shimmering on a May morning. The fields marked by flowering Hawthorne hedges, high as cottages and a distant freeze of venerable woodland with a church spire peeking out. In the middle distance, a herd of deer, like something in a tapestry, lifted their heads in unison in a field, then wheeled

and scampered away. Closer still lay a garden, unlike any garden I'd ever seen. The outline of Edwardian lawns and flagstone terraces was there, but floppily un-corseted, left to riotous rampant seed. Artfully undisciplined lilacs and cherry blossoms swayed over unmoored meadow grass that was sprinkled with white cow parsley, yellow cowslips, blue bells, tulips that were blowsy, droopy-peddled, pale pink. Butterflies were everywhere, jerkily dancing and alighting."

[SHOWS SLIDE] A few sentences later, Miriam herself appears wearing this colorful, self-designed uniform-of-sorts out of Liberty prints with a matching headscarf. Those of you in the audience can see it right now. If you can't see it, imagine sort of a Russian peasant gone Mod. Less generous journalists have described it as 'Benny Hill in drag,' which is very harsh and not correct. Or, 'Beatrix Potter on amphetamines.' [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] At this point in the article, Miriam mentions that at Oxford, they called her the "Bugger's friend," at which point I was like, 'yes, tell me more.'

Little did I know that wanting to find more about this woman would lead me on tangents that included Alan Turing, a secret British commando of Jewish soldiers, the Cambridge spies show up at some point, the notion of "Jewish space lasers," the jump of the flea, myxomatosis, of course, not to mention the history of Palestine, yikes.

Even starting at the beginning, as Miriam is really, really difficult because Miriam was born to *those* Rothschilds, you know, they're really rich, you've heard of them.

[SHOWS SLIDE] Here are jazz musician Thelonious Monk and Miriam's sister Pannonica — also known as Nica — in New York as the Jazz Baroness, giving a completely mystifying and false recap of who the Rothschilds are.

THELONIUS MONK IN FILM CLIP: Ain't that right? The Royal family came to your grandfather and said, crying the blues and all that, begging. And so you'd lay the bread on him so he could beat Napoleon, right? And threw him in the soul of the crowd. That saved the world. That's nobody's fault 'round here. But that was over in Europe. I mean, I'm your president, I'll tell people who you are. This is the United States, we don't need the story. She's a billionaire, you know, the Rothschilds.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: She wasn't a billionaire. Just correcting that, at least. What's true is that the Jewish banking family of the Rothschilds played a very big role in European and colonial history between the Battle of Waterloo in sort of 1900, let's say. Escaping the anti-Semitic laws and overcrowded ghettos — ghetto, one street of Frankfurt, their home bearing a red sign, hence the name, to build a financial empire with headquarters in all of the European capitals.

So at that point it was London, Paris, Vienna, Naples. [SHOWS SLIDE] Important to note here is that Miriam's great-great grandfather, so the *OG Rothschild*, his will stipulated that only Rothschild sons could lead the banks. Daughters, wives, sons-in-law were not welcome. Quote: "I'd never be able to forgive any of my children if, contrary to these, my paternal wishes, it should be allowed to happen that my sons were upset in the peaceful possession and prosecution of their business interests."

Consolidating power was another reason why many of Miriam's forefathers married their actual Rothschild cousins. She suspected this inbreeding also affected the family's mental health. As far as her for-mothers, Miriam wrote "they were no Rosa Luxemburgs or Emma Goldmans." Those are the examples she used.

Though her own mother certainly stood out. [SHOWS SLIDE] Born in Hungary, now Romania, to one of the first Jewish families to have been ennobled without having to convert to Christianity first, Rózsika, yeah, lovely, was an athlete introducing the overhand serve to women's tennis in Hungary, which was very risqué because you could see a whole different outline of breast, apparently. She won the national championship.

She had this party trick where she would jump over barrels on ice skates. I assume wearing a full skirt? An athlete, right. [SHOWS SLIDE] One summer when Rózsika was already 37, a suffragist friend introduced her to the second son of the London Rothschild family, Charles, who was a banker but really a passionate entomologist, out hunting butterflies with Ralph Vaughan Williams, the composer. [SHOWS SLIDE]

And though the wedding itself was briefly delayed by her brother slicing someone's ear off in a duel that morning, [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] and of course there was a communist bomb threat to the synagogue that morning in Vienna, but they married and on the 5th of August in 1908, Miriam was the first of their four children.

