

S2 Ep6 - Secret Life (clean transcript)

KK: Welcome all you adventurous readers to the epic worlds of Alfred Döblin, where we explore the life and works of this fascinating but little known early 20th century writer. Brought to you by the website Beyond Alexanderplatz.

CG: Hello, everybody. Welcome to Episode 6 of our Season Two! I'm Chris Godwin, and I'm here with Katie Kavanagh.

KK: Hi, everyone. We have a great episode for you today. I'm very excited. This is, well, do you want to tell us what it's all about?

CG: Well, we're calling it Secret Life.

KK: Secret Life, which sounds like a kind of tabloid newspaper. Doesn't it?

CG: It does, but no. We're going to be dealing with what for decades has been one of the most contentious issues in Döblin scholarly circles and the lit crit industry..

KK: And it's going to be controversial at times, but we shouldn't shy away from it And everything we're saying today is in the public domain already?

CG: Yes. All we're doing is summarizing secrets which have been revealed since at least 1966.

KK: So we're going to put it in a bit of context.

CG: That's 60 years that this has been out and about, okay, in one form or another. So, what is the secret? The secret is the relationship of Alfred Döblin with a much younger woman called Yolla Niclas, which lasted from their first meeting in February of 1922, really, until Döblin's death, and even thereafter. Because Yolla wrote a memoir during the late 60s, early 70s, just to make sure that her side of the story would become known at some point.

KK: Yes.

CG: So I thought what we'd do first of all, we'll follow the posthumous controversy and the way that the secret leaked out gradually, and the way that it was handled by the lit crit industry. And then we'll go back and look at the relationship from what evidence we have from Alfred himself and from Yolla.

KK: So, OK, great. It's obviously a very private matter in terms of the family. Um, so how did it come out, posthumously? What happened? How did it come to light? And also, Chris, why are we even bothering to talk about it?

CG: We're bothering to talk about it because I think there is a very strong case, from the point of view of analysing and enjoying Döblin's literary productions – there's a very strong case for saying that the relationship with Yolla released creative powers in him which were being suppressed because of his rather unhappy marriage with Erna. But then there's also, by looking at the

psychology of the writer, this can throw light on the way that characters and events in his fictions are put together.

KK: I see.

CG: Yeah. So I think for a rounded picture of Döblin, it's very important. And Döblin himself, a couple of years before he died, called in his old friend from the Paris days called Robert Minder, who we've mentioned a few times in these podcasts and who was a very acute critic of Döblin's productions. Döblin was very sick at this time, he was bedridden in fact. And he called Robert Minder in explicitly to tell him about this relationship and what it had meant for him, because he said, "If my side of the story doesn't come out, then posterity is only going to have a very sanitized and prettified version of my life", of Alfred's life. And he wanted a full accounting of the life to become part of the public record.

KK: And how do we know this?

CG: We know this because Robert Minder has told us. And how dependable is Robert Minder? Well, he began to mention these confessions, if you like, from 1966 [i.e. nearly a decade after Döblin's death – CG]. There was an essay he wrote called "Alfred Döblin Between East and West", which was included in a collection of Minder's essays and lectures, published in German in 1966, that apparently didn't cause very much of a stir. But a certain amount of public stir occurred a few years later, when in 1969 a volume of Alfred's Selected Letters was being prepared, and Yolla had offered the editor of that volume letters from Alfred to her. And the editor rejected them.

KK: Right.

CG: And this caused a certain controversy in the press. Then in 1971, Robert Minder went into greater length in a long essay analysing an early story of Alfred's called "The Sailboat Trip", where Minder brings together the psychology aspects of the writer and the structure of the story to show how they merge together. And then 1978, of course, was Alfred's centenary year. So there was quite a bit of press interest. And Robert Minder was given quite a lot of space in the Süddeutsche Zeitung to write a long essay. And a journalist called Jürgen Serke also had a long piece in Die Zeit-Magazin, where he had also been in touch with Yolla Niclas and so he could provide some evidence from Yolla's side. But these newspaper articles prompted Döblin's son Klaus (or Claude), who we've mentioned before, who was very upset by being, as he saw it, abandoned by his parents in France in 1940.

KK: Yes, I remember.

