

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women Podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Dr. Rebecca Brenner Graham, a postdoctoral research associate at Brown University and author of the new book, *Dear Miss Perkins*. Now, while the book specifically focuses on Frances Perkins's work to help refugees from Nazi Germany, Dr. Graham is also going to tell us a bit more broadly about the first woman in the US Cabinet whose work as labor secretary and as the architect of the New Deal programs lives on almost a century later.

RBG: She was the first woman Cabinet secretary in US history. President Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected in 1932 and appointed her to be his secretary of labor. At that point, there was significant motion from women's groups in politics for a president to appoint the first woman Cabinet secretary. Frances Perkins had worked as Franklin D. Roosevelt's industrial commissioner in the state of New York when he was governor. That position was essentially the state-level labor secretary. So the kinds of work that she ended up doing on a national level, she had substantial experiences at a state level. When the Roosevelt administration, the first Roosevelt administration, was appointed and took their oaths of office on March 4th, 1933, they were quickly called back to the White House for an emergency Cabinet meeting because there was a national banking crisis. So immediately, I think the administration felt like they were just trying to keep up with the Great Depression and the state of disarray in which the country had found itself. And then when she went to the Labor Department after that meeting, she found immigration in particular to be once again in a state of disarray. Several different men introduced themselves to her claiming to be in charge of immigration. So she came to Washington to work on things like child labor laws, on unemployment insurance, and Social Security. There were many New Deal-type priorities that Frances Perkins had. However, once she got there, immigration was at the forefront of her agenda because it was a mess.

AT: Now, from what I recall, when I was taught U.S. history, the New Deal was largely credited to FDR and Frances Perkins was largely getting left out of the story.

RBG: It was the Roosevelt administration and many presidential accomplishments, we don't know all of the people who worked on it. However, there were other members of the Roosevelt administration that are typically in the textbooks, like Harry Hopkins in particular, who was integral to the New Deal, but so was Frances Perkins. Also, Senator Robert Wagner was always in the rooms writing the legislation, but so was Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins. The story of what we focus on in history moves in different ways for a lot of reasons. One of them in this case is that Frances Perkins did not draw attention to herself. Just characteristically, she did not like the limelight. It often went poorly for her when she was in the spotlight in the media, such as a resolution to impeach her in 1939.

AT: I feel like I've noticed that about a lot of women in different activist movements and that sort of thing is, they do tend to be the ones actually doing the work behind the scenes, but there is also a psychological component where women are penalized essentially when we are seen as putting ourselves forward. It's entirely possible that she was more effective in the shadows regardless of whether she was even comfortable in the spotlight.

AF: Absolutely. I think that is true here.

AT: In addition to all of these impacts, you have chosen to tell a lesser-known aspect of her story. I had never heard of this part of her work before.

AF: Frances Perkins is better known now because in 2009 journalist Kirsten Downie published *The Woman Behind the New Deal*, which is an excellent biography. There are two chapters in that book that deals with Frances Perkins's refugee policy. There was also an academic article in the early 2000s by Bat-Ami Zucker on it. However, my book is the first book-length treatment of Frances Perkins's refugee policy. In the early

Roosevelt administration, Roosevelt administration was new, Nazi Germany was also new. They both started in early 1933. And Frances Perkins was, in those early years, the foremost advocate of German Jewish refugees from within Roosevelt's Cabinet. In that spring 1933 after the national banking crisis that we mentioned, the Cabinet gathered in April 1933 and Frances Perkins had come prepared with a plan to use an overlooked provision from the Immigration Act of 1917 where the Labor Secretary could actually play a significant role in choosing immigrants to come to the U.S. through a thing called a charge bond that we don't have to get into right now. But the point here is that the State Department almost immediately expressed opposition. Secretary of State Cordell Hull actually did not immediately express opposition but as soon as he returned to his offices everyone who worked for him did express opposition. And they tried to tell the Secretary of Labor that she was not in charge of immigration except for the fact that the Immigration Naturalization Service was in the Department of Labor.