[SHOWS SLIDE] The family largely lived at Ashton Wold. Ashton Wold was on this very butterfly-rich swath of land that Miriam's father had chanced across one day, and he'd gone around and asked the locals, like, "ooh, I'd love to buy it".

And the locals were like, "the owners, they don't need any money, they're not going to sell it to you". Turns out it was his father. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] So everything came out right.

Since Miriam's father despised school, writing: "If I ever have a son, he will be instructed in boxing and jiu-jitsu before he enters school, as 'Jew-hunts'

such as I experienced, are a very one-sided amusement." His daughters were kept at home.

MIRIAM ROTHSCHILD IN FILM CLIP: We were brought up in great luxury, but no liberty, and a lot of discipline. And regular things, dull food while we were in the nursery and so forth, very immaculately cooked. Monday was the fish, Tuesday was the egg, Wednesday was the fish, Thursday was the egg, [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Friday was the fish, Saturday was the egg. It was always the same.

We would dress — first a vest, and we had a thing called a bodice, and there was a ribbon round the waist which was threaded in and out, and I had blue ribbons and my sister had pink ribbons. And then we went along to see my mother. Then we knelt down by her bed and said our prayers, which always ended: "And make me a good little girl, Amen."

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: The girls only received very limited instruction, sewing, piano, a little bit of French, some history. They never got further than the Romans, apparently, let alone being told about menstruation or sex or anything like that. And they hardly ever saw their parents, only being allowed at table with them by the time they were 16. [SHOWS SLIDE] There were aristocratic families nearby, but they didn't invite Jewish children to play. [SHOWS SLIDE] This left Miriam free to escape her governesses and help out in the dairy.

In 1917, Miriam was nine…and I need to have a quick sidebar on the history of Palestine [SHOWS SLIDE] and Israel, as it was Miriam's uncle Walter, who was the recipient of a short but consequential document called the Belfour Declaration. There it is on the screen in full. I will read the middle part:

His majesty's government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object. It being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.

Note the omission, let's say, of Palestinians in that "non-Jewish communities," though they, with other ethnic groups, made up 92% of the population of Palestine at the time. [SHOWS SLIDE] Miriam's mother was deeply involved in the Zionist negotiations with the British, who were, was it a protectorate at the time? The British were in charge, in any case-ish. Miriam's mother would continue to support the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine alongside her advocacy work for the people of Hungary.

And though the Rothschilds' fortunes were no longer growing astronomically,

the tax rates were rising and there was a failure to launch a bank in the US. Many of Miriam's family members kept financially supporting these early years, especially of the Zionist project.

Later in life, Miriam herself would financially support mental health and science institutions in Israel, but she also criticized the ecological devastation wrought by the state's industrial and urban expansion as, quote, “a biblical folly” akin to “spiritual suicide”. End of sidebar.

[SHOWS SLIDE] Miriam's father struggled with his mental and physical health, eventually locking himself in a bathroom and slitting his throat when Miriam had turned 15. Her family never discussed his death. In fact, they told the other children that he had a heart attack, I think. In the Rothschild family's misogynist spirit, [SHOWS SLIDE] her younger brother inherited two and a quarter million pounds. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] That would be 177 million pounds today. And Miriam and her two sisters got 5,000 pounds each, which still is 400K, but it's not….anyway.

She'd start spending more time with her uncle Walter, who we saw earlier, [SHOWS SLIDE] now pictured seated on a giant tortoise, taunting it with lettuce in the name of science, maybe. He was the UK's first Jewish peer, hence him being the recipient of that letter, and the definition of a British eccentric. His estate doubled as a zoological museum, containing, for instance, two and a quarter million butterflies, once admired by previously featured lepidopterist Margaret Fountaine. Check her out on the pod.

