

THE PSYCHOANALYST Sabina Spielrein

Transcript of [What'sHerName Episode 40](#)

Olivia Meikle: Hi Katie!

Katie Nelson: Hi Olivia!

OM: We're back!

KN: We're back! Yay!

OM: It was a good break.

KN: It was a good break, it actually feels really long.

OM: You went to Greece...

KN: I did! I was there for five, six weeks.

OM: I went nowhere. [laughter]

KN: I ate so much Greek salad literally every day.

OM: Yay! That's my dream.

KN: So good, so good. So in this coming season, obviously, I'll have some Greek-themed episodes in the docket.

OM: Exciting! And I'm heading to Scotland next month. So I'll have some Scottish-themed episodes.

KN: Ooh I hope so. Very cool!

OM: But today we're going to talk about the person who invented some of the most important psychological theories of our time. For example, we're gonna talk about the person who came up with the idea of the 'death wish.'

KN: Whoa. Really?

OM: And the person who came up with the idea of 'ancestral memory.'

KN: Oh, interesting. As in, like - you carry the memories of your ancestors?

OM: Exactly, that you are walking around carrying buried memories from your actual ancestors.

KN: Says the woman who's about to go to Scotland, the land of her ancestors.

OM: Exactly.

KN: Okay so I also associate these ideas with, like, Freudian, Jungian psychology. But, of course, Freud and Jung, they're men. So... are you about to tell me that a woman came up with those and the men got all the credit?

OM: I *am* about to tell you that!

KN: Whoa that is *shocking!* [laughter] Wow!

Somehow, somehow, I am persistently surprised.

OM: Yeah, I mean every single time I think, "But how. But surely..." Yeah. And in this episode, I think we're going to encounter a new form of erasure - a new method of erasure that we haven't talked about yet.

KN: Okay.

[theme music]

OM: I'm Olivia Mickle.

KN: And I'm Katie Nelson.

OM: And this is *What'sHerName*.

KN: Fascinating women you've never heard of.

[theme music]

OM: First, let's meet who we're talking about. Her name is Sabina Spielrein, and she is best known for being one of Jung's patients, and possibly his mistress.

KN: Classic.

OM: And that is all anyone knows about her.

KN: Yup, okay.

OM: But, there's so much more to Sabina Spielrein than a possible 'affair' and a childhood mental illness. So to learn more about her, I talked to Dr. Angela Sells.

Angela Sells: Hi, my name is Angela Sells. I am a Women's Studies professor in Seattle. I am the author of [*Sabina Spielrein: The Woman and the Myth*](#), published by SUNY press last year in paperback. I am a drummer in the band Below Blackstar, and fight for women's rights, especially female musicians rights as an editor for [*Tom Tom Magazine*](#).

OM: Dr. Sells wrote a biography of Sabina Spielrein - by far the best biography and the only one that, in my opinion, gives anything close to an accurate picture of who she was and what she means to modern psychology and philosophy.

Angela Sells: Sabina Spielrein was a psychoanalyst, one of the first female pioneers. She's often presented as the mistress, *so-called* 'mistress' of Carl Jung, and is presented via the 2011 movie with Keira Knightley, *A Dangerous Method*, as some sort of pawn in a love affair between Jung and colleague Freud in 1909 in Switzerland - in Zurich. But actually, even though she had been diagnosed with hysteria as a young girl - after her sister died, her younger sister died, and she was expressing grief, which was diagnosed as hysteria. She, through 'talking therapy,' which was innovative and still new at the time, healed, and was deemed cured by the director of the institute. Because she was institutionalized from her native hometown in Rostov, Russia, she was institutionalized then in Zurich. And she was cured through talk therapy. Which I believe was because she actually could express herself and had someone to listen to her, and affirm her - which was Jung, and she was actually one of his first female patients.

05:07 - 10:02

OM: So whether or not they had an affair doesn't matter. And I'm not going to talk about it.

KN: Okay.