So after the State Department decided to give visas to people, then it was literally under her oversight. So the charge bonds controversy was the first battle in this story. She won it. The Attorney General decided that she was right and then she didn't end up using charge bonds but that political victory gave leverage so that the Department of Labor could partner with the German Jewish Children's Aid Incorporated to pioneer a robust child refugee program that brought over 500 children into the U.S. from Nazi Germany between 1934 and 1941. So that brings us to 1934 and then there were many ideas that she had expanding child refugee policy, merging the immigration quotas. The law of the land was the National Origins Act of 1924, which decided how many people from each country could come to the U.S. So the quotas were really blocking people who would otherwise immigrate. She was looking for ways to get around them. Another idea that she had, and some other people had too, was to open a separate quota for the American Colonized Territory of Alaska to settle German Jewish refugees there. That did not happen. One thing that did happen was the repeated extension of visitor visas. She did that throughout the 1930s for people who were already here. After the Kristallnacht pogrom in November 1938, President Roosevelt made that the policy for the executive branch at Perkins's suggestion. There is a theme in my book of things that she suggested a few years ago being taken up a few years later and that's probably relatable to other women in the workplace.

AT: I just keep thinking, everything I know about her, she was so progressive even by today's standards in a lot of ways. And it's just baffling to me that this is 100 years ago almost and how was she able to be so progressive at that time? Have we gotten more conservative?

RBG: She was part of a broader movement. She was intellectually descended from the new field of social work in the late 19th century like Jane Addams, Florence Kelly. She knew both of them, particularly Florence Kelly who was really a mentor figure for her. There were many other people like her and they were progressive. On immigration in particular, the white male labor unions tended to skew anti-immigrant, like they lobbied in favor of the Chinese Exclusion Act and some other restrictionist immigration policy. So these women's social work movements were quite progressive. She was not a one-man band, that's for sure. She was a proponent of universal health care. It didn't happen under her. That was the only thing on her original to-do list that they didn't get to in the Roosevelt administration but even the things that they did get to had significant loopholes that affected real people. *The Case for Reparations* by Ta-Nehisi Coates in *The Atlantic* in 2014 just rakes through the New Deal, Social Security and I think the Federal Housing Administration is in that many ways that the progressive policies left people out. What the New Deal did was, it transformed the relationship between government, the economy, and society so that government would be farther entrenched in the economy and in people's lives. If the federal government steering the ship has empathy and righteousness and Americans' lives in minds, then hopefully maybe that's a good thing, but who's steering the ship?

AT: That is a big if. So do you think that people looked at this work and thought, "okay, we're done?" Like they took this imperfect solution and were like, "okay, that's all we needed to do. Moving on."

RBG: With New Deal policies, they had signing ceremonies and celebrated individual milestones, as legislative milestones should be celebrated. In refugee policy, however, it was always what I call a patchwork, piecemeal system that was not solving the big problems. They couldn't solve the quota system. She was just finding creative ways to work within a system that was not a system on behalf of people who needed help. There were really no celebrations. Maybe when an individual child refugee ship arrived in New York, the people involved greeted them, but even that was deeply sad because they had departed for their parents, right? Like there's really nothing, there's not much worth celebrating in my book. I just hope that illuminates powerful historical and social forces.

AT: Well, do you think that difference between publicizing and not, because I agree, I'm quite glad that they didn't try to get like press coverage out of refugee children, because that sounds creepy and exploitative.

RBG: It was actually important that they didn't. So when the child refugee program began, the Department of Labor, through their networks, asked the press not to cover it, because if it was widely known about, there would have been more political backlash and maybe a rise in antisemitism. Those things happened anyway, but most newspapers followed the direction not to pay attention to it.

AT: See, this is one of the things I find really interesting when we're talking about they publicized the things that would be popular, which makes sense, and sort of downplayed the things that would have been controversial to some people. And what I find interesting is that even the New Deal stuff has somehow become controversial today. So in terms of she wasn't trying to fix a flawed system, she was just trying to help as many people as she could.

RBG: She actually did fix a flawed system. I'm not sure she fixed it 100%, but when she became Secretary of Labor, there was the Immigration Bureau and the Naturalization Bureau, and they were not centralized. And the Immigration Bureau was not focused on naturalizing people, it was focused on deporting people. So one of her first actions out of everything when she became Secretary of Labor was to ask the president for an executive order combining the Immigration Bureau with the Naturalization Bureau to create the INS. The same INS that's, well then it moved to the Department of Justice, then after 9-11 it moved to the new Department of Homeland Security, where it is today for now. And she used the centralization of that bureaucracy to consolidate authority. So she could do things like, previously INS employees were allowed to just arrest an immigrant, and under Perkins's leadership they had to apply to arrest the immigrant. She did things like letting the funding run out for a federally funded mob called Section 24 that would raid immigrant communities and deport them throughout the 1920s and into the early 1930s under the Hoover administration. And there were smaller significant changes too, like for example at Ellis Island, social workers would have better working spaces so that they could better advocate for the immigrants in their care. Those are all ways that she worked to reform the system. I forget if your listenership is very academic, but if anyone wants a great academic article on this, in the Journal of Policy History there's one by Neil Hernandez from 2023, it's called *Against the Grain*, and it's about these ways that Perkins reformed the immigration bureaucracy, and it's called *Against the Grain* because that's exactly what she was doing.