So Miriam partly grew up among giant turtles, kangaroos, zebras. [SHOWS SLIDE] He rode up to Queen Alexandra's house like this. He was kind of terrified that they would kick her in the face. They did not. For the listeners, this is a carriage with four zebras. Zebras are famously not carriage material, let's say. There were also terrifying emus. She loved it. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

MIRIAM ROTHSCHILD IN CLIP: From the very first, for instance, I was only interested in things that were alive. I was not remotely interested in ordinary toys. And was I asked, what do you want as a Christmas present? And I said some baby chickens. And when they were given to me, they were velvet models. And I just screamed my head off. And my father, who was very understanding, immediately gave me some live white mice. And then that was all perfect.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Still, it was by no means clear from the start that she would make being a naturalist her profession, let alone the fact that women of her class weren't supposed to have any professions.

Like her mother, Miriam excelled at sports, like skiing, billiards, tennis, squash, even joining the British National Women's Cricket Team under a

pseudonym. [SHOWS SLIDE] In one of her books about her uncle, she suggested that the Rothschilds had some kind of gene for the natural sciences. [SHOWS SLIDE]

Here we have her uncle Walter looking on as her father, this time sits on a giant tortoise. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] But I'd side with reviewer Stephen Jay Gold, who suggested there was something else these naturalists all had in common. Great wealth, right? [SHOWS SLIDE]

When Miriam eventually did start evening classes at a polytechnic in 1928, she had a hard time combining English Lit and zoology" "You could never get the lectures synchronized. You always wanted to hear somebody talk on Ruskin, and at the same time you had to dissect the entrails of a sea urchin. It was hopeless." [SHOWS SLIDE]

She'd never graduate, instead traipsing around with the likes of Evelyn Wall and Paul Robeson, before a field trip to Plymouth saw her discover a previously undescribed parasitic worm living on a mollusk, like you do, [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] and she got hooked on science instead. Now, this didn't mean that she abandoned literature. She loved books. She had 15,000 of them in her house, and like her mother, her family considered her a *Proust-itute*. They were very big Proust fans, Proust heads, in fact.

[SHOWS SLIDE] She spent much of the start of the 1930s here in Naples, and then the rest of the 1930s in Plymouth [SHOWS SLIDE] at the Maritime Observatory, studying the life cycle of different parasites that lived in birds, fish and snails, publishing her first articles.

At the same time, she was advocating for the increasingly imperiled Jews living in Germany and the rest of the continent, and by 1938, that became her sole focus. [SHOWS SLIDE] She took charge of Ashton Wold, the house where she was born that you saw earlier.

Her brother generously donated it to her, you know, one of the many houses in their collection, and she'd host not only 49 German-Jewish children between the ages of 9 and 14, providing psychological support for them as well, but also convalescing privates, soldiers, [SHOWS SLIDE] but also London's Natural History Museum's helminthological collection. I know. Anybody?

VOICE FROM AUDIENCE: Worms?

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Parasitic worms, exactly, to protect them from the blitz. [SHOWS SLIDE] Leasing land to a US Army base meant that she'd spend time with Clark Gable, who was apparently a great shot, but lacking in the humor department, let's say. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

Though Miriam's mother had died at the start of the war, her voracious appetite for news and politics—she read four different newspapers, four newspapers every morning—she read newspapers in four different languages. That's what I wanted to say. [SHOWS SLIDE]

So her mother's voracious appetite for news and politics put her in the way of George Lane, not his real name, a Hungarian water polo player and journalist turned British soldier. I'll let him explain. Oh, this is him. [AUDIENCE REACTS TO PICTURE] I know, that's a lot of jaw. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

GEORGE LANE IN CLIP: I had a letter from a Hungarian lady who was married to an Englishman and lived in England, but she read all Hungarian newspapers. And she read these two articles, wrote to the editor, asking the editor to put her in touch with me because she wanted to meet me, the writer of the article. I remember getting the letter. I wasn't interested, and I didn't bother about getting in touch with her. When I arrived at the convalescent home, I suddenly realized that was the address from which that letter was sent.

