

Transcript

Preview

(Hitler speaking in German: Long live the National Socialist Movement! Long live Germany!)

Narrator:

Germany, 1933. Hitler has seized control of the country, but not all Germans are under his spell.

Anne Nelson:

A lot of people felt the Nazis were like a bad dream, and it was going to blow over.

Narrator:

Mildred Fish-Harnack is a Milwaukee native living under the Nazi regime. Along with her German husband Arvid, she chooses to fight back.

Donald Heath, Jr.:

Mildred says, "Well, it's not a question of how dangerous it is. I've got work to do."

Narrator:

They enter into a world of espionage. The stakes are incredibly high.

Rainer von Harnack:

They saw the brutality and they saw what happened to the Jews.

Donald Heath, Jr.:

He would become a Nazi in order to penetrate the German government.

Narrator:

A twist of fate will set Mildred and her husband on a collision course with Adolf Hitler.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

At that point they knew the Gestapo was on their trail.

Anne Nelson:

The rage drove a thirst for vengeance that Hitler felt personally.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

He didn't want any martyrs. He wanted her dead.

Narrator:

The only American woman ever executed on the direct order of Adolf Hitler.

Announcer:

Support for Wisconsin's Nazi Resistance includes principal gifts from the Frances and Laurence Weinstein Family Foundation, and the L.E. Phillips Family Foundation; and major gifts from Mildred and Marv Conney, and the Wisconsin Humanities Council, with funds from the National Endowment for the Humanities; and additional contributions from the Herbert and Elsbeth Weichmann Foundation, and the Friends of Wisconsin Public Television.

Life in America

John Gurda:

At the turn of the century, Milwaukee was unlike any other city, because no other city was as German, as socialist, and as fond of beer.

Narrator:

Born into this city in 1902, Mildred Elizabeth Fish, family and friends would affectionately call her Mili.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

Mildred, as the youngest, was very much loved, as a lot of younger children are. She was the pet of everybody, so I think that kind of security gave her a lot of self-confidence all of her life. And she was a bit of an extrovert personality.

John Gurda:

Where she grew up on the west side, 26th and Highland, was very close to what they called "Sauerkraut Boulevard," which was these very wealthy Germans, the Millers, and the Pabsts, and the Usingers.

Narrator:

The Fish family was not wealthy, and moved frequently when the rent went unpaid.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

They moved a lot of times because her father was lowering himself by his bootstraps. Every job he had was down a peg from where he started.

Narrator:

William Cooke Fish was estranged from his family, and would die alone when Mildred was in high school. Despite the darkness and storm of her parents' unhappiness, Mildred excelled at West Division High. She was active in Athena, a club devoted to women's issues and a student Bible study group. Grace Carlsruh, one of Mili's best friends, considered her a soul mate. Grace later wrote:

(Read from Grace Carlsruh's writings):

It's been many, many years since Mili and I thought alike, dreamed alike, wrote poetry on identical themes without consulting each other. I was perhaps the first Jewish person whom she knew.

Narrator:

With Grace, Mildred began a lifelong passion for writing. For the yearbook Mildred wrote, "Our Boys" about soldiers in World War I, a foreshadowing poem perhaps of her own fate later in wartime.

(Read from Mildred's writings):

They saw the need and went; their life narrowed in a sterner living, stripped of its tinsel, leaving the bare intent: to fight and love.

Narrator:

World War I triggered a monumental backlash in Mildred's hometown.

John Gurda:

When Milwaukee becomes part of this huge juggernaut of the Americans kind of jumping into the war in 1917, then just German culture is just cut off at the knees.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

People were very afraid of being identified as German, and were really interested in proving their loyalty, and Mildred would have picked that up.

Narrator:

And while Mildred wasn't German, she was immersed in the culture, in this - the most German of American cities. The end of World War I proved to be a turning point for Mildred's mother Georgina.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

She taught herself shorthand, and so she taught herself typing. When they moved to Washington, she was really able to get a good secretarial job and support the family.

Narrator:

Following the move to Washington, DC, Georgina's priority, getting Mili through her final year of high school and on to college.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

She joined all of these activities. She was something of what we would call a jock. She loved athletics. She loved nature. She loved hiking. But again, that comes out of Wisconsin.

Narrator:

Mildred started college out east, but was homesick. She wanted to follow family tradition and follow her sisters to the University of Wisconsin.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

She always felt like she was a Wisconsin girl, and wanted to return to Madison and go to the university in Madison, which is what she did.

Narrator:

She arrived in Madison to find a seismic shift in politics. Women now had the right to vote. With dreams of a writing career, Mildred moved into Journalism House. As a student, she worked for the Wisconsin State Journal, and joined the Wisconsin Literary Magazine with its art deco covers distributed nationwide. Mildred stood out at the university. One professor invited her back to his class, where she impressed students learning Greek.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

She memorized the first book of the Iliad in Greek, which is no small feat, and she recited this. People that heard her never forgot that.