AT: Again, as you're talking, all I can think of is ICE and how we've regressed back to mobs and arresting people without cause and imprisoning kids in cages.

RBG: She was the antithesis to what you're describing, and I think that that has a lot to do with why she's quickly becoming more famous right now. For example, her homestead in Maine became a national park site this past December when Joe Biden was still president, and she is what I call a moral icon on the rise. She's far from perfect, but everyone needs historical figures to look to and know who they are and possibly follow

their example.

AT: And so just in case people don't know what naturalization is, that's essentially immigration is you got here, naturalization is making sure that you stay here in a productive way, whether that's employment, whether that's moving along to a longer-term visa, would that be correct?

RBG: It's the transition to citizenship, which looks different at different times.

AT: So I'm curious when you say she's imperfect, is there any gossip you want to tell us about her?

RBG: She was a cards-close-to-her-chest person. She often did not say what she was really thinking, but she didn't have the privilege or luxury of doing that. So in many ways the strategies that she used to navigate her job were useful to her. Sometimes I get the sense that she wouldn't like me very much, because she's so proper. She's so proper. One time she told a friend whose marriage had recently ended that the way to get over a breakup is to go to church every Sunday and wash your face. I don't blame her for that. I don't know, I find it kind of quirky. It's just an example of how proper she was. She definitely had a good sense of humor, but you might not get that side of her upon first meeting. She and the many well-meaning humanitarian lawmakers who wanted to further colonize Alaska, they were looking out for the lives of German-Jewish refugees, but in their rhetoric around the topic they seemed to take American empire for granted, which is something that historians that I know and like would be more critical in context.

AT: I find it interesting that she was giving relationship or at least breakup advice because I don't know if anyone flagged this, but the title of your book is *Dear Miss Perkins*. Was she ever married?

RBG: She was married for most of her adult life. She used her maiden name Perkins and went by Miss because she did not want all the other people in the room who were men to view her as another man's wife because that would detract from her respectability. When she was on the state's industrial commission in New York before she became industrial commissioner, when she was on the commission under Governor Al Smith, he would sometimes bring his wife or even his mother to meetings to ensure the respectability and comfort of Frances Perkins and also of his campaign manager and advisor, Belle Moskowitz, who's also a female.

AT: So you have a chapter on *The Sound of Music*?

RBG: She extended the visitor visas of the Von Trapp family twice, once in early 1940 when the INS was still under her oversight and then again at the end of 1940 when it wasn't really her but she passed along a note to the Department of Justice. Basically she had a close friend, Gertrude Ely, who was also a friend of the Von Trapp family. They were famous but they were not as famous as they became 25 years later. But *The Sound of Music* is also how I transition in my book from the refugee stories to my last three chapters, which are on historical memory, how these stories are thought of over time. Because in the 1960s when *The Sound of Music* won an Academy Award, well the Von Trapp family wasn't Jewish and that's kind of what America was willing to grapple with. It was a running from the Nazi story, at least the third part of the movie, a running from the Nazi story without Judaism or Jewishness.

AT: That's so inexplicable to me but understandable from what I know of human psychology. Now you mentioned that she was impeached at one point which I feel like we kind of glossed over, so can you tell us about that?