So when I had to report to the matron, I asked, “is Mrs. So-and-So still living here?” She said, “No, I'm afraid not. She's dead, but that's her daughter walking across the lawn.” I was introduced to the daughter. She knew about the articles and the letter, and her first words to me was, “Why the hell didn't you answer my mother's letter? You ought to be ashamed of yourself.” Those were her first words to me, and a year later we were married. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Isn't that always the way? Shortly thereafter, Plymouth's Maritime Observatory was bombed: [SHOWS SLIDE]

“An incredible sight met my eyes. The door had gone and the room appeared to be empty, except for a huge pile of tiny splinters of glass on the floor and picking its way delicately among the debris, the sole survivor, my tame sandpiper, a redshank. Where were my notebooks and manuscripts? Where were the labeled drawings? Where were the cultures of intermediate hosts, the infected gobies, the hundreds of isolated infected snails? Where were the microscope, the watch glasses, the finger bowls, the tubes, the shelving, the jars? Gone. Seven years' work had vanished, pulverized with a ton of glass. Next morning, I found that my redshank had died, possibly from delayed shock.

I felt deeply disturbed as I saw her lying quietly among the slivers of broken glass, an unequivocal indictment of the human race. I grieved for her. The following day, I was seized by a sense of meaningless excitement and lightheadedness. Without realizing it, I had gradually become an appendage

of my trematode life cycles. Now, all at once, I was free."

[SHOWS SLIDE] Miriam joined the war effort at Bletchley Park in 1941, deciphering Nazi communications Alan Turing was decoding. One of her colleagues in Hut 6 described the experience as follows:

"It was always dark. It didn't matter whether you were in the huts or the new blocks, the time of day or even season of the year. It always felt like nighttime in there. The concentration you can see etched on our faces was typical of the working environment. It was intense. The daily riddles we faced produced a heavy and strange intensity. We were working on impossible codes, and it was often deeply boring." [SHOWS SLIDE]

Miriam translated messages for the naval section from 4 p.m. until 8 a.m., with two days off every fortnight. [SHOWS SLIDE] Still, unlike most of the other women who slept in dormitories on site, Miriam was billeted at a nearby Rothschild estate called Mentmore, which you might recognize as Wayne Manor from *Batman Begins* or from *Eyes Wide Shut*. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Anyway, it's derelict now.

After secretly marrying George in 1943 — she had to marry him secretly because if she'd married an unnaturalized Hungarian citizen, publicly it would have cost her her citizenship — and suffering a miscarriage, Miriam would leave the Park and, as a very rare exception, join her husband in Wales, [SHOWS SLIDE] and then Scotland, etc., etc., as he was training to be part of the very secret X-Troop, [SHOWS SLIDE] a commando unit of Jewish immigrant soldiers with the language and physical skills to go behind enemy lines to extract information.

She remembered them as very intellectual, like talking about Schopenhauer all the time, and I also want to note, because I enjoyed this piece of information, that there seemed to be no issue taken with the fact that some of them were gay...with each other. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Just that Tarantino movie sounds like...looks very different in my head now. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

When George was captured during an operation, [SHOWS SLIDE] he was interrogated by Rommel himself and moved to a POW camp, escaping near the end of the war. When it was over, Miriam wrote: "In a mood of buoyant euphoria—the blackout misery had ended and rose-colored spectacles took its place—we decided to enjoy family life, and in addition, to try to recreate the farm in the garden at Ashton. The house required drastic repairs and alterations and did not become habitable for a decade, so we lived in the cottage in the village for the next ten years. Times had indeed changed, and it was essential to initiate luxury horticulture with a strong commercial flavor. I

donned a pair of riding breeches and bought a delivery van, selling flowers in London straight out of the back of the van. [SHOWS SLIDE]

George was a changed man after the war, however, distant and touchy with a, quote, “unfortunate habit of knocking men down in nightclubs”. Soon their first child, Rosie, was born, [SHOWS SLIDE] Miriam using her old gas mask to protect herself against the jealous attacks of her pet owl. I did promise owls.

They had lost a lot of family in the Holocaust. [SHOWS SLIDE] This is just one in the middle there. That's Miriam's aunt who was murdered on arrival in Auschwitz. And Miriam was horrified to find that the UK government was actually denying many Jewish survivors access to property and accounts that had been frozen during the war on the basis, for instance, that allegedly there weren't any walls around the houses they'd been imprisoned in or they'd just been shot in a cupboard for two years. Anyway, she hired a researcher to correct this injustice. [SHOWS SLIDE]

In relatively short order, three more pregnancies followed. Two of those children survived, but at this point, Miriam lost any faith she might have had. “I think it's immoral to believe in God,| she'd write. Then later elsewhere, jokingly admitting that the only time she'd been tempted to believe was when she learned that fleas had penises. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