Narrator:

Mildred Fish would graduate from the University of Wisconsin in the Class of 1925. She stayed on as an English instructor during graduate school. Love, life and lecturing took a dramatic turn when Arvid Harnack, a Rockefeller Scholar, arrived from Germany. As the story goes, Arvid went to the wrong building, and by mistake ended up in a class taught by Mildred Fish.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

He saw this radiant teacher with this blonde hair. Everyone says that Mildred was the most beautiful girl on the university campus. She was absolutely gorgeous. He went up and introduced himself. He apologized for his faltering English, and she apologized that she didn't speak German very well. And he proposed he study English with her and she study German with him. And that was the beginning of the romance.

Narrator:

A romance sparked by accident or fate, soon included canoe rides out to Picnic Point. Mildred and

Arvid would talk about their hopes over lunch on Madison's State Street. In her memoirs, Arvid's sister Inge described what happened next.

(Read from Inge Havemann's memoirs):

I still remember how a letter arrived for my mother with the laconic sentence, "I've met a girl with the beautiful name, Mildred." My mother read it and said with assertiveness, "That's her." Meaning, that will be his wife.

Narrator:

The invitations went out, announcing an August 7th wedding. Always an independent thinker, Mildred Fish-Harnack chose to hyphenate her married name.

Jilly Allenby-Ryan:

She married into an elite family, in an academic sense. Almost everybody excelled at whatever it was they did, in one way or another.

Narrator:

Arvid's father, Otto Harnack, was a noted literary historian. Like Mildred, Arvid lost his father at a young age and grew-up under the strong guidance of his mother.

Rainer von Harnack:

He was a very gifted child. He wrote poems. He painted. He wrote dramas. Later, he became the so-called "streng," serious and analytic mind.

Narrator:

Arvid's mind would be challenged at the University of Wisconsin by John R. Commons, a well-known professor of economics. It was at Professor Commons's house where Arvid and Mildred would gather with a circle of friends to discuss social, economic and political policy.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

These were very progressive people that were in fact inventing very significant legislation. Unemployment Insurance, Workman's Compensation, Social Security. These people were the heart of the progressive movement and the Wisconsin Idea.

Narrator:

These students became known as the Friday Niters, and included another German student named Greta Kuckhoff.

Anne Nelson:

The University of Wisconsin in Madison played an absolutely unique role in creating the intellectual outlook of this group. Arvid and Mildred Harnack, Greta Kuckhoff, all had a formation here.

Narrator:

And what they learned in Madison was about to be tested in a fight against the Nazis.

On the Move

Narrator:

Arvid booked a passage back to Germany in 1929 at the end of his fellowship. When Mildred joined Arvid, she was welcomed with open arms.

Genie Allenby:

I knew that she loved being a part of the Harnack family. She must have been very lively, and very interested in the things that the Harnacks were interested in.

Narrator:

Arvid's sisters and Mildred became good friends.

Genie Allenby:

Inge and Mildred were sometimes, or perhaps quite often, taken for sisters. And it was not only the fact that they looked alike, but I think they had very much in common.

Narrator:

Education was a common bond, and both Arvid and Mildred enrolled at Justus Liebig University. That's where Arvid submitted his thesis, "The Pre-Marxist Labor Movement in the United States."

Shareen Blair Brysac:

The Harnacks all had multiple degrees. Arvid had two-and-a-half doctorates. Mildred immediately started to work on a doctorate. She embarked on a degree in American Literature.

Narrator:

In a move out of financial necessity and scholarly ambition, Mildred would join the intellectuals at Berlin University to teach Modern American Literature. She was one of the first Americans on a faculty that included Albert Einstein.

Anne Nelson:

She was somebody who wrote about the spirit of democracy in American literature.

Narrator:

In 1933, Mildred wrote home about being a free woman, a busy life in Berlin and hope for the future. The very next day, Hitler took over. Her correspondence soon changed.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

The importance of those letters was that they described the coming to power of Hitler in her own words, so you know how she felt with all these demonstrations, beatings in the street, book burnings, because she was a witness to this in Berlin.

Anne Nelson:

For Mildred, in the early stages of the Nazi period, I think a lot of people felt that the Nazis were like a bad dream and it was going to blow over.

Stefan Roloff:

They underestimated them. These were thugs. They were different people, and suddenly everybody was under their control.

Narrator:

With the rising Nazi tide, suddenly Mildred lost her teaching job. She was a woman. She was a foreigner. And she wasn't Nazi enough. The Harnacks began to hear the steady Nazi drumbeat grow louder in their neighborhood, so they moved to an area of Berlin more in step with their ideals.

Anne Nelson:

Certainly, they had extremely liberal, progressive and in some ways Marxist ideas. Arvid Harnack

believed in centralized economic planning. He'd just lived through a stock market crisis. Arvid Harnack was an economist, and he said capitalism isn't working terribly well right now.

Narrator:

It was the Great Depression, and to Arvid the Soviet planned economy seemed to be an interesting alternative. Arvid founded a study group similar to the Wisconsin Friday Nites to discuss the Soviet economy. It included a trip to Moscow in 1932. During that trip, most likely the first contact with Arvid was made by Soviet Intelligence. At the same time, Mildred became engaged in all things Soviet. Mildred booked her own trip to see a tourist's version of Joseph Stalin's empire. Mildred discovered radical new concepts unheard of in the United States. Soviet women had maternity leave, equal pay, and education about birth control. When Mildred returned to Berlin, she did find another teaching position.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

It was not a prestigious university, so she had jobs like that until the war started.