RBG: So I was giving a talk recently and I was talking about the impeachment story and the people who, let's

say their politics differed from mine, they looked displeased. So I think it's a politicized story because they tried to impeach her for politicized reasons and I was struggling through how to tell the story without alienating anybody, though maybe not alienating anybody should not be my goal. That was not Frances Perkins's goal. Anyway, this also relates to your country, Australia. So there is a man named Harry Bridges who immigrated from Australia to the U.S. in 1920 and he was a dock worker and they called that a longshoreman. And he became the spokesperson for his union and in 1934 they led a highly successful strike on the West Coast of the U.S. So that upset the capitalists, but no one nationally was like really upset about it until in 1935 the National Labor Relations Act, also known as the Wagner Act, provided legal mechanisms for strikes and unions. That really upset the capitalists and also there were a ton of people that didn't like her because she had reformed immigration policy and also she was the first woman Cabinet secretary. So she received a lot of hate mail. Congress took notice. There was a whole conspiracy theory calling her Jewish, which she was not, but that would be a convenient tool to explain her alleged communism from the perspective of a bigot, which is, she wasn't a communist, she was actually kind of a centrist Democrat that just wanted to reform. She was an institutionalist in many ways.

Anyway, in January 1939 Congress called her for an impeachment hearing. In early February 1939 she sat through it and the speech that she gave, I think is really interesting for two reasons. One is the contemporary relevance of the balance of power in the U.S. federal government. She literally says, "if Congress made a law saying that I had to deport someone for being communist, I would do it. However, Congress has not made that law." And also it was not confirmed that Harry Bridges was a communist, he was just a leftist labor organizer who happened not to be born in the U.S., he was born in Australia. Another reason why it's interesting, the testimony, is that, I have not read every document she ever wrote, but I read a lot of them and she very rarely talks about herself, but she does. She talks about how she views her career and how she came to Washington, D.C. to serve her country and President Roosevelt, who she admired and respected, and she says that she wanted to make, I forget the exact quote, but I use it as a section title, it's like, "our country closer to the kingdom of God," she says something like that. She really brings out her morals and her own intentions and it's a unique moment for her where they put her so on the defensive that she was talking about herself. Another moving piece in this impeachment saga is that if she had not reformed the immigration bureaucracy, an INS employee probably would have just arrested and deported Harry Bridges. But by reforming the system she ensured a fair process and that led to the resolution to impeach her. She was not impeached because they literally tried to impeach her for treason and they could not prove that, but it was a huge deal, really.

AT: Now, as I understand it, one of the reasons that she was so effective is that, unlike basically any other Cabinet secretary outside of the FDR administration, she had 12 years with him in office. Would you say that that longevity not just enabled her to do more but to make it stick?

RBG: Harold Ickes was also there for the administration. Cordell Hull was there for almost all the administration. Henry Wallace served in a couple different positions, but he was always around. Harry Hopkins was there until he died of cancer, I think. So you're right that there was a lot of turnover in many of Roosevelt's Cabinet positions over the years, but he had a big enough team that she was not the only one that stuck around. What was unique about her role in the Cabinet was when they all got there, she was the Cabinet secretary who had the most experience working with Franklin D. Roosevelt. The rest of his appointees, not all of them, but most of them were kind of Washington insiders who just didn't know the governor of New York very well. So that was one advantage that she had and she needed every one she could get.

AT: So I'm always curious when I'm talking to somebody who's written an entire book about a subject, particularly with all of these interesting things about Frances Perkins, but also, in the broader scheme of, you mentioned Belle Moskowitz. There are so many interesting people. What was it about not just her, but this aspect of her that made you say, I need to go write a whole book about this?

RBG: I chose to take on this topic twice. The first time was in 2014 when I was starting my senior thesis in college. I interned for the Frances Perkins Center. It was an internship specifically for a Mount Holyoke student, which is where Perkins went and where I went. She was class of 1902. And it became my senior thesis topic. I learned about the refugees story from author Kirsten Downie, who had written the comprehensive biography of Frances Perkins, which is a great read. And when I graduated, it passed with honors. And it taught me how to do archival research. It taught me how to work on the same project for an extended period of time, because when you're 21, a year and a half or so feels like a while. It was probably even less than that. And then I didn't work on it for six years while I did a PhD on a different topic. When I defended my dissertation in 2021, I thought that I wanted to do an academic monograph on my dissertation topic, which was postal history and religion/state relations. And then a few weeks after my defense, I figured, "you know what I really want to spend my time doing? I didn't find the answers to all the questions in my senior thesis yet. And I really want to, and I want to get to do that process." And I also wanted to do it for a commercial trade audience where people who are interested in women's history, immigration policy and American responses to the rise of Nazi Germany can learn the story and be interested in it without being academic. So that's the process that has been really positive for me as a historian and writer. And I'm thrilled when people like the book or even when they don't. I'm thrilled when people read the book.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember well-behaved women rarely make history.