When she was pregnant with her first son and marooned in the ruins of Calais, she started writing her first book of popular fiction, a surprise hit called *Fleas, Flukes and Cuckoos*. [SHOWS SLIDE] They adopted another baby from the village, but rural life simply wasn't it for George, and soon they compromised and moved to just outside Oxford where the children could go to school. The marriage, however, didn’t survive. [SHOWS SLIDE]

Around this time, she started a catalog of her father’s immense flea collection. He had discovered 500 species himself, [SHOWS SLIDE] including the one that spread the Black Death, which is ironic as Jews during the Middle Ages had often been blamed for spreading the Black Death.

Miriam said, “I had children, so it was quite a full-time job, but at about eight o'clock in the evening, when they'd all gone to bed, I used to settle down to the microscope and there was nothing more delightful when the evening would get quieter and quieter and even the sort of clink of cups vanished and you could settle down and look at this mescaline-like world of fantastic colors and timeless beauty.” [SHOWS SLIDE]

She took great pleasure in using massive enlargements of flea genitalia to send around as holiday cards [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] or put on her book covers. [SHOWS SLIDE] That's a flea's vagina.

Miriam thought that cataloging all these fleas would take her seven years max. It would end up taking three decades, [SHOWS SLIDE] writing 250,000 words, rarely sleeping more than four hours a night and severely damaging her eyesight in the process as she was peering down this microscope. “Such a bore,” she'd say about that—similarly matter of fact about later having to use a wheelchair or a hearing aid.

In 1954, Miriam put together a team of biologists and zoologists to advise the Wolfenden Committee, which had been tasked among other things to determine what to do about this thing called homosexuality. [SHOWS SLIDE] Though her name was left out of the resulting report, perhaps because she had no academic degree or standing, her voice comes through fairly clearly, arguing that homosexuality occurs across geographies, species and genders and is likely genetic rather than environmental.

It went even further when it stated that “persecution of minorities gives emotional satisfaction to the majority,” and though she stated that she was doing all this work to stop this threat of blackmail that hung over a lot of gay people's lives, in later life, she herself was bisexual, so she clearly had a stake in this herself too.

[SHOWS SLIDE] It was around this time that Miriam began spending her winter breaks at the Chalet in Wengen, Switzerland, with a view of the Jungfrau Mountain. [SHOWS SLIDE] Five winters, she'd spend there in the company of her friend, Gabrielle, who went by Gay, and her two kids. Gay suffered from depression, and after she died by suicide at Miriam's house outside Oxford, Miriam would adopt Gay's two children.

Aged 47, Miriam now had six children in her care, and with her sister, Liberty, suffering from schizophrenia, her own doctor told her she was, quote, “on the edge of a nervous breakdown”. She responded, “all members of my family are permanently in a state of breaking up or down, and I feel sure the condition is a normal one!”

When her children had finished school in 1967, Miriam got more time to herself. And though she mentioned affairs in letters sometimes, the only real evidence is this letter held by the Tate, of all places. In this letter, the Austrian painter, Marie-Louise von Motesiczky, gently tries to turn Miriam down:

“One part of my true nature could say to you, I am not a lesbian, but if it makes you happy that I should be one, I will try. I will never be such a good one as you, but I will try my very best. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] But there's another side of me, and I can't and I don't want to hurt the people I love. I belonged to Kennedy for 30 years.” (that’s Elias Canetti who would later win the Nobel Prize for Literature.) “We did hurt each other, of course, but the

good things prevailed. Would I only play with the idea that a completely new kind of adventure is in my reach? I would not only destroy the present, but all the past as well." [SHOWS SLIDE]

"Madame Mott", as Miriam called her, did this wonderful portrait of Miriam, together with her owl, Moesie, and her collie Foxi. But Miriam also featured in this rather more puzzling painting called *Confrontation in the Forest*. [SHOWS SLIDE] [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

For the benefit of the listener: on the left of the image, we see a baffled-looking painter holding a palette and some brushes, where in the middle, a woman dressed like a Russian peasant gone mad is standing astride a flowering branch and looking and making eyes at the painter, right? That's the best I can do. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