CG: He launched a lawsuit against Robert Minder for something like violation of personal rights of Alfred. And this case came to court in Berlin, and Minder had to hire some quite expensive lawyers to defend it. And there was a preliminary session. But before the whole case could be concluded with a judgment, Minder had a heart attack and died.

KK: Oh.

CG: And so that put an end to the case?

KK: I can imagine the stress of being taken to court was a leading factor in a heart attack.

CG: Yes, sure. Now, I have to say, Minder comes across as being a fairly aggressive defender of Alfred, if you like, you know, a bit of a bulldog. But, anyway, going on from there, then things sort of cooled for a bit.

KK: Can I just say, Chris, I imagine at the time when the court case was being publicized, I imagine that sales of Döblin increased because we know that any publicity is often good publicity, even if it's bad publicity!

CG: Well, I really haven't tracked the sales numbers. I mean, he was he was coming out in dribs and drabs in different editions, all through the late 20th century. So it'd be quite tricky trying to pursue how many were actually being sold at what particular time.

KK: Yeah..

CG: Anyway. Interesting question . Now, Döblin scholarship very carefully avoided discussion of this secret, until one of the leading German Döblin scholars called Gabrielle Sander produced a, quite a long 400 page book looking at Döblin's life and each of his works, where she says, well, it's possible that Minder exaggerated a little bit about the meaning of this relationship, but in any case, the relationship unleashed new creative powers. And this was a very gracious kind of recognition from the scholarly world.

KK: OK. And was Yolla still alive at this point?

CG: No. Yolla had died in, I think, 1978.

KK: Oh, sorry. A long time.

CG: But before Yolla died, she wrote, or she typed up, a memoir of her relationship with Döblin and put very pretty marbled endpapers on it and enclosed it in a metal box. You know, a lot of very tender feeling went into this item. She sent one copy off to the Marbach archive, which was collecting all the materials on Döblin that they could. It's a very large archive now, a very useful archive in Germany, at Marbach. So she sent one copy there and she kept one copy for herself. And I think it's fairly evident that she sent a third copy to Robert Minder. Actually I acquired her original copy from her great nephew [Jack Mautner]. Because in 2017, a German historian of photography called Eckhardt Köhn had produced a very nice album called *Yolla Niclas and Alfred Döblin*, where he gave the entire German text of her memoir, plus some very long follow-ups of her life in America in the 40s and 50s and 60s, where she became a very well-known and well-liked photographer. [It was Herr Köhn who put me in touch with Mr Mautner. I passed Yolla's memoir on to the Deutsche National Bibliothek. – CG]

KK: I see.

CG: But a lot of shenanigans were going on by people who wanted to keep the whole thing under wraps and not reveal the secret.

KK: So was Yolla based in America for her entirety, or was she back and forth from the 1940s? I

CG: She arrived in America in 1940 at the same time as the Döblin's.

KK: And did she go back? Or she stayed there?

CG: She stayed in America. By the way, the copy of her memoir that she sent to the Archive was embargoed by her until 2005. So when it became publicly available, it seems nobody was interested. Or nobody knew about it and it didn't make any stir at all.

KK: I see.

CG: And it was 12 years after that that Eckhardt Köhn published his very nice volume, which gave the entire text.

KK: Do we know why she embargoed it until 2005? What was her reason for doing that?

CG: Oh, it's very unclear. I think she probably didn't want to stir things up with the family too much. So leave a decent interval when you know it will only be the grandchildren around. And perhaps they're not going to be so bothered by it. Perhaps. I'm really not sure. But, you know, perhaps she just wanted it kept as, you know, their tender secret, and she didn't want it to be violated too much.

KK: But I think we can be sensitive, can't we? And we can also say, anything like this can entirely rock a family to its core. But obviously, it's out in the public and is general knowledge now.

CG: Well, yeah. I agree. And I think the discussion I had with one of the grandsons did make me more sensitive to needing to look around to see where is there any trace of Erna's voice in this situation?

KK: Yes.

CG: And, you know, I actually found a few places where it is possible to hear Erna in her own voice. Because, remember, in previous episodes, we found that she's treated quite spitefully and disdainfully by some of Alfred's clever literary friends.

KK: Yes. That's really sad. I think it's important that she is recognised in this as well.

CG: Yes. So perhaps, at this point, it might be useful if I read out a letter which first appeared in Jürgen Serke's article in Zeit-Magazin in 1978, even though it had not been published yet. Apparently it was included in the second edition of the Selected Letters.