Narrator:

Mildred wasn't paid much and took odd jobs. She wrote freelance articles about America for "Die Dame," Germany's leading women's magazine.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

They had no money, the Harnacks. They never had any money. She wanted to get free books. One way of getting free books was to review them.

Narrator:

The Harnacks didn't have much money, but they were welcomed into the embassy crowd.

Anne Nelson:

Ambassador Dodd was very sympathetic to anti-Nazi elements in Berlin. His daughter Martha was a very good friend of Mildred Fish's. They held parties together. They wrote articles together. And so, Arvid and Mildred were very much central figures in the U.S. Embassy.

Narrator:

But with the Nazi crackdown, ties to the U.S. Embassy became more risky. Even more dangerous, any Communist connections. So Arvid's group that studied the Soviet planned economy disbanded, and he destroyed his thesis on the Marxist movement. The Nazis also continued to target Jews.

Berlin "Circle of Friends"

Anne Nelson:

Arvid and Mildred Harnack had Jewish friends and progressive friends who were, in some cases put in the new concentration camps right down the road from their house.

Narrator:

That just added to Mildred's agony when she joined the Nazi party in order to survive, in order to get work. Joining the Nazi party meant she had to sign official documents with the phrase "Heil Hitler!" Privately, the Harnacks used their apartment as a base for a small circle of friends to discuss literature and politics in the face of the Nazi regime.

Anne Nelson:

So they went from this kind of broad social policy focus to saying we're in a political emergency and we have two choices, we can either hide from it or we can engage.

Narrator:

The Harnacks' circle moved from discussion to resistance to warn other Germans. Their resistance work reconnected the Harnacks with Greta Kuckhoff, the German friend from their days in Madison.

Johannes Tuchel:

Mildred Harnack was in a group of people, a circle of friends, her husband, Adam Kuckhoff, Greta Kuckhoff. And I think Mildred was involved in all the activities of her husband.

Narrator:

At great risk, Mildred used her teaching job to recruit students into the Nazi resistance. The resistance network also included Lutherans, Catholics, Jews, social democrats, Communists, and aristocrats, anyone who objected to the Nazi dictatorship. As their resistance work increased, the Harnacks took a new address, on the outskirts of Berlin in a house less likely to draw Gestapo attention.

Johannes Tuchel:

We have evidence that they lived their daily life, and they lived their life, their evening life or their night life, as preparing actions, leaflets, dealing with material for anti-Hitler actions.

Anne Nelson:

Here were Mildred and Greta, who were professional women, educated women, ready to go out and change the world and work hard. And they get to the Nazi period and were told go back to the kitchen, put on the apron and have lots of nice Nazi babies.

Narrator:

These women refused. And under the cover of darkness and in the shadow of Berlin's landmarks, organized resistance meetings and transported secret documents.

Anne Nelson:

They were seeing the first signs of the Holocaust, and trying to rouse the German public to respond. The Nazi's had an absolute control, a lock on public information. One activity that the group did was illegally get foreign radio broadcasts.

(Franklin Delano Roosevelt speech):

The blunt fact is that every single person in the United States is going to be affected by this program.

Narrator:

Mildred and Greta translated speeches from foreign leaders, then distributed those translations illegally in leaflets around Berlin. As a cover, Mildred also used her job translating books and traveling for a publishing firm to help her Jewish friends.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

She had an American passport and she could travel to France, and Norway, and Denmark. And she seems to have used these connections; it was said, to help Jews escape. Max Tau was one of them. He was a writer in Germany. And he said, "Mildred Harnack helped me escape Germany." We don't know how.

Narrator:

Mildred's friendship with the U. S. Ambassador's daughter most likely proved valuable.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

The one thing we can probably speculate on was her connections with Martha Dodd in the American Embassy. She was in a position to get visas for people. So Mildred would have said to Martha, hey there's this person who really needs to get out, can your father give him a visa?

Rainer von Harnack:

They definitely helped Jews. They shared the last piece of bread they had. When they had nothing, Mildred's mother also, from time to time, sent a check from the States.

Narrator:

That assistance was needed despite Arvid having a good job in the Economics Ministry.

American and Soviet Ties

Narrator:

Arvid's work put him in close contact with the U.S. and Soviet embassies, and created an opportunity.

Donald Heath, Jr.:

He decided early in the game that he would become a Nazi in order to penetrate the German government. And so, he was famous in the Economics Ministry as being a hard Nazi. Secretly, he was meeting with Soviet intelligence officers and providing information to them.

Anne Nelson:

The Soviet Union, at a certain point, tried to enlist them as traditional Soviet agents who followed orders. And this conversation was held with Arvid Harnack, who said, "No, that's not who I am. I am doing this for Germany. I'm doing this for my country. And I think that helping the Soviets will help to overthrow Hitler. So, those are my terms, and I will not follow your orders."

Narrator:

The Harnacks were also open to assisting the Americans and took a trip to the U.S. in 1937. Arvid on government business, Mildred went on a lecture tour. She also wanted to see her mother.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

Her mother was dying and she hadn't been to the United States in nearly ten years. So she came back and she toured around. She gave some lectures at various colleges. She really worried that there was a Gestapo tail on her, so she was very, very careful about what she said. Arvid was, I think quite cold-blooded. I think with his arrogance, he kind of believed he was smarter than these idiots in the Gestapo.

