

Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 77
Anna Göldi

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

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast. I'm Susan Stone. The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women, both overlooked and iconic, who achieved amazing things against all odds while they were alive. And we do it through women's history storytelling on stage here in Berlin and beyond. Then we bring you a selection of those stories here on the podcast. DLS co-founder Florian Duijsens is here with me, too. Hello there!

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Hi Susan, it's so nice to be back on your couch in darkest, darkest Berlin.

SUSAN STONE: Yeah, it is feeling kind of dark inside and outside, isn't it? You know, I was thinking a few weeks ago, the topic of today's episode might be unsuitably grim for November 2024. But actually, as it turns out, it feels very suitable for the prevailing mood.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Sadly, yes. We're going to be hearing about Anna Göldi, the last woman to be executed for witchcraft in Switzerland. She was an independent, free-thinking woman and her case has very much been reevaluated in the last couple of decades.

SUSAN STONE: It has, and our own independent and free-thinking co-founder, Katy Derbyshire, will be bringing us Anna's story. Here's Katy live from the stage in Berlin.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Now, has anybody ever heard of Anna Göldi before? [AUDIENCE RESPONDS] Yes, two people have heard of Anna Göldi. I'm kind of only half-surprised. She's known as the last person to be sentenced as a witch in Switzerland and one of the last people in all of Europe.

[SHOWS SLIDE]

So what I'm showing you here is obviously not a photo. This is an imagined portrait by Patrick Lo Guidice. So I'm going to explain lots of background details. The place, first of all, is the canton of Glarus in Switzerland. It's German-speaking, largely Protestant, even at that time, with some Catholics, and Anna was one of those Catholics.

Switzerland, in the early modern era, was pretty big on witch hunts. So of 110 estimated witch trials in Europe during the early modern period, about 10,000 of them took place in Switzerland, which is a tiny country, so it's just massive.

For some reason, mountain regions like the Alps and the Pyrenees were particularly into witch hunting.

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So what I'm showing you here is an illustration of a Swiss witch trial in 1568, as described by Johann Jakob Wick. On the left, you can see a really fun wedding. If I was ever to be get married, I would want this green guy on the bellows pumping on my fire. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] It's a young girl marrying the devil, and her mother has arranged the marriage. On the right, you can see the trial and the pyre in which the mother and daughter were burned. You probably know that it was mostly women who were persecuted as witches. They made up 65 to 95% of defendants in Switzerland, depending on the location.

Basically, if something went wrong or if conflicts arose in the neighborhood, people would denounce their neighbors to local courts, and there are a lot of courts in Switzerland. It particularly affected outsiders and people on the margins of society, like older and widowed women who were perhaps considered less productive than others. They would be tortured, which would lead to confessions, which would also lead to more accusations, and it became a vicious circle and you just get loads and loads.

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We, though, are actually in the canton of Glarus in the 1780s. This is Glarus the town, which was the capital of the canton in around 1750. You can see there's a little church and some houses. It doesn't look like a massive place. It looks like you would know your neighbors.

So Switzerland at this time was like a loose confederation of independent cantons that were like very tiny republics. And interestingly, Glarus was an exception in Switzerland, because before Anna, no one had ever been sentenced to death as a witch. They did have trials, but no one got burned or beheaded. And the time we're talking about is mainly around 1781 and 1882. So we're slap bang in the middle of the Enlightenment.

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We've got the young Mozart who has visited Switzerland already in 1766, looking very, very cute there, in a childlike way. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] I'm not going to take it back. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Goethe, he just published his big hit, *Sorrows of Young Werther*, in 1774. Then we had another dude, Kant, less attractive maybe. *Critique of Pure Reason* came out in 1781. We've got the American Revolutionary War in full swing. The first men rode in a hot air balloon in 1783, and the mechanical loom is in development. At last, a

woman on this slide who gets to operate the loom. Of course, the French Revolution is looming [AUDIENCE LAUGHS]—sorry, so sorry—in 1789, and it's important to know, remember this little fact, that Napoleon invaded Switzerland a little bit later in 1798.