KK: Okay. And who's written this letter?

CG: This letter is from Alfred to Erna. I have to say, I would love to acquire the second edition of the Letters, but it's on offer on AbeBooks at around €200, so Anyway, here it is. And apparently in the second edition of the letters, it's actually dated as having been sent sometime in 1924, which was a couple of years after he first met Yolla. So Alfred writes to Erna:

Once when I went away from home, when I came to know Yolla, those days were so horrible and unbearable for me that I never slept a wink, I was so tormented. When I was back at home, the very first night I slept soundly. You were there. I was at home. A verdict was pronounced over the whole affair. You were and are for me a piece of myself. Sometimes, too often, we have quarrelled. What is that against the 'simple' affection that I feel for you: love, togetherness, your belonging with me. [Quoted in Sander 2001, p.33, fn 15 – CG]

Ah, I think that's lovely.

KK: Yes, it's lovely. But also there's a big guilty voice in there, I would say.

CG: Yes, because he was tormented.

KK: I mean, he says he was tormented. Which I'm sure at points he was. But you make a decision and you run with it. Um, but those words are to appease and to brush off and to try, in my mind at least – those words are very much for Erna to not worry because he says that he loves her.

CG: But no, because I think if it was just sort of a shallow little ploy to try and keep the lid on and try and keep her happy or something, he would not have used the words that he did. Well, he says how internally he was very, very torn. But he realises the family is very important to him because you remember his childhood.

KK: I mean, he was a writer, so ...

CG: No, but he was also a child whose father abandoned the family.

KK: And he's keenly aware that he doesn't want to break the family up.

CG: Yes. But on the other hand, as a writer, the relationship with Yolla was a kind of liberating influence, because it enabled him for the first time to create very credible and life-affirming female characters.

KK: I wonder if this is a good point to go back to the beginning. So where did it all start, and how did the three of them become entwined? I mean Erna, Alfred and Yolla.

CG: Yes. Well, if you remember from previous episodes, the marriage of Alfred and Erna was a little bit fraught right from the start because Alfred felt he'd been pushed into it by the family. Because she was a splendid young lady, very clever, one of the first female medical students in Germany.

KK: It was an arranged marriage.

CG: It was sort of an arranged marriage. And he'd had to split up with the young nurse he'd been living with for the previous 4 or 5 years, who had produced an illegitimate son.

KK: Right.

CG: Um, so, you know, all through the, I think, the first decade of their marriage, Alfred was probably pretty, you know, cool and aloof and his heart was not very much in it. But then at a Lenten ball in 1922, I'm sure it was 1922, even though quite often it's referred to as 1921, which I think doesn't agree with external circumstances very well. 1922 at a Lenten ball. Well, Alfred and Erna attended. There were lots of writers and film folk and artists and so on. A film star called Alexander Granach had pulled across by the hand this young lady saying, "oh, come and meet Alfred Döblin. Now, by this point apparently they'd had a little tiff and Erna had stormed off to go home for a good night's sleep while Alfred stayed around at the ball. And then this young lady was introduced to him and she sat down and they began chatting. So next morning they agreed to go for a walk in the Tiergarten, which is the kind of Hyde Park of Berlin. And they obviously hit it off very immediately. And I'm fairly sure things turned romantic very early on. And at this point, Alfred was just beginning to work on *Mountains Oceans Giants*, a very ambitious project not anchored in anything historical where he could go and research in museums and books and so on. It all had to come from this imaginative spirit working away in him. And he actually rented a room in the western suburbs of Berlin for several weeks, to be able to concentrate fully on developing the story of *Mountains Oceans Giants*,

KK: So this at this stage, Erna was quite used to him going off for periods of time?

CG: Not really, I don't think, he hadn't really... Well, during the First World War, he'd been suffering from stomach complaints and, uh, line management problems, shall we say. He had gone off to Heidelberg and Strasbourg at times, where he was able to delve into university libraries and so on for *Wallenstein*. But I wouldn't say that he'd frequently taken leave from the family until this point.

KK: With *Mountains Oceans Giants* .Right.