OM: What matters is that she took this treatment that she received and made it into a career. She became a student of psychology. She got a PhD. She became the first child psychologist. She delved really deeply into children's neuroses, children's dreams, especially after she had her own children. She really wanted to understand children's world and children's brains and their worldview. And so she really did the first systematic study of psychology in children. She practiced for thirty years as a psychoanalyst.

KN: Wow.

OM: She was extremely well known, extremely influential, and extremely important to the beginning field of psychoanalysis.

Angela Sells: When she was working in Zurich -and she had also been working in Berlin and Geneva, and could speak three languages and teach in all three languages - she originated the so-called 'death wish' almost a full decade before Freud expanded on her idea. And he's - you know, he's become known for that, but he actually cites her in his footnotes, indebted to her. And though his concept is much different - she had this beautiful idea and concept of death as a *dissolution into one's beloved*. So it's just this very poetic, feminine point of view about love, and destruction of the self metaphorically through childbirth,

bringing a new being into the world. She called it ‘destruction in the service of creation.’ And of course, sometimes childbirth led to actual death, and that was in service of this new child, so ‘destruction in the service of creation.’ But aside from that literal translation of interpretation, it was this idea of transformation and especially for women - sexually-active imagination, about dissolution and union through sexuality with one's partner. She was such a pioneer, and so many others have really expanded on those topics, but no one has really realized how progressive, how interesting and pioneering those ideas were at the time, and they really came from her.

OM: She did a lot of research in women's sexuality in what she called ‘the bisexuality of the soul’ - that women are sexual beings *at all* is sort of pushing back hard against the narratives of the time, but also the narratives that these two men will carry on after her about what women are, how they exist in the world.

Angela Sells: Their ideas were very different. He translated into biology - you know there's such an emphasis on biological gender, and ‘male’ being *this* and ‘female’ being *that*, and she actually kind of turned that on its head and she took it to a metaphorical place.

OM: She did a lot of work about archetypes, and mythology - archaic stories, and how they pertain to what we're learning, Greek myths...

KN: Wow, yeah I totally associate that with Jung!

OM: Exactly - all of these things she started *first*, and she really laid the groundwork for these as things that could be applied to psychoanalysis. Jung is *not* erasing her. He's not taking credit for ideas - these ideas that he is taking from her, he is citing. He is saying, clearly, this is *her*, and I'm gonna do *this* with it.

KN: Treating her like a peer.

OM: Right, from the correspondence between these three, we can see that she was definitely viewed as an equal, and someone they looked up to and admired and learned from.

Angela Sells: Because she was a nineteen-year-old, quote ‘hysteric’ being seen by Jung, and this was a bit of the basis of the formation of Jung and Freud’s relationship - Jung was getting advice about Sabina Spielrein. But the kind of salacious nature of “did they or didn't they,” that is what has taken over - completely overshadowing the fact that she was Jung's patient for about eight months. She then lived her life into her fifties, an analyst, a colleague.

10:03 - 15:10

Angela Sells: She actually wrote about a lot of pain she experienced. Because let’s not forget, you know, as a patient and therapist, there's a breach of ethics. If they had been involved, which I'm not even saying that they were, we need to consider that when we say things about ‘romance.’

KN: Right.

Angela Sells: Or that he cured her because of *love* or some relationship. But that's the dominating narrative, that's how she's painted - and actually her diaries contradict that. The fact that this gets characterized as a romance, I really think is detrimental, and still relevant to women's experiences with abuses of power.

OM: Early on she sent a letter to Freud, well before she had, like, a *right* to write to Freud. She's nobody, she's this nineteen-year-old nobody, and she sends a letter to Freud that is really amazing.

Angela Sells: She actually wrote to him talking about the relationship with Jung, and standing up for herself, and these labels that were already circulating. And he wrote to her not believing her. "Doctor Jung is my friend. I think I know him and have reason to believe that he's incapable of ignoble behavior. So I urge you to ask yourself whether your feelings are not best suppressed and eradicated..."

