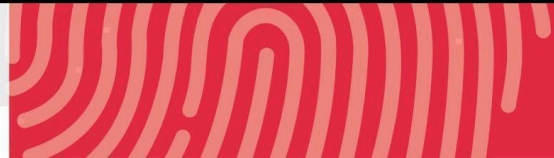




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THE LIFE OF MARIELLA MEHR

adapted by Katalin Lábán

based on the novel of Mariella Mehr: *Nachrichten aus dem Exil*

translated to English by Patrick Mullaney

(excerpt)

PLAYED BY:

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ZERO

My name is Mariella Mehr. I'm a Yenish authoress.

Zero is the name of the town that took me in and expelled me.

The houses' sandstone walls crumble with hypocritical manners and comfort leading a conceited bourgeois lifestyle.

Here live those who were born to condemn,
thoughtfully collecting case files.

The town of Zero gave me 12 years to think over
the life of Sylvia – Sylvio – Sylviana.

Those who know the lies remain silent.

Those whose souls are oppressed beyond recognition must remain silent.

The charitable institution responsible for my life exists no more.

Its founder, Sigrist Eberhad, died a few years ago.

His successor, Frau Wanzenreid, made it her social mission
to look after gypsy children.

"We'll clean up the streets," declared Alfred Siegfried,
leader of Pro Juventute in 1926.

Children torn from their mothers' breasts were raised in the homes of people
who benefited from rights and laws.

They upheld law and order.

The essential ties to the mother tongue were severed.

After all, in Switzerland, the law banned the Yenish language.

I preserve my life in an old trunk...

BIRTH

A new memory emerges.

Mother carries Sylvia down a long white corridor.

Sylvia's in a sack, a sack under mother's arm.

The little girl feels the anxiety, the fleeing, the fear.

Mother's threatening words, wild shouts.

Mother squeezes Sylvia to her body,
practically smothering her in her prison.

They wanted to kill Sylvia,
so Sylvia's body was barely born –
a black prison, a foreign power,
a torture device from a strange, incomprehensible world.
My mother's cry of desperation was my nursery song.

TWO YEARS OLD

At the city home for infants,
lying on a floral cover, Sylvia could barely slide and crawl.

She is far from the other children, near a fence, alone.

Lying down, Sylvia observes everything.

The nurses say that Sylvia's stench is unbearable.

Her rough fabric diaper is full again. She feels guilty.

The nurse approaches. Sylvia grows stiff.

She can clearly see the face distorted with fury.

With a single motion, the nurse pulls the floral cover out from under her.

Sylvia rolls into the hedge, her pullover getting stuck on the lowest wire.

I must not do that again. I want to be good. To be good.

She sees Sylvia's helpless writhing.

Another nurse comes and puts an end to the writhing.

The little girl reclines again on the floral cover.

This nurse is crazy. As crazy as mother. She also wants Sylvia to die.

Sylvia's stench is unbearable. It can't be expected from anyone,

neither the nurses nor the children.

FIVE YEARS OLD

In the Zum Lachelnden Jesus Children's Home,
Sylvia sits in the darkest corner of the playroom,
not like the other girls who play freely.
There are traces of scratches on her little hands.
Her nails are cut down to the quick.
Sylvia hates being dirty
Sylvia breaks her silence with murmurs.
At rare times, she beats the wall, breaks the toys.
The little girl's face turns red from the nurse's palm.
Her crying is dry, tearless sobs.
She grips the little wooden horse
and waits in the corner of the room.

It's the same room where, two years before, a nurse smeared Sylvia's face
with the little girl's soiled panties.

SIX YEARS OLD

Until I turned six, I remained mute as a protest against the world,
which endlessly committed violence upon me.

Neuendorf, in central Switzerland, is largely Catholic.
I was seven when the underwear ritual began.
My foster mother demanded that I remove my panties at night,
undershirt and underskirt.
I wanted to keep them on,
because every night she sent my foster father into my room,
and he felt around under my nightshirt.

I had to stand up the bed, so he could reach under my nightshirt more easily.
If I wasn't completely undressed, I had to do it in front of him
while he watched, and I felt terribly ashamed.
If I was a bad child, this was followed by a whacking.
That's what my foster father called beatings.
He flogged me with his military belt and meanwhile cried.

Going to bed at night became my everyday nightmare.

EIGHT YEARS OLD

At eight years old, I thought if I had a mother, no one would harm me.
Only I had no mother – and this, too, was my fault.
Her illness could be my fault.
Peace, said Sister Hanna Maria, is a quality few possess.
One must pay for it with pain and suffering.
“You, Sylvia, you have not suffered enough.
You haven't been thirsty or hungry enough.
You've had no sponge soaked in vinegar pressed to your lips.”
Those of us living in the children's home believed this madness,
just so we'd be loved.
“Children stand the closest to God.”
Those rotten hypocrites!

THE HOME IN HOHENRAIN

Fraulein Fedler led the gymnastics.
In the gym, I wasn't able to jump up and down.
She touched my shoulder, and I drew back. This made her furious.
She couldn't stand girls climbing trees.
I, however, wanted to live in the treetops.
Like a boy, I could even run like a boy. I was proud of that.

Up high, I could hear the forest's breathing.

I could feel the heartbeat of the meadows with my hand.