[SHOWS SLIDE] Throughout this time, Miriam stuck with her own idiosyncratically divergent research, publishing countless articles, always carefully crediting her collaborators—even if they were her own children sometimes—who also published on their own. There's an article called "Negative Experiments with Butterflies and Sweaty Socks" from her 13-year-old son, Charles. And by 1969, she and her brother, who was also a scientist at the time, were the only Rothschilds listed in *Who's Who*. Miriam said: "To have edged the banking partners out of the limelight is a moment of great malicious pleasure to me." [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]

[SHOWS SLIDE] In 1968, she'd received her first honorary doctorate from Oxford for her work in—deep breath— anatomy, chemistry, entomology, pharmacology, neurophysiology and zoology. This was her first of eight honorary degrees. And as the citation stated: "It is unusual that in natural science, anyone still less a woman should receive an honorary degree without any degree already from any university." [SHOWS SLIDE]

She studied the possessiveness of gulls, parasites that only live on a hippo's eyelashes and how butterflies can use their smell and sight to count how many eggs are already on any particular food plant, never more than a hundred, thus giving their offspring the best possible chance. In this clip, she talks about why moths only ever have mites living in one ear.

MIRIAM ROTHSCHILD IN CLIP: "I had the idea possibly why this was so, because you see these moths fly at night and they're caught by bats. And you know, those lovely little squeaks that you only hear when you're under 10 years old or something. You know you're going deaf when you can't hear bats, but these moths avoid them by clearing out of the way when they hear these supersonic sounds, because they can hear the supersonic sounds. And it struck me that of course, if they had mites in both ears, they wouldn't be able to get out of the way."

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: She published 10 books and around 350 papers in various fields, 27 of them in the journal *Nature*, in the process becoming a pioneer in the new field of ecology. [SHOWS SLIDE] As she could live off her farming income and her mother's inheritance, her independence made it possible to collaborate across borders and fields, including 16 papers with a Nobel Prize winner. [SHOWS SLIDE]

She always paired this work with activism, continuing her father's work in preserving fragile natural habitats in the UK, caring for her sister at home, and founding the Schizophrenia Research Fund and a museum of art by schizophrenic artists, and fighting for animal rights, both on farms like her own and in academic laboratories.

As she wrote: [SHOWS SLIDE] “Looking back at the first half of my life as a zoologist, I'm particularly impressed by one fact. None of the teachers, lecturers or professors with whom I came into contact, and that includes my kindly father, ever discussed with me or each other in my presence the ethics of zoology. It took me another 30 years before I myself began to consider the matter serious and allowed my doubts to crystallize. This fortunate but traumatic experience I owe to my eldest daughter, who as a schoolgirl, resolutely marched out of her zoological classroom, never to return. She refused to kill and then dissect an earthworm. The penny dropped.” [SHOWS SLIDE]

Miriam became a vegetarian and refused to wear leather. Her own home, as you heard earlier, was a site not just of preservation but of restoration as she took up another scholar's challenge to recreate the plant diversity of a medieval meadow. As since the 1930s, 97% of the UK's meadows had disappeared, turning the country into a, quote, “snooker table.” [SHOWS SLIDE]

This drew the attention of both Lady Bird Johnson and then Prince Charles, [SHOWS SLIDE] who was one of the first to buy a special seed mix she concocted and marketed and produced called Farmer's Nightmare. At Miriam's funeral in 2005, packages were distributed amongst the mourners.

In her last book, she wrote: “It is impossible for us to imagine the roar of the dinosaur. Will future generations understand what they have also lost? Lacking the vanished liquid notes of the nightingale, the jubilant dawn chorus accompanied by the modest hum of the now dwindling bumblebees.” She was 96 when she died, writing a book on Proust and the weather, a collection of haiku, using butterflies to produce natural antibiotics, and of course, studying animal telepathy.

In my endless research for this talk, I was struck by one anecdote in which

Miriam talks about walking across some dunes along Israel's coast and spotting an “unprepossessing plant” she didn't recognize. [SHOWS SLIDE]

When her pal looked it up, she exclaimed: “Believe it or not, it's a Rothschild!” named after a French Rothschild who'd founded several Zionist settlements. Yet the plant, like the Palestinians, was there long before 1948, when Israel was founded.