OM: [frustrated] Ahhhhhh.

Angela Sells: It took Jung actually confessing, you know - whatever there was to confess - to Freud for him to then write back to Spielrein asking for forgiveness. And she wrote again.

OM: Well that's something I guess.

Angela Sells: Right, it's something, it's something. But she wrote back again, "Yet you should have given me an audience." I think that's one of the most astonishing letters. She's really speaking up for herself, but then that kind of starts their correspondence, their letters, bouncing theories back and forth, which are fascinating. She becomes a working colleague with both of these thinkers.

OM: Her paper on the Death Wish was so well received in the community that prominent scholars called it "akin to the work of the great mystics."

KN: Wow!

OM: Freud was so impressed with this paper that he presented her for membership to the Psychoanalytical Society.

Angela Sells: He and the fellow members of his Vienna Psychoanalytic Society voted unanimously to have her as a member, and she was the first woman to be voted unanimously into the society.

KN: So what happened? I mean, how come she didn't get the credit? Did she call it something boring and he branded it something exciting? Or what?

OM: No, I think that's what's so fascinating about this, is that even when everyone involved is working in absolute good faith to assure credit where credit is due, *translation* will ruin it. And in this case, I mean literal translation. Jung's works are translated into other languages - the footnotes are *not* translated.

KN: Oh!

OM: And so all of these meticulous citations giving her credit for all of these ideas - poof - disappear. And so everyone reading these groundbreaking works in England, in France, in America are *not seeing* where they're coming from. And Sabina Spielrein saw this coming, she was very concerned about it. And we have letters where she is writing to Jung saying, "I'm very concerned that people aren't going to know where you're getting this from. I'm very concerned that people are going to leave me out of this, and that my ideas are going to become your ideas when people read these." And Jung wrote back...

KN: She called it!

OM: Exactly, it's almost like women know what happens to women... [laughter] But Jung, with seemingly total sincerity, wrote back and said, "Don't be ridiculous. *Everyone* knows this is yours." She was so well known, he was almost laughing at the idea. Who would ever think that this was his? It's Sabina Spielrein's, obviously! So even though she was so concerned about this and called out these problems, it *still* happened. When these works go out into the world, she is removed from them, and these ideas that *she* pioneered became theirs.

15:11 - 20:02

KN: I'm a little bit annoyed. Couldn't Freud and Jung just have mentioned her in the text instead of the footnotes, like just say "as Sabina Spielrein has established... blah blah blah."

OM: But it seemed to be, just you know...

KN: Maybe they just thought it was a given.

OM: Yeah, it was following standard academic citation practice, and also it really seems to have been something like, it would be like, now...

KN: You're referencing "All the Single Ladies" and you're, like - come on, everybody knows.

OM: Exactly. This is Beyonce, we don't need to attribute this phrase to Beyonce, everybody knows, right? No one's gonna get confused.

KN: Yeah.

OM: But they did. And she was disappeared out of these books.

KN: Boo.

OM: There's another aspect to her silencing, but we'll get to that in a minute.

[ad] And now a word from a podcast that I personally love, [Latina to Latina](#). So you obviously like listening to powerful and inspiring stories. So I wanna tell you about a show that highlights women who are trailblazers wherever they are. *Latina to Latina* lets you listen in on intimate conversations with some of the most fascinating Latinas in the USA. From Hollywood power producers, to chefs, to activists, guests on

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[music]

OML In our narrative now, Freud and Jung are opposing forces, right? In psychology 101. They're friends, but they are two different ways of looking at the world, and you have to pick one. You're a Freudian, or you're a Jungian. And if we have *one woman* coming up with all of the ideas for both of them to build on! That really shakes that foundation that we have of "pick one." If they're *both* drawing from Sabina Spielrein, they can't be those two pillars of psychology that are so different. They're all doing similar things together in a much messier way than I think most of us in Psychology 101 want to talk about.