CG: So fairly soon, they agreed that Yolla needed to be introduced to the family. And she was a great favorite with the children. Because she was a photographer, she was able to take some delightful pictures of the family, of the children. And she was invited for Christmases. You know, although they weren't an openly religious family, they celebrated the kind of Christmas that we celebrate. You know, without necessarily too much religion in it.

KK: Chris, can I just stop you for a second? You said you were fairly sure that it would have become amorous quite quickly. But would they have made that decision to invite her to those family things? If it was so amorous at that stage?

CG: Well, let's look at some of the evidence we have of things that actually happened with Yolla in the family.

KK: Okay.

CG: So in 1924, which was just a couple of years after they met, Erna asked Yolla to come and be the babysitter for an extended period while Alfred was away in Poland doing research for his travel book called *Travels in Poland*, which was published the following year.

KK: So how had Erna met Yolla?

CG: Well, she'd been introduced to the family. I think she was presented probably first of all, as what we would call a “groupie”, you know, a younger person infatuated with the famous older person.

CG: Okay.

KK: But Erna had to go off and have some kind of medical treatment for something she wanted to keep secret from Alfred, and she asked Yolla to come along for an extended period of babysitting for what was then three boys. Yolla was happy to oblige.

KK: Do we know what that medical treatment was?

CG: No. No idea. And then in 1925, Erna actually invited Yolla to come along on a canal barge holiday they were going to have in the wetlands somewhere around Berlin. And there again, she was a big favorite with the children and had an interesting time with them. But in her memoir, she says how they all went off to sleep in their quarters, and she had to sleep alone. Her tender heart was a bit hurt by this. And then in 1927 ...

KK: What an odd thing to write down!

CG: What was an odd thing to write down?

KK: Well, I guess they're just her personal memoirs.

CG: It's like her personal diary, and it is very much a kind of, you know, tender, girlish, emotional.

KK: Yeah. Okay, so I will reframe it in my mind.

CG: Then in 1926, which was already five years after the liaison began, Yolla was visiting the family, Erna came and sat down beside her and whispered in her ear that she had a big secret and there was going to be another little man or possibly a little woman.

KK: In other words, she was pregnant.

CG: Yes. With Stephan, as it turned out. And in her memoir, Yolla says this really upset her because it meant that Erna was tightening her chain on Alfred, and she was still hoping – even I think during the 1930s, she was still hoping that at some point Alfred would opt to leave the family and marry her. But finally, by 1940, she'd realized that this was never going to happen. And so Yolla marries a young man called Rudolf Sachs, who had been helping her in her photographic studio in Paris.

KK: And I imagine it's quite clear to see, well, I think at least, anyway, that Erna, by that remark and by telling her in that way that she knew what was happening and she was telling her to say, it's time to back off now.

CG: Er, well, may well be so. Paris. The Döblin's have settled in one arrondissement, and Yolla is on the other side of town with her little photographic studio. And quite often they bump into each other in the street.

KK: Right.

CG: With no predetermined meeting. And this they both of them put down to a kind of telepathy. Anyway, by the end of the 30s, as you know, war is coming. Yolla's boyfriend, Rudolph Sachs, is interned as an enemy alien. And Yolla realizes, actually, she had better go and marry him now, because obviously nothing is ever going to happen with Alfred. And so she asks the commandant of the camp where Rudolph is being held if he might be allowed out for an afternoon to get married to her. And the commandant says, yes, of course, why not have 48 hours? So he's released for 48 hours, and they get married. But while this was going on, Yolla's mother in law, Rudolph's mother, finds this big package of all the stuff that Yolla has been collecting of letters from Alfred, and books with dedications written by him, and mementos and so on, and burns it all because this might cause problems with the, the very nervous French police at this time of the Phoney War, 1939, 1940.

KK: I see.

CG: So all these mementos have disappeared. And then Yolla herself is picked up and taken away to an internment camp right down in the south in the Pyrenees. But eventually she manages to get away from there and eventually gets to Lisbon and eventually takes a steamer across to New York. Well, Alfred is already in Los Angeles. Any letters Yolla sends are immediately intercepted by Erna and marked "Not known at this address" and put back to the Post Office. And only once, I think, during those years in Los Angeles did a telephone call that Yolla made to Alfred actually get through at a time when Erna wasn't in the house. But Alfred was very frightened by this. He said, "You really must stop telephoning. You know, it just causes big upsets in the family. But on the other hand, it's very nice to hear your voice."