Donald Heath, Jr.:

He'd do anything to achieve an objective you know. I mean, like joining the Nazi party when he hated it so much.

Narrator:

Representing the Third Reich, Arvid had been tasked to travel to Washington.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

Arvid was trying to get aluminum and copper supplies from the United States in the run-up for the war, that was his official mission.

Narrator:

But not his only mission.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

His value to the Americans was that he knew where all the German companies were and where their assets were. And he told them that. The war was coming, and the Americans were not ready to believe that in 1937. Americans just thought they were being duped, because here was this perfect Nazi, they assumed he was a Nazi, he was working a high level job in the government. They didn't really do much with this information, which Arvid really risked his life in telling them.

Narrator:

A risk if discovered that could result in severe consequences when the Harnacks returned to Germany.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

In 1937, the Germans passed a law which said any revealing of economic secrets to anyone was a matter of treason.

Narrator:

Despite that danger, a changing of the guard at the U.S. Embassy in Berlin presented Arvid another chance to help the Americans. Donald Heath, Sr., arrived in Berlin as the embassy's new first secretary. His covert mission, infiltrate the German Economics Ministry.

Donald Heath, Jr.:

President Roosevelt and the Secretary of the Treasury were both worried that Hitler would do something that would precipitate another Wall Street. So they were more interested in my father's reports on economic matters than they were on what Hitler was doing to the Jews, or what he planned to do to the Russians. I had no idea what my father was really doing, except that I noticed that he was seeing a lot of people in the Ministry of Economics, and one of them was a man named Arvid Harnack.

Narrator:

The Harnacks and the Heaths became fast friends.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

Heath would tell Arvid what he needed to know about what was happening in America. But more importantly, Arvid was passing on all these secrets about German rearmament.

Narrator:

Arvid met regularly with Donald Heath, Sr., but in order to not rouse suspicion, they devised another way to relay information. Mildred started tutoring a young Donald Heath, Jr.

Donald Heath, Jr.:

I would go back and forth with messages from the Harnacks to my father, messages from my father to the Harnacks.

Narrator:

By this time, Arvid had lost touch with his Soviet contacts, but 1939 would prove to be a pivotal year.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

Suddenly there was a knock on the door, this man, Korotkov, appeared at his apartment and said, "I bear messages from your Soviet friends," and "Can you help us?"

Narrator:

Arvid agreed, but laid out his three goals: topple Hitler, end the war, and preserve German independence. The missing link, military information. Mildred took advantage of an opportunity to tutor a German soldier.

Anne Nelson:

He apparently met with Mildred to get his English lessons, liked her a lot, and talked too much. So it was said that she became a recipient of military information.

Narrator:

But the real military cache came when the Harnacks joined forces with Harro Schulze-Boysen in a network the Gestapo nicknamed the Rote Kapelle, or Red Orchestra, because of its Soviet connections.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

What we now know as the Red Orchestra really took off in 1939, when Arvid Harnack and Schulze-Boysen got together. Now, Schulze-Boysen was a young Luftwaffe Lieutenant from a very distinguished German family. When Arvid first met him, he said this guy is much too dangerous, and didn't want anything to do with him.

Rainer von Harnack:

Arvid was very secretive. Arvid was extremely careful.

Narrator:

Using code names, this larger resistance network now began spiriting military and economic secrets to the Soviets and Americans.

Donald Heath, Jr.:

In order to meet with Arvid and Mildred, my mother and father and I would go out on weekends into the countryside and they would meet us at some set agreed upon point. My father and Arvid would walk along, arguing over Arvid's pro-Russian attitudes.

Narrator:

Despite the arguing, the men became close friends and trusted allies. In August, 1939, the U.S. Embassy advised all Americans to get out. Arvid was worried and bought Mildred a boat ticket to America, a ticket with no expiration date.

Donald Heath, Jr.:

Arvid asked my father to speak with Mildred and tell her "You've got to go, because you just don't know how dangerous it is." And Mildred said, "Well it's not a question of how dangerous it is, I've got work to do, I'm not going."

Stefan Roloff:

I think more amazing it must be to Americans, knowing she could have left. And she said, "No. I'm going to stay here. I'm going to fight by your side. This is where I belong," and "I'm with you."

Narrator:

Mildred couldn't leave Germany without Arvid. And he couldn't leave Germany to the Nazis. Arvid's sister saw Mildred's struggle, and wrote about it in her memoir.

(Read from Inge Havemann's memoirs):

She chose her words very carefully when she spoke about the fear and turmoil that filled her life, and also about her longing for her distant American homeland.

Narrator:

The pressure only mounted when the Germans invaded Poland.

Newsreel Announcer:

Arrogant and well-trained, the Nazis marched through Warsaw Streets.

Narrator:

In 1940, as bombs fell on Berlin, the resistance ratcheted up another notch when the Soviets provided radio transmitters to speed the flow of information.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

They had been given some radios, but they didn't have any training as radio operators. The radios were plugged into the wrong kind of current.