Angela Sells: And that's the thing, of course - she was influenced by both and they were also influenced by her, and that seems to be the problem (that I don't understand why it's a problem) if everyone was influenced by everyone. Spielrein really was the best of both worlds, in my opinion. She took this kind of mythic understanding, this very 'literary base' of Jung, and interpreted it as a woman - you know, very clearly writing about *women's* sexuality. And then she took a more grounded approach in dreams and family trauma from Freud.

KN: They're both *Spielrein-ian*.

OM: That's exactly the term that Angela Sells wants to start bringing into the common discourse!

KN: Oh cool.

OM: I love it. I'm using it from now on.

KN: You're a Spielreinian...

OM: These are Spielreinian ideas.

KN: Ahh!

OM: It doesn't quite have the same ring, I will give you that. But maybe the two guys became famous because their last names are one simple syllable. And hers is hard.

KN: That's all it came down to. [laughter]

Angela Sells: I honestly would love for that to become A Thing, because I really think she deserves it.

OM: The other issue is, unfortunately, that these men had *decades* to refine their ideas, to work on publishing, to publicize their own work, to create their own fan clubs.

KN: Uh oh. No, no. She's gonna die?

OM: She's gonna die.

KN: [sighs] Aghhhh

OM: And unfortunately in a particularly terrible way, so....

KN: No!

OM: So everyone prepare yourselves.

KN: Okay...

OM: Because - after studying and practicing in Switzerland for many years, Sabina Spielrein moves back to Russia. In 1923 she decides to travel back to Moscow.

KN: Okay so 1923, that's... six years after the Bolshevik revolution.

20:02 - 25:01

OM: Right. So hopefully things have come down a little and things are pretty stable. She opens a practice specializing in Child Psychology. She is a teacher. She trains [Jean Piaget](#); he joins the staff, and actually goes through an eight month analysis with *her* as his psychoanalyst.

In 1925 she leaves Moscow and she and her daughter move with her husband - who much earlier had moved back to a village named Rostov-on-Don - and in Rostov-on-Don she's still continuing to do psychoanalysis. She's also working as a pediatrician.

KN: Wow!

OM: But, in 1941...

KN: Oh, no.

OM: The Germans invade Russia, and Sabina Spielrein is Jewish. And in 1942 the German army occupies her city, and she and her two daughters are killed by an SS death squad.

KN: Oh my gosh.

OM: And not just them, but the entire village - 27,000 people - are killed.

KN: Oh my gosh.

OM: They massacre everyone in this entire village.

So aside from, of course, the horrific tragedy of that - that also means that her legacy ends. You know, we've talked a lot about the importance of having someone to carry on your legacy, to tell your story - all of her children are dead. All of her family members are dead. And so there's no one to carry on her legacy. And while Freud and Jung do, they keep praising her work...

KN: Yeah, I was just going to ask, why don't - why aren't they carrying it on?

OM: And they are, but those praises keep *not being translated*. And, and I think - that can't be an accident.

KN: Yeah.

OM: When you are translating a work, it's not an accident when you eliminate *all traces* of the woman who came up with these ideas. Especially a Jewish woman in this time period.

KN: Well, I suspect that post-World War II, you know, heading into the Cold War - she's Russian, so the western world would be inclined to just remove all Russian elements from... And since, as we established, I think it was in the [Marjorie Hillis episode](#) that we talked about how in the 1950s in western, and especially American culture, there was this new movement to 'get women back into the home' because that's 'the American way.' And they're putting all of that, they're building 'the American way' *on Freud*. And if Freud's built his ideas on this Russian woman, who was not 'just going back into the kitchen...'

OM: Yes! And most ironically, Freud got very angry with Sabina Spielrein when she got pregnant, because he told her "you're wasting your talents."

KN: Wow.

OM: "It would be a waste of your intellect and your gifts for you to *just* be a mother." And Sabina Spielrein, of course said, "I can do both. I can do both. *You're* doing both. *He's* doing both. Why can't I do both?" And she did.