I don't know. Miriam was opposed to marriage, was once thrown out of a hotel for encouraging the maids to strike. [SHOWS SLIDE] And from her sister's battles with racist cops in Delaware, where her and Thelonious were busted for weed and Nica took the rap, Miriam knew very well people have a tendency to punch down.

MIRIAM ROTHSCHILD CLIP: The office boy has got to kick the cat downstairs. Everybody's got to have something below them that they can either bully or torment or kick downstairs like the office boy. It's just part of the human race, and it's just unlucky if you happen to be Jewish because you're one of the easiest things to kick downstairs. But the next day, it'll be the Negroes. The next day, it'll be something else. They always need something on which to vent their anger, really, at what life is like.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Katy sometimes ends her talks by imagining new endings, longer lives for these women. And while Miriam lived a long and largely very happy life, I, too, would like to imagine her living a few extra years, just long enough to let her famously holistic eye see what was happening in the Middle East and realize that any fight to preserve precious ecological systems, any fight for the rights of women and LGBTQ people, any fight against racism, prejudice and inequality is holistically and inextricably tied to resisting colonialist regimes, whatever form they may take.

[SHOWS SLIDE] If you'd like to know more about the history of Palestine and Israel, I most heartily recommend *The Hundred Years' War on Palestine* by Rashid Khalidi, recently also out in German. If you'd like to know more about its native plants, go see Jumana Manna's beautiful film, *Foragers*.

And if you'd like to know more about Miriam, I also heartily recommend her *Desert Island Discs* episode, her final, I almost stole it, but I was like, no, you have to just listen to that by yourself. [SHOWS SLIDE]

Her delightfully weird compendium, *Butterfly Cooing Like a Dove*, which puts art historical images of doves and butterflies in conversation with their appearances in poetry and literature from Sappho to Proust, right?

And the book, *The Women of Rothschild, The Untold Story of the World's Most Famous Dynasty* by Natalie Livingston, which has one chapter about

Miriam, one about her mom and one about her daughter, Rosie Lane, the one who resolutely marched out of that classroom and basically into the offices of *Spare Rib* where Angela Carter worked. And she also co-founded the Feminist Art History Collective. [SHOWS SLIDE] So she's definitely a woman of our—in our spirit.

As always, I'll give Miriam the last word:

“I derive some consolation from another aspect of daily life with the natural world. I share my living space with a starling roost of 75,000 birds. Very, very chatty, very, very messy and incredibly marvelous. As they wheel in at dusk, their wings transparent against the setting sun with synchronized turns and aerobatics, which no jet pilot could hope to emulate, what I appreciate is that there they are. After a day spent, I know not where, going about their starling business. And mercifully, they do not know I exist.”

Those starlings may not know Miriam Rothschild existed, but now you do. Thank you.

[AUDIENCE APPLAUDS]

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Florian Duijsens on Miriam Rothschild, thanks to Thomas Beckmann and everyone at Lettrétage for their kind assistance at our recent live show.

SUSAN STONE: Yes, thank you. And thanks to everyone who came. If you want to see pictures of Miriam and some of her many natural obsessions, hop like a flea on over to deadladiesshow.com/podcast. You can also flock like a starling to our newsletter to find out when our next live show will be. The link is in the episode notes.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: And if you're lucky enough to be in New York, you can see a Dead Ladies Show next month. They've got one scheduled for July 17th at the KGB Bar's Red Room. Find out more from them on Instagram @deadladiesnyc or join up for their newsletter if you like.

SUSAN STONE: And if you like, you can also find us over on patreon.com/deadladiesshowpodcast, where we have exclusive content for our subscribers.

In fact, this month, Florian is there telling me all about another Rothschild, Pannonica—Miriam’s sister—who was named after a moth, but was known as the Jazz Baroness for her patronage of and friendships with musical greats, including Charlie Parker and Thelonious Monk. You can join up for as little as $2 or 2 euros a month and enjoy our full archive of special features as well as our eternal gratitude.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Oh, and more of our gratitude will come if you follow us on social media @deadladiesshow, where we share pictures and info about all of the wonderful Dead Ladies we've covered so far.

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

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Our theme tune is “Little Lily Swing” by Tri-Tachyon. And thanks to everybody out there listening. We'll be back again next month with another fabulous Dead Lady.

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