The apex of the European witch craze was about in the year 1600, after which the churches became more stable and had a better control on society for better or worse. Also, rationalism found its way to the courts because people realized that when you torture someone, they just say what you want them to say to make it stop. So you'll be familiar with the Salem witch trials in Massachusetts. There were over 200 accusations there. Fourteen women and five men were hanged. At least five people died in jail and one died under torture.

So that happened actually in 1692 and '93, as the witch craze was definitely on the way in Europe. What we're talking about 90 years later, in a really changed world, you get the picture. This was not peak witch time. Let's go back to Anna.

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Here she is performing some household duties in the musical [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] about her which premiered in Switzerland in 2017 with Masha Karel as Anna.

Anna Göldi was born in 1734 in Sennwald, which was part of the lordship of Sax-Forstegg, which was a bailiwick of Zurich. I don't know what that means either. [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] But she wasn't from Glarus, it's important. She was an outsider.

She was the fourth of eight children. Her father was a knife sharpener and a church verger. They weren't serfs, but they were right on the bottom rung of society. They did still have serfs in Switzerland at the time. Anna worked as a maid in various households from an early age, as did my grandmother from the age of 14.

In 1762, she started at the vicarage in Sennwald, where she worked until she fell pregnant in 1765. The father made a quick escape. He became a mercenary, which was quite an important part of the Swiss economy at the time. They still do that for the Pope. They still have those Swiss guards. Very sadly, the baby died during the first night.

Here comes a sad part because Anna was, we assume that she didn't do it, but we know she was sentenced for killing her baby, and she was pilloried and received six years of house arrest.

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This is a surviving pillory, or maybe it's just a reconstructed pillory, in Mölln, the German town of Mölln. People were chained to these posts, and pain and ridicule was piled upon them.

Anna was lucky enough to be released from house arrest early, and she moved away to the Glarus region, where she worked for influential families that ruled this canton in a kind of oligarchic system. That included six years with the Zwicky family—there's going to be a lot of good names—where she said she was happy.

That could have been to do with the fact that she had an extramarital relationship with the employer's son, Dr. Melchior Zwicky, which is my favorite name of this whole talk, who was 11 years her junior.

So extramarital relationships were illegal. Obviously, she kept it secret. She got pregnant again, so she had to leave. And in 1775, she said, she gave birth to a healthy boy in Strasbourg, which was more liberal than other parts of Switzerland. And she had him baptized, which was possible there, presumably under a different name, though, because we have no records. And we can only assume that she gave that child away.

So, we don't know what happened for the next five years, but in 1780, she got a new job in Glarus, in the home of the alderman judge and doctor, Johann Jakob Tschudi, and his wife, Elsbeth.

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So, they were all living in this lovely big house, on one, two, three, four, five floors, with Tschudi's brother, Peter, the five children and a number of servants, including Anna herself. Anna, at this time, was 46 years old. She was said to be attractive, intelligent, and confident.

But after a year, she was suddenly sacked in the wake of an argument. So, Anna Göldi fights back, or she tries to, and she demands compensation for her dismissal. The complaints department in Anna's case was two relatives of her employer, the bailiff, Johann Heinrich Tschudi, and the pastor, who was also named Johann Jakob Tschudi. I can only assume they didn't have a large choice of names in those days.

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So, this bailiff was the highest government official in the Canton, and also the highest judge because they didn't do separation of powers. So, he was, oh, and he was elected for life. He was an incredibly, incredibly powerful man, a

bad enemy to make. The pastor calls her a *freches Luder*, which translates as something like a hussy. It's hard to know though because this is a long time ago, how the meaning has shifted.

It's not a compliment, and he tells her to apologize to his relative, the other Johann Jakob Tschudi, and the bailiff orders her to leave the canton. So Anna fetches her belongings, including 16 Swiss doubloons. So these were gold coins, and the total value was about 64 Rhenish guilders, in case you know what that is.