So she is just in the *worst possible* scenario. Because she's Jewish. So she's being erased in Russia all the way through the war, and in Europe throughout the war, you know, these - 'you can't put a Jewish person on a pedestal during the war'...

KN: Right.

OM: And then as soon as the war ends, she's Russian. So she's just kind of, *casually* erased in a way that *she* foresaw, but that these men just genuinely couldn't see.

Angela Sells: When the reputations of Jung and Freud became the pillars, so-called, of psychology - then in the sixties, seventies, eighties, nineties... that's when we see scholars really fight to stigmatize any inkling of Spielrein.

OM: Part of the problem might be that she has been stuck in psychology. Jung and Freud have been 'freed' from psychology. Now, you study Jung and Freud everywhere. We study them in literature analysis, we study them in history, we study them in philosophy. We study them in...

25:01 - 30:02

OM: ... art history. We study them everywhere. They are in no way limited to the idea that they are psychologists, right?

KN: Yeah.

OM: And she is still stuck in psychology.

Angela Sells: Freud actually wanted her to replace Jung's name on the masthead of his journal. These are the facts of her later adult life. And so I have theory that the relationship, or the kind of 'sexual intrigue' of her relationship with Jung as his patient, subsumes - or kind of consumes - us, because it keeps her as this sick little girl, instead of, you know, the healthy career woman.

OM: The culture continues to be obsessed with the story of Sabina Spielrein as the nineteen-year-old hysteric in therapy with Jung, and the mistress having an affair with Jung. Even though she has a thirty-year career, and that's less than one year of her life. But that is the story that we keep talking about. And as Sells will point out, even in articles and books written less than ten years ago, they are *still* calling her the 'ingenue patient', 'the devotee,' she 'worshiped at the altar of Jung'... When he saw her as a *colleague*. When she created these really important ideas. And maybe that's because, if we can keep her as the nineteen-year-old patient who has psychology done *at* her, instead of *doing* psychology, we can justify dismissing her.

KN: Yeah. We can keep our simple boxes.

OM: Exactly. Our nice, uncomplicated, *Jung and Freud*. And *they created* psychology. [pause] Psychoanalytic innovation isn't pie - if we give her some there's not *less* for Freud and Jung.

Angela Sells: You would be amazed what scholars, and reputable scholars, have said as recently as 2010. It was really the later papers dismissing her that were the most horrifying. I mean, I compiled this list of names that she was called in scholarly journals, you know: hysterical, schizo, 'little girl lost,' borderline schizoid, obsessive seductress Asian provocateur, an 'Aryan worshiper' - because she was Jewish, Jung was Christian... I mean, *horrifying* - but accepted into the narrative.

And that the funny thing is, though, is that it was there all along. We have diaries and letters, we don't need to rewrite anything. We have firsthand accounts. I think that there's a lot of fear - if we elevate a woman, does that mean that then these men, who were influenced by her and vice versa, somehow lose

their status? And it just - to me, that's the wrong conversation. It doesn't have to mean anyone has to change their opinions about anybody involved, or we have to tarnish anyone's reputation. It really just means that there should be room for her *alongside* these people.

OM: A lot of this reminds me of [Alma Mahler](#), the same way that she is repeatedly erased, and repeatedly prevented from even being included in the conversation.

KN: Reduced to a mystery.

OM: Yeah, exactly. Reduced to the mistress, and the *mad* mistress. Right? She is the hysterical, unreliable....

KN: That he fixes.

OM: Yeah, and he - 'through the power of love' (again, *ew*) "fixes this." And even the importance of *that* narrative - that hysteria can be solved in less than a year by a gifted psychiatrist....

KN: By a 'loving man.'

OM: ...by a loving man and some talk therapy - when really this clearly seemed to have just been *grief*. And so all of these narratives are shaken up when we start to undo that - that Jung could... he was the master therapist who could fix people immediately, that severe mental illness is fixable with just a few simple new tricks...