Narrator:

The radios didn't work. But as air raids pierced the night, Arvid continued to frantically code secret material, not knowing the magnitude of the radio failure. But the resistance had other ways to relay vital intelligence from Harro Schulze-Boysen that could change the war.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

At the time, May-June 1941, was when Harro gave very specific information about the fact that the Germans were going to invade the Soviet Union. He was not the only one. I mean, books and books have been written about the number of times Stalin was warned that he was going to be invaded.

Narrator:

The Germans did storm into the Soviet Union, catching Stalin's troops off guard. The resistance network was dazed. How could Stalin have ignored secret warnings for the past nine months, secrets the resistance had risked their lives to get? Mildred may have also put a young Donald Heath, Jr., at risk. At just 13 years old, she asked to use Donald as a lookout.

Donald Heath, Jr.:

My mother and father really weren't keyed into how dangerous a situation it was.

Narrator:

His covert operation, follow Mildred on a train to the city of Potsdam. His instructions involved a rendezvous in a park.

Donald Heath, Jr.:

"You're going to follow me. And if you see me join this lady, but if somebody else seems to be following us, you walk by and you have to whistle a tune." (whistling) "And I'll know we're being followed."

Narrator:

Soon after that, the Heaths got pulled out of Germany.

Anne Nelson:

Suddenly, the State Department transferred Donald Heath to Santiago, Chile, just as the war was about to engulf the United States.

Narrator:

December 7, 1941 - the bombing of Pearl Harbor. President Roosevelt declares war on Japan, Italy and Germany.

(Franklin Delano Roosevelt speech):

The American people and their righteous might will win through to absolute victory. (Crowd cheering)

Gestapo Capture

Narrator:

With Donald Heath, Sr., gone and the U.S. Embassy empty, the Americans lost contact with the Harnacks. The resistance also saw its ties to Moscow get severed. The Soviets, desperate to get information, radioed a spy in Brussels with a message that said...

Shareen Blair Brysac:

That they should send someone to Berlin to contact Schulze-Boysen, and Harnack, and Kuckhoff, and they gave the addresses in that message.

Narrator:

In a fatal breach of security, the Soviets transmitted the real names and addresses of its Berlin contacts.

Johannes Tuchel:

One of the addresses and the names was of Harnack, Arvid Harnack.

Narrator:

The Nazis had been eavesdropping.

Johannes Tuchel:

In summer of 1942, the Gestapo was able to decipher this message, and they had the name of Harnack, and they had the name of Schulze-Boysen.

Narrator:

One of the network's leaders, its military source, Harro Schulze-Boysen was captured first.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

Once Harro was arrested, Libertas, his wife, tried to flee. She was picked up on a train, and she warned some of the other people.

Narrator:

The Harnacks took a sudden trip to the Baltic coast with their good friends the Zechlins, where storm clouds signaled trouble.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

This is an interesting aspect, Egmont Zechlin whom I interviewed, said he thought that maybe they were intending to escape. At that point, they knew the Gestapo was on their trail. So, they maybe were trying to escape to Sweden.

Narrator:

But escape was no longer possible. What happened next seared into the memory of Egmont Zechlin. He chronicled Mildred and Arvid's arrest at this fisherman's cottage.

(From Egmont Zechlin's writings):

Harnack walked over to me and said calmly, "We're going with the gentlemen to Berlin. They need me in the Ministry." At that moment, a Gestapo agent stepped between us. The highest ranking Gestapo officer said to me in a changed tone, "Professor, I would like to inform you that you are not to tell anyone, anything. Otherwise, we will have to come back to you."

Narrator:

When she was arrested, Mildred still had the boat ticket to America in her purse. The Secret Police brought the Harnacks to one of the most feared addresses in the German capital, Gestapo headquarters. Walter Habecker, known for his brutal torture techniques, was assigned to break the Harnacks.

Anne Nelson:

We know that in the case of the men, including Arvid Harnack, there were extreme forms of torture.

Narrator:

Mildred was incarcerated at Charlottenburg Women's Prison and taken daily for questioning. Other resistance fighters, including Helmut Roloff overheard Mildred's interrogations.

Stefan Roloff:

And this day that my father had a brief view of her, he was sitting in front of the interrogation room. And he heard a terrible, terrible amount of screaming and yelling inside of that room. And Mildred must have had a breakdown, because she was brought out on a stretcher.

Narrator:

More than 100 Germans had been arrested. Their resistance network stunned the Nazis. These were Germans, who could have benefited from the regime.

Stefan Roloff:

Hitler was shocked. Hitler thought he had the entire nation behind himself. He was sure of that. But when he saw the diversity of this group, the oldest person arrested was 86 years old, the youngest was 16, 40% women, every walk of life.

Narrator:

Three weeks after the Harnacks' arrest, Arvid's cousin Axel von Harnack was summoned to Gestapo headquarters. Axel later wrote about his ordeal.

(From Axel von Harnack's writings):

I was told it concerned a very serious matter and the whole thing must remain absolutely secret. I was to explain their absence as an "official trip to foreign countries of indefinite duration.

Rainer von Harnack:

It was too dangerous to get anybody else from the family being involved. If they can't get you, the Gestapo, they get the family. And Sippenhaft is something like a collective punishment of the family members.