KK: Mhm. Oh, it is tricky. So Erna was obviously trying to protect her family.

CG: Well, she was a wronged woman. You know, asserting her, her wifeliness against this interloper.

KK: Exactly.

CG: So, anyway, I thought as our reading, we could give Yolla's own testimony, her own words, in her own memoir about their last meeting, a face to face meeting with Alfred.

KK: Okay.

CG: This took place on 8th October 1945, which was the day before the steamer sailed on which they had booked passage back to Europe, where they'd taken this big gamble. You know, they had no idea what's awaiting them in Europe.

KK: Yes. But the war's ended, they're returning home.

CG: It's the end of the war. Right. And, well, let me give it in Yolla's words:

On 8 October, around noon, Rudi and I were living in a really small apartment in Jackson Heights, the telephone rang. An agitated voice said: "Little Sister, is that you – my little Yolla! I really must see you, and right away. We're in New York for a very short while, and Erna has gone off shopping on 5th Avenue."

"Little Brother, I can't walk at all, not one step," I said, "I've just had a major knee operation."

"But that's terrible," he said, "tell you what, I'll come right away to see you. Peter knows your address, he'll help me find you."

... We sat facing each other, and I heard the beloved voice.

"Oh, our unlived life..." he said, and the angels again began to sing as at our first encounter – albeit with different voices. I can't remember everything we talked about, it was good that Peter was there too, so our eyes could say the most.

D's full head of hair with the parting at the side was turning grey at the temples, otherwise there was no essential change in his previous appearance.

When we spoke of my lost copy of *Mountains* with the page-long personal dedication and I told him I had at least been able to find another copy here in New York, he stood up to take it down from the bookshelf. "Now no more regrets, Little Sister, I shall quickly write out something else." A pen was already in his hand.

"The world is not lost. – We have no need to wait for salvation!"

Dear Little Sister, today I see you again – and we shall often see one another again, be sure of it!"

Early October 1945, New York

Your P.

"Your P" meant Pim, which was her nickname for him, just as Yolla was actually his nickname for her. Her real name was Charlotte.

KK: Oh, okay.

CG: So Yolla continues:

Then he helped me to my feet, and I hobbled on crutches to the kitchen to open the refrigerator. "Something to drink, Little Brother!"

"You know," he said, "maybe it's quite wrong of me to head back to Europe, so cheerful, so carefree, with no idea what awaits there!"

A few minutes later he glanced at the clock. "I have to go soon." He turned to Peter: "Could you call for a taxi?"

Normally when I took my heavy apparatus and tripods into New York to take pictures, it often took half an hour to locate an empty taxi in this area. Peter on the other hand, oh woe, came back hardly five minutes later. The cab was waiting by the door. I was quite bewildered when D stood up.

"Little Yolla," he said at the very end, "there's one thing I've learned: one should never enter a marriage that is not made in Heaven."

We embraced – "with all our heart, all our soul, all our strength" – for the last time.

KK: So it really does sound like, from what you've just read out, that he did have regrets at that moment in time. He regretted that they weren't, that they couldn't be together.

CG: Yes he did. He was very much a split spirit.

KK: Right.

CG: He was the human being and the family man, who didn't want to reprise the disaster that his own father had visited on the family when he was only ten years old.

KK: Yes.

CG: On the other hand, he was the creator, the writer. And this creativity was an incredibly important part of his life. You know, all these books behind me, these are basically all books by Döblin. It's a very long bookshelf! So, yes, he is a split mind, a split personality. He would say, no, it's not a split personality. It's a split state of being.

KK: Right.

CG: Anyway, the day after, just as they were rushing to get ready to go aboard the boat, he managed to scribble a little note to her. It's dated 9th October:

Still in New York. My dear little sister, little Yolla. Today is Sunday. I'm sitting in the hotel. Everything is not just packed, but almost already fetched away. And tomorrow morning we're off to Europe. At least I have seen my little sister once again, and spoken with her, and found her as good as I always knew her. And maybe she saw in me the old unchanged friend, though a little aged. Little sister, when and where shall I see you again? Oh, what will become of me over there? I'm going into it so cheerful and maybe clueless. Think of me. Help me with your thoughts and if you can, your prayers. It will not be simple or easy over there. And I know you're no longer young. We can stay in touch with each other by letter. You will hear from me soon, little Yolla. I've had stupid, disturbed, harassed days here. Not my fault. It's so lucky that I was able to steal that hour with you. How is your knee? You'll soon need massages. But all in all, it will soon be fine and "all right" [in English]. For my work, I found no understanding in America. But there were several friendly and helpful people here. Certainly more than I ever found in France. Now live well. Really well. And you will never forget me. Nor I you.