And she leaves them with her paternal friend, Rudolf Steinmüller, who is a wealthy man and another relative of Tschudi's. He was the brother of Johann Jakob Tschudi's brother-in-law. And she goes back to Sax, where she came from. But the rumor mill is working hard.

People start saying that Anna Göldi is pregnant by Dr. Tschudi, that she skipped off to Schlesburg, where, as we know, the illegitimate children are treated better. And it's all looking very bad for the Tschudis. Carnal misdemeanors would be a blot on Dr. Tschudi's career.

So he arranges for Anna to be arrested so that these rumors can be disproved. There's a runner is sent out to her area with a wanted notice. But do you remember the wonderful Melchior Zwicky?

Yes, there's no, I think there might have been photos, not photos, there might have been a painting, but I like to only show the women. He gets wind of what's going on, and he sends his own runner to warn Anna. And that guy runs first than the other guy. So Anna flees to a place called Degersheim under a false name and finds a new job as a maid.

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So it's a time in which the newspapers are becoming the new media, and a wanted notice is published in the *Zürcher Zeitung*, which is a forerunner actually to today's very conservative Zurich newspaper. And there's a reward promise of a hundred crown talers.

Crown talers, if you didn't know, are silver coins, and the total value of this reward I worked out is about 200 Rhenish guilders. Point is though: it's like way more than Anna's entire life savings.

The village schoolmaster, in Degersheim, presumably wasn't paid very well because he had helped to write a letter to Anna's relatives and he recognizes her from the description and dubs her in. Thank you very much, yes. And Anna is arrested in February 1781.

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The Tschudis now claim to have found what they called *Gufen*—so, pins, in their nine-year-old daughter, Annamiggeli's milk cup. And that was the reason, they say, for the dismissal because it was Anna Göldi who boiled the milk for their sickly daughter. And then 18 days after the dismissal, Annamiggeli allegedly started spitting up pins, nails and small pieces of iron wire.

Now, they claim, the child is very fearful and in pain with a stiff foot and her father, the doctor, can't help her.

There are around 20 so-called witnesses to this pin-spitting behavior, all of them friends and employees of the Tschudis. And, funnily enough, the pastor, Johan Jakob Tschudi, is almost always present during the incidents. One witness, though, states that the mother holds a handkerchief up to Annamiggeli's mouth during the episodes and takes it away, and there's a pin. Very strange.

The Tschudis' explanation, though, is that Anna Göldi has given the child what they call a *Leckerli*, so it's something like a piece of gingerbread, and that was magic. Susan immediately thought of Hansel and Gretel with the magical enchanted gingerbread.

But Dr. Tschudi, obviously, being a doctor had studied medicine, he did already understand the digestive system, so he knew that this was absolute nonsense, this explanation. He also called on his university pal, Dr. Johann Marti, as an expert witness in court, who didn't contradict that explanation either.

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What you can see here is a drawing from a quite horrified, skeptical report after the fact by the German journalist, Heinrich Ludewig Lehmann. So the new media is already picking up on it.

Annamiggeli, meanwhile, is still sick. And they think, okay, well, maybe Anna can heal her.

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What you can see here is Cornelia Kempers in the film, *Anna Göldin — The Last Witch* from 1991, directed by Gertrude Pinkus. And it's based on a novel by Evelina Hasler, which was actually a fairly big hit in 1982, and really got the story out there.

So Anna is taken out of prison on several nights in the dead of night to see

the child, and she massages her foot while pleading to God for help. Miraculously heals the child, her foot relaxes, no more pins coming up. And Anna hopes for mercy wrongly, sadly. It's now seen as evidence against her. Good old Pastor Tschudi, writes in a letter, the snake that bit the innocent child has healed her.

So they're now calling her a *Verderberin*, which translates as something like a woman who spoils or corrupts and somebody else. The authorities never use the word witch, but it's clear that they're accusing of her doing magic.

And suddenly, Annamiggeli starts accusing Anna's friend, Rudolf Steinmüller as well, of being present when she received this *Leckerli*, the gingerbread, along with a strange creature with no legs, which was riffing on the floor of Anna's room. Steinmüller is supposed to have baked the magic gingerbread.