Narrator:

The Harnack relatives took the risk.

(From Axel von Harnack's writings):

Dr. Falk Harnack, the younger brother of the prisoner, had come to Berlin several times. He alone had been permitted to speak to his brother twice. No one ever received permission to speak with Mrs. Harnack.

Narrator:

Mildred did manage to get one note to Arvid's family.

(From Mildred Harnack's letter):

Dear Axel, Mother and Falk, Thank you a thousand times for everything you are doing for me!
Many greetings and kisses, Mildred.

Narrator:

Arvid's mother replied:

(From Clara Harnack's letter):

Not a day passes that we don't think of you and your beloved Arvid time and again. I don't know what you have done, but I'm quite certain that you could not do anything from selfish-based motives, dear Mildred.

Narrator:

During its investigation, the Gestapo labeled the resistance network the Rote Kapella or Red Orchestra, "red" being a Communist moniker.

Johannes Tuchel:

The Gestapo only linked the group to the Soviet Union. But the Gestapo has no idea that Arvid and Mildred Harnack also have close contacts to members of the United States Embassy here in Berlin.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

Arvid Harnack was not going to admit he passed on information to the Americans. Why would he do that? They were not going to admit that since it was illegal to get Jews out of the country, they were not going to say, well yeah, and by the way we helped a number of Jews escape.

Red Orchestra Trials

Narrator:

The trials began in December, 1942, at the highest military court, where justice wasn't blind, and a death sentence was almost assured.

Anne Nelson:

An Air Force prosecutor named Manfred Roeder was called "Hitler's Bloodhound." He even shocked the military judges with how bloodthirsty he was in demanding the death sentence for every possible case.

Narrator:

The trials, shrouded in secrecy, often family members weren't even told.

Anne Nelson:

The entire process was a joke, a very bad tragic joke. In many cases, they met with their lawyers

for five minutes before they were tried. Mildred and Arvid Harnack were tried early on. It was pretty clear that they were going to be dealt with harshly.

Narrator:

Arvid would be sentenced to death for high treason and espionage. The defense would argue Mildred simply acted on her husband's orders. Mildred's sentence, six years in prison. With the help of eyewitnesses, Arvid's cousin documented what happened next.

(From Axel von Harnack's writings):

Dr. Harnack, looking straight at his wife, was radiant. He insisted that because of that sentence, her life had been saved, for she would be able to serve that term, or even surely be liberated before then.

Narrator:

Arvid's sister Inge waited outside to get details for the family.

(From Inge Havemann's letter):

My dear Mama, the Court Martial pronounced the cruel verdict. Although we all secretly expected it, it was still a blow. I want to urge you again not to give up hope.

Narrator:

Two days later, Hitler personally signed Arvid's death sentence. The night before his execution, Arvid wrote a farewell letter.

(From Arvid Harnack's letter):

Within the next hours, I will depart this life. I would like to thank you all again, for all your love which you have shown me. So, I am calm and happy. Tonight, I will hold a small pre-Christmas celebration, and I will read aloud "The Christmas Story." And then comes the moment of departing. Your Arvid.

Narrator:

The next day, Arvid was handcuffed and taken into a small building at Ploetzensee Prison. The prosecutor, Manfred Roeder, witnessed the special punishment Hitler had ordered.

Stefan Roloff:

He decided to have these meat hooks put up in Ploetzensee at the prison.

Narrator:

Overhead, the newly installed meat hooks. Arvid would hang by a short rope. A Nazi torture tactic to prolong his suffering.

Stefan Roloff:

It was a private revenge of Hitler against these people.

Narrator:

Arvid's petition to see Mildred one last time had been denied. Arvid went to his death not knowing Hitler refused to sign Mildred's prison sentence and had ordered a retrial.

Anne Nelson:

I think that the rage drove a thirst for vengeance that Hitler felt personally.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

He wanted this American woman. He didn't want any martyrs. He wanted her dead.

Narrator:

Manfred Roeder wanted to make a name for himself, so it was extremely embarrassing when Hitler demanded a new trial. Determined to follow orders, Roeder cautioned the Harnack family not to interfere.

(Read as Manfred Roeder):

I urgently warn the Harnack family not to undertake anything whatsoever in favor of this woman. She no longer belongs to your family.

Narrator:

Especially hard words for Arvid's sister, who recalled Mildred's journey into the resistance.

(From Inge Havemann's memoirs):

She shared his turbulent life, waited for him for nights on end, filled with fear, anxiety, she even ran through the dark city streets to meet him. She became an active member of her husband's resistance group, to which she dedicated her life.

Narrator:

So had Libertas Schulze-Boysen, now isolated and alone, prison proved harsh for Libertas and Mildred.

Johannes Tuchel:

She tried to give some letters to Libertas Schulze-Boysen who was there at that time. These small letters, small illegal letters were found and used as evidence at the trial against Mildred Harnack.

Narrator:

Mildred appeared to buckle under the pressure without Arvid. And with a little new evidence, she was sentenced to death. Mildred Harnack, Prisoner 228, returned to the bricks, bars, and now a death row cell.