Your P.

KK: So undoubtedly everyone now knows they had a relationship for sure.

CG: Well, no. I'm not so sure. I mean, it was still pretty confidential, I think, right up until after he died, even close friends didn't fully realize the intensity of the situation.

KK: You misunderstand me. As in now, today.

CG: Today? Yes. Oh, yes. I mean, you know, 60 years after Döblin's death, it's now kind of common knowledge. Because the materials, the witness statements from Robert Minder and from Yolla. And from Herr Köhn, who put together that very nice volume about the relationship. So it's all there, it's part of the Döblin story.

KK: Yes. So I wonder if we would call her a muse. In the early days, and then maybe it moved into something else.

CG: I definitely think that she had the function or the spirit, if you like, of a muse who enabled him to create female characters of a delightful kind of life-giving fullness that he had never managed before. There are two in particular, there was Venaska in the later parts of *Mountains Oceans Giants*, and Savitri in *Manas*. I don't think he would have been capable of creating these if he hadn't had this kind of release of the erotic, if you like, in his life.

KK: OK.

CG: But it's interesting that even last year, when I asked a leading UK academic in the Döblin area, are there any published articles or anything about Yolla as Döblin's muse. And he just wrote back very curtly saying, "I've seen no evidence that she was ever his muse."

KK: Well, I guess there's fear there isn't there, from the establishment. Fear of putting something in writing. So I feel like we've covered quite a bit. And I also feel that we've talked about Erna and her feelings towards the relationship. And we've heard from Yolla, and obviously we've heard through Robert Minder from Döblin himself as well.

CG: Yes.

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KK: So would we say that this is the end? I think there's not much more to say for this episode.

CG: Well, I hope the viewers and listeners will have found it interesting enough to go and explore, particularly these two wonderful, rounded female characters Venaska in *Mountains Oceans Giants* and Savitri in *Manas*. Because I have to say, *Manas* continues to be very severely neglected among all of Döblin's works, even though it's such splendid free verse. I mean, free verse usually scares everybody off, but it's a very particular kind of Döblin free verse, which is actually very easy to read, despite being a sort of intensified prose. So I would urge people, don't be put off, go and acquire a copy of *Manas* and, uh, maybe immerse yourself in it.

KK: *Manas* first. *Mountains Oceans Giants* afterwards.

CG: Yes. *Mountains Oceans Giants* is quite a hard go. I mean, I was tempted in my translation of *Mountains* to say let's put Parts 6 to 9, let's put them first.

KK: That's where it gets a bit more exciting.

CG: Yeas because they're the real science fiction, the exciting bits. And then we'll do all the lead up to it, with the world building.

KK: You've got to have the world building. Yes. OK. Thank you. Chris, it's been really interesting, and I'm glad that we've covered it in the way that we have.

CG: I hope we've done it in an inoffensive way, where we're trying to be honest about something which is already in the public domain and something which I think is of interest to anybody who is interested in reading Döblin.

KK: OK. Well, let's stop there then and say thank you very much, everybody. Thank you for joining us today, and we will see you next time.

CG: Well, thank you, Katie. So goodbye, everybody. I'm not quite sure what our next episode is going to be.

KK: Well, maybe we're on a summer break now.

CG: Yes, we can wait. Wait till the autumn. And I hope all the all the various interruptions we had because of internet connections will not cause you as producer too much trouble.

KK: I'm sure I can snip some bits out. It'll be fine. Yeah. Thanks,

CG: Goodbye, everybody. Thank you. Bye.

KK: We hope you've enjoyed this episode of the Epic Worlds of Alfred Döblin. Join us next time to explore more about this fascinating writer's life and works. Meanwhile, visit the website Beyond-Alexanderplatz.com for posts about Döblin and some of his unjustly neglected contemporaries, as well as downloads of translations. So until next time, happy reading!