KN: Yeah.

OM: We don't *want* all of that to be broken.

Angela Sells: I was a bit too hopeful, I'll admit, pre publication - because after publication my argument was actually trying to focus on her as a historical person, focus on her work. But the dominating narrative, became, again, *What was the relationship exactly with Jung? Let's really talk about her sexuality*. And so I feel like...

30:03 - 35:04

Angela Sells: ...that completely overshadowed her work *yet again*. And so I actually was very sad too, after publication, because I thought that - almost one hundred years later, here we are again with this 'love triangle' narrative that has *nothing* to do with her work and what it still could mean. Because there are some of her ideas that I feel are still *so* relevant to, especially, women today. I almost wish that her work could be re-published in Philosophy, because she's so based in [Nietzsche](#). There's not a lot of the kind of practical, hands-on Nietzsche that then developed... I wonder if that's almost harming her ability to get out of 'purely psychology.' Because when you read her stuff, I mean - jargon aside, some of it is just so beautiful. And she herself wanted to be a philosopher, and she, coming from this Jewish rabbinical family,

was more in line with that kind of mystical outlook. And so, I feel like the way that Freud and Jung have been repackaged for the Humanities - I think that she could really benefit from something like that, too.

OM: If we can move her into broader fields, maybe some of that pushback, some of that threat, will be removed. And we can start really looking at this, still really fascinating, ground breaking, critical work she was doing - around archetypes, around narrative as a force in society and in our own minds, in the development of our psyches. Some of these takes on Greek myths that she is coming up with I have *never* heard anyone talk about, and they've been sitting there this whole time.

This seems to be the moment for that. Have you read the new translation of the *Odyssey*?

KN: Yes. I just bought it in Greece! And I also bought Stephen Fry's new *Mythos*, which is a retelling of all the Greek myths.

OM: I think [Emily Wilson's translation of *The Odyssey*](#) is one of the best examples of why this kind of thing is important. That again - speaking of translation - that in this translation of a story that we all *think* we know, she uncovers so many of the ways that stuff that had *no business* being in there have been inserted. That these sexist agendas... Who are the sirens? We all know what sirens look like, we all know that they're sexy and dangerous and alluring, and beguile man with their beauty - and that's *nowhere*. That's nowhere in *The Odyssey*; that was imposed by sexist men translating *The Odyssey* in the nineteenth century. So much of the things that we think are the 'lessons of Greek myths' are nonsense!

KN: Hey! It's the same old theme. [laughter] We retell the same stories over and over to suit the present day. We pick new main characters, we shift people around, put different people in the spotlights...

OM: The number one bestseller in historical novels this week, I was just looking, is a [retelling of the myth of Circe](#), with Circe as the main character.

KN: Yeah.

OM: Yeah, I think *now is the moment* for us to do that with Sabina Spielrein. Let's rediscover her. Let's dig in and find all of these 'old' *new* ideas that she has been sharing with us for half a century - and none of us have heard.

KN: Awesome.

Huge thanks to Angela Sells. If you'd like to learn more about Sabina Spielrein, you can find pictures, links to books, and other information and lots more at our website, <http://whatshernamepodcast.com>. Thanks also to this episode's sponsors: Chawntelle Oliver and Katherine McKay. If you'd like to become a supporter of the podcast, just click on the [donate](#) link on our website, and find great rewards like trading cards, cross stitch patterns, and more. No donation is too small. You can become a patron for only a dollar a month, and every bit helps us create more women's history. You can also follow us on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook where we post lots of photos each week. Music for this episode was provided by Trialogo, Nico de Napoli, Michael Levy, and Amanda Setlik Wilson. Our theme song was composed and performed by Daniel Foster Smith. *WhatsHerName* is produced by Olivia Meikle and Katie Nelson, and this episode was edited by Olivia Meikle.