The only funny thing about this is that there was this inheritance dispute running between him and Dr. Tschudi. Very odd. So you can guess what comes next. They were both tortured. The usual sequence of questioning was applied. First came what they called “amicable interrogations”. Do they just ask some questions? They might not have been particularly nice to them, but they didn't do any more than that, during which both defendants denied all charges.

Then came what's called the “fear examina”, where they're shown the torture instruments by the executioner and his son, who is his apprentice, passing it down in the family. During this, it's already a form of torture.

Anna accuses Steinmüller, incriminates Steinmüller, but then she retracts her statement, apologizes to him, and denies all accusations.

So, the last stage is the “painful interrogations”. I'm not going to describe the methods there. The records actually still exist. I didn't want to read all those leading questions, and also they're in 18th century Swiss German, so I didn't. But what we know is that Anna says the devil was guiding her, and then she goes back to accusing Steinmüller.

Steinmüller confesses under torture to being led by the devil and having baked the magic gingerbread using steel shavings and vitriol, which he could imagine, he says, or the records say, led to all this pin-spitting stuff.

He retracts that confession, confesses again, and then they let him stew in his cell, and he's found hanged the next morning. The court confiscates Steinmüller's assets and ends up making a profit out of the whole trial.

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Anna is sentenced to death on the 6th of June 1782 for poisoning, although, of course, her alleged victim is alive and well. She's beheaded with a sword and buried at the execution site.

It's clear, I think, to all of us that it was a witchcraft case, and many of Anna's contemporaries saw it the same way and were really incensed, including the new media. We had whistleblowers, we had journalists working on it, and that's why we know so much about the case now.

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I'm very grateful to the historian and writer, Walter Hauser, who not only wrote several books about Anna and founded the museum, but fought long and hard for her rehabilitation, and that worked out in 2007.

So we now know Anna Göldi was not a poisoner after all. As you've seen, she's much better known now than she would have been during her lifetime. We have those novels, non-fiction books, the film, the musical, of course, a number of quite, well, one very good podcast and some other podcasts, and the museum.

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This, her story reminds me, actually, of a recent case of Depp vs. Heard, actually. The similarity I see is we have a woman who tries to stand up in a very small way to a rich and powerful man who then flips out, drags her into court, sicks all his friends on her, and ends up breaking her. Thankfully, Amber Heard is now living in Spain and making movies again.

And to my great satisfaction, Anna Göldi's employer, Dr. Johann Jakob Tschudi, came to a bad end. Remember I told you about Napoleon invading Switzerland? [AUDIENCE LAUGHS] Tschudi, being an aristocrat, wasn't really into Napoleon. He tried to stage a coup which completely failed and he ended up in prison himself. He died at the age of 53, deeply humiliated from the consequences of his imprisonment. Thank you very much.

[AUDIENCE CHEERS AND APPLAUDS]

SUSAN STONE: Katy Derbyshire from the stage at ACUD. Thanks to Thomas Beckmann and everyone at Lettrétage for their kind assistance with our live show. You can see photos and get more information about this Dead Lady and everyone we've featured on our website deadladieshow.com/podcast.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: We'll be back at ACUD later this month for another Berlin live show. And we'd love to see you there on November 30th. That's a Saturday. We'll have the stories of three fascinating ladies in our classic

German-English—well, it's really English-German-English format. Magda Birkmann will tell us about Mary MacLane, a Canadian-American feminist writer known for her detailed and scandalous memoirs. Susan, you'll talk about notorious Scottish medium Helen Duncan. Ectoplasm alert! And I'm going to introduce French-Peruvian activist and writer Flora Tristan.

Get your advance tickets now. That's all I can say. We'll pop the link to the tickets in the show notes. And you can subscribe to our newsletter as well so you never miss a thing.

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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: Whoo! Our theme tune is 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon. We'll be back again soon with another fabulous Dead Lady. Goodbye!

SUSAN STONE: Bye!

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