Death Row Remembrances

Shareen Blair Brysac:

I think she was treated very harshly. She tried to commit suicide at one point by swallowing pins. She became very thin. Her hair turned white.

Narrator:

Mildred was assigned a cellmate to keep an eye on her. Gertrude Lichtenstein lived to write Arvid's mother about Mildred's time in prison.

(From Gertrude Lichtenstein's letter):

Sometimes she wept when she talked about Arvid and his fate. I had to leave Mildred for a concentration camp the same day she went to trial where she received the death sentence, and that was the very moment she needed me most.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

She almost lost her mind, I think. She was running around the courtyard, someone reported, just sort of scurrying around at one point. The only evidence against losing her mind, was that she was translating Goethe in her cell, maybe to keep her mind.

Narrator:

Mildred has sustained herself with a stub of a pencil, translating a book of Goethe poems.

Rainer von Harnack:

Probably, she felt happy to have these Goethe poems.

Narrator:

Mildred's final translations scribbled in the margin are from the poem "Vermaechtnis," or the "Legacy."

Rainer von Harnack:

She crossed out things. You feel she was in a rush. And I could imagine that this is her legacy.

Narrator:

And the final line Mildred translated:

(From Mildred Harnack's translation):

Your place is with a chosen few.

Narrator:

As a cold rain blanketed Berlin, a prison van delivered Mildred down a cobblestone street to Ploetzensee Prison, where the Nazi tools of death were housed. The prison chaplain, Harald Poelchau, was a family friend.

Johannes Tuchel:

He was deeply touched by her personality, by her confidence.

Narrator:

The pastor described how at age 40, Mildred was so starved, so broken after five months of Nazi interrogations, she could no longer stand upright. He gave Mildred a Bible and she read:

(Read as Mildred Harnack):

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Narrator:

Pastor Poelchau brought Mildred an orange he had smuggled into prison along with a picture of her mother. Mildred remained strong until she saw this photo. Her eyes filled with tears. Mildred kissed the picture again and again. On the back, she wrote:

(From Mildred Harnack's writings):

The face of my mother expresses everything I want to say at this moment. This face was with me all through these last months.

Narrator:

The chaplain broke the news to Mildred, Arvid had been executed on December 22, her mother's birthday.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

He told Mildred about Arvid's death, and how he died, and what were on his lips, and that he believed he prayed to the power of love.

Rainer von Harnack:

Mildred remembers in her death cell. Arvid remembers in his death cell. When they're rowing boats, reciting Goethe and Whitman. They shared this happiness till their very last moment on this planet. Maybe they still share it.

Narrator:

With hands cuffed behind her back, two guards led Mildred into a brick shed. A curtain was pulled back revealing the guillotine. On February 16, 1943, inside an execution room that looked more like a chapel, Mildred Fish-Harnack was strapped to a bench and guillotined at 6:57p.m. The Nazi's would note it took Mildred seven seconds to die.

The only American woman ever executed on the direct orders of Adolf Hitler, her last words:

(Read as Mildred Harnack):

"Und ich habe Deutschland so geliebt."

Narrator:

"And I have loved Germany so much." Exactly three months to the day after her execution, a "Milwaukee Journal" article announced Arvid's death. Mildred's fate, still unknown. Through the help of a Vatican emissary, Mildred's family sent a message to Berlin.

(From Mildred Harnack's family letter):

Precious Little Sister, the old home is waiting, and funds for your passage when possible.

Narrator:

After months of anxious waiting, a letter from an archbishop arrived, confirming their worst fears. Mildred had been executed seven months earlier. Following the defeat of Hitler, the Heath family returned to Berlin.

Donald Heath, Jr.:

My father had no idea what had happened to Mildred and Arvid. Falk explained it all and my father suddenly raised his hand and walked out in the garden and wept. In my whole memory of my life with my parents, I can't think of times when we didn't talk about Mildred and Arvid. They were just our best friends.

Caught in the Cold War

Narrator:

But friends and family would have to defend the Harnacks' honor, especially through a Cold War lens. In May 1945, Greta Kuckhoff, the Harnacks' friend and fellow resistance fighter, was freed from prison by Soviet troops. Greta and the Harnack family fought to bring Nazi prosecutor, Manfred Roeder, to justice for crimes against humanity.

Stefan Roloff:

The Americans treated Roeder in an interesting way. At first, they put a gun to his head and they asked him, "So how does it feel to be like that?" But once they asked him why he had killed these people, and he had said they were all Communists, in the Cold War climate, they thought that he was their friend.

Narrator:

At Nuremberg, Germany, Nazis were put on trial. Manfred Roeder would go free, protected by the Americans who wanted his help tracking Soviet spies.

Anne Nelson:

If you can imagine the reaction of people like Greta Kuckhoff and Falk Harnack, who had such terrible loss, and then they're told that the Americans are protecting this man, this Nazi. They were angry. They were angry at the United States.

Narrator:

The CIA took the Nazis at their word, and investigated surviving members of the resistance as Communist spies.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

The Americans had really dropped the ball. They were looking at people like Falk Harnack and Greta Kuckhoff who were in Berlin, and they made visits to them. They were trying to finger them.

Narrator:

All based on Gestapo reports that had no mention of assistance to the Americans. As a result, the lines between reality and fiction begin to blur. In 1947, the University of Wisconsin "Alumni Magazine" meant well when it published an article putting Mildred in the spotlight.

Art Heitzer:

The Harnack story in the United States really broke in the UW alumnus magazine. It was very interesting. And so they found lots of good things and reasons why she should be recognized.

Narrator:

But as the Cold War heated up, a move to honor Mildred was halted, because her pro-Communist sympathies could not be ruled out. Wisconsin senator Joe McCarthy and his hunt for Communists may have been a factor. So instead of honoring Mildred, the university's inquiry triggered an FBI investigation.

Johannes Tuchel:

The people had no idea at that time of the real story of the Red Orchestra in Berlin, and what Mildred Harnack and Arvid Harnack really did. At that time, they were seen as Communists in Germany, in the United States, and also in the Soviet Union.

Stefan Roloff:

All I can tell you is Arvid Harnack was very wary of Stalin, totally. He did not trust him. He did not want anything to do with him.

Narrator:

Even so, the Soviets had posthumously award the Harnacks medals and enshrined them as Communist heroes.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

They retrofitted a lot of people like Greta Kuckhoff. They predated their Communist membership cards. So they kind of retrofitted the Harnacks and the Schulze-Boysens into being much better Communists than they might have been, much more Stalinist than they might have been.

Narrator:

Part of the propaganda included putting Mildred and Arvid's pictures on a series of stamps honoring the resistance. Even though they were all dead, the stamps became part of a CIA top secret file. The Harnack family also learned the East German secret police engraved Arvid's image on a medal.

Rainer von Harnack:

They were abused in this so-called German Democratic Republic with this medal.

Narrator:

And used it as a reward for informants.

Rainer von Harnack:

From the Ministry of State Security they got Arvid's medal.

Narrator:

By 1976, an East Berlin high school is named after Mildred Harnack. The first school honoring an American in Eastern Europe. But in America, sentiment toward Mildred was slow to shift. The State Department, in 1961, ruled out any recognition, explaining although Mildred was an American citizen, Mrs. Harnack's activities were not conducted on behalf of the U.S. Government.

Anne Nelson:

The Harnacks were killed twice. They were executed by the Nazis and their characters were assassinated in the postwar period.

Narrator:

Those judgments all came during the height of the Cold War, before the fall of the Berlin Wall and Communism.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

There wasn't a lot of really factual information, documents. Until really, the wall came down, and we now then had access to what the East Germans knew.

Narrator:

And what the Americans knew.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

When I got those files declassified, that we ever saw what had happened. There was rumor that there was a Gestapo Final Report, but nobody had seen it. Somehow the Gestapo Final Report ended up in the American National Archives for all those years.

Narrator:

That's when it came out. The Gestapo had exaggerated the facts. The Communists had distorted the truth. And the Americans had sheltered Nazis while suppressing the story of the Harnacks' help to the United States. In 2011, the CIA still refused to release all of its records in this case. And FBI files are still heavily redacted.

Stefan Roloff:

I think ultimately, the connection to America was much closer than to the Soviets ever was. To the Soviets, it was an attempt at telling them, "Hitler is going to attack you." With the Americans, it was family.

Narrator:

Mildred would be the forgotten daughter of Wisconsin until 1986, when the State Legislature named a day in her honor, based on the efforts of Milwaukee civil rights lawyer Art Heitzer.

Art Heitzer:

The State of Wisconsin recognizes Mildred Fish-Harnack you know as a Milwaukee native and the only American woman executed under Hitler for being a part of the German Resistance.

Narrator:

September 16th, Mildred's birthday, by law is now a day of observance in Wisconsin public schools. The first major honor for Mildred in the United States.

Final Farewell

Narrator:

Mildred Fish-Harnack will be remembered as a Milwaukee-born, University of Wisconsin grad, who became a Nazi resistance fighter. She loved America, loved Germany and loved her husband.

Shareen Blair Brysac:

They shared their work. They shared their joys. They shared their sorrows. It was really this wonderful, wonderful love story.

Narrator:

And it showed. While in prison Arvid wrote a farewell letter to Mildred. And his thoughts were on Wisconsin.

(From Arvid Harnack's letter):

My most beloved heart, if I had the strength in these past months to be calm and composed within myself, and if I face what is to come with calm composure, it is due most of all to the fact that I feel connected to the good and beautiful things in this world.

As far as people are concerned, it was those closest to me, and especially you, who embody both of these things. Last night, I let my thoughts roam through many of the most beautiful moments of our marriage. The more I thought about it, the more there were. It was as if I was looking into a starry sky, in which the number of stars grows constantly the closer one looks.

Do you still remember Picnic Point when we got engaged? I sang with joy early in the morning in the club, and even earlier, our first serious conversation on State Street? This conversation became my guiding star, and has been so ever since.

I have also thought regularly about you and all my loved ones at 8 o'clock at night. They are thinking about both of us at the very same time. Do it as well, then one knows that the feeling of love in the world flows into each other.

You are in my heart. You shall always be within. My dearest wish is that you are happy when you think of me. I am too, when I think of you. Lots and lots of kisses! I am hugging you tight! Your A.

Announcer:

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