

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by historian Pamela Tolar, author of, among other things, *The Dragon from Chicago: The Untold Story of an American Reporter in Nazi Germany*. So let's start with an introduction to Sigrid Schultz.

PT: Sigrid was amazing. She was the Berlin bureau chief for the Chicago Tribune from 1925 to 1941, which means her career as bureau chief really tracks with the rise of the Nazis. She actually started working for the Tribune in 1919, right at the end of World War I, as foreign bureaus are actually first really being opened. She serves as a broadcast journalist for part of that time, toward the end of her time in Berlin. She had a 15-minute segment every Sunday night of news and analysis that went live from Berlin into America's living rooms, and there were people who made a point of showing up there on Sunday to hear what Sigrid had to say. She was one of the first American journalists to warn her readers just how dangerous the Nazis were. She was one of the last to leave Berlin while it was still possible to get out. And then she went back toward the end of the war, February 1945, as a war correspondent for both the Chicago Tribune and, unlikely as it may seem, McCall's magazine.

AT: So I want to mention that your title, *The Dragon from Chicago*, is actually a reference to what the Nazis called her, and I always adore when people sort of reclaim these nicknames that are meant to be offensive, but then you're like, actually no, this woman was a badass.

PT: Quite the badass. She got that title because she really pissed Hermann Göring off one day. They had tried to trap her as a spy, fraudulently. They had delivered documents to her house that included plans for an airplane engine, and her mother called and said, "there's this funky package here." She went. She sees it. She knows she'll be arrested if she's caught with it. She's sure that the Gestapo is going to be there soon. She tears it up. She puts it in the fireplace and burns it down to ash, and then on the way back, sure enough, she meets people headed to her apartment. She steps right in their path and says, "don't even bother. I burned everything. There's nothing there to find." But a little bit later, she's at a foreign press club luncheon at which Hermann Göring is the guest of honor, and in case any of the listeners don't know, he was Hitler's right-hand man. He was also the architect of a plan to try and discredit foreign journalists as spies. So they're at this luncheon. It's being held to honor his second marriage, so it's supposed to be this big celebratory thing. She gets in his face and confronts him about the event in front of the entire foreign journalist community, and he just lost it and yelled at her, "you're just never going to learn proper respect for authorities. I don't know what's wrong with you. It must be part of being from that crime-ridden city of Chicago." And then after that, he and his staff called her the dragon from Chicago, and she really wore that title with pride.

AT: Well, you mentioned her mother, and when I saw "American journalist in Germany," I sort of assumed that she's someone who went there as an adult, but she actually lived in Europe for a fair bit of her earlier life. So could you give us a bit of a background on growing up and how she ended up in the position that she was in?

PT: Sure. She was born in Chicago, 1893, to immigrant parents. Her father was a Norwegian portrait painter, actually quite a successful one. Her mother was, Sigrid always described her ancestry as being cosmopolitan, which is kind of an interesting term. Lots of different European ethnicities, but her mother had grown up in Germany. So she's born here. They live in a Chicago suburb, right at the outer edge of the city. So she grew up with prairie right outside her fenced-in yard, and she always remembered it as being pretty much paradise. But the market for portraits took a tumble in the Depression of the 1890s, and when her father got a really good gig to do a pair of portraits of some minor German royalty, he packed them up and took them back to Germany for what was supposed to be only two years. One commission led to another commission, and they, quite frankly, never came back. She lived in Europe for the next 40 years. She spent time in Germany, went to schools in Germany. She went to schools in Paris. She spent summers with her father's relatives in Norway. She's getting

language skills like crazy, and she graduates from a serious Parisian girls school, not a school for Americans abroad, but a school for Parisian girls. After she graduates with honors, she spends some time at the Sorbonne studying history and international law. And then they end up in Berlin. Her father has opened a new studio in Berlin shortly before World War I, and Sigrid and her mother joined him there, and they weren't able to get out when the war started, because first her mother and then her father were too sick to travel. So Sigrid ends up being really the sole support of the family through the war years, working lots of little jobs, making lots of contacts. And when the war ended, she probably assumed that she'd keep doing that, but she ended up just stumbling into what was going to become her lifetime career because she met the new bureau chief of the new foreign news bureau for the Chicago Tribune. His name was Dick Little.

Those news bureaus were really new because World War I changed how American newspapers handled foreign news. Before the war, they really didn't have people on the ground in Europe. They got their news from the wire services. But with the war, hundreds of American journalists are in Europe reporting on American soldiers in the trenches, and then a number of major papers decided they wanted to continue that kind of reporting, and so they set up these news bureaus. So Dick Little, first Berlin bureau chief for the Tribune. He gets to Europe. He's a really accomplished foreign journalist, war correspondent specifically, but he doesn't speak any German, so he's got this problem reporting in Germany. He does know how to say "ein beer," but that's it. And so he's totally dependent on people who he doesn't trust, who say they can't get him the interviews he's asking for. He's not sure they're giving him the real story when they do translations. And the two of them meet at a party, Dick Little and Sigrid Schultz.

It's a Carnivale ball that's being given by an important Berlin banker. He's the older brother of someone that Sigrid had tutored in French and English during the war, is one of the ways she made money. And he and a lot of his friends wanted to meet American reporters, so he sent his younger brother to the different hotels and invited American reporters to come and sweetened the deal by telling them they'd get a chance to meet this young American woman who had been in Berlin during the war and would be able to tell them stories. The only two who accepted were Dick Little and his counterpart at the Chicago Daily News, Ben Hecht, who went on to become a major screenwriter. They meet and Sigrid's there, and she's thinking she's going to be dancing at this costume ball, and there's going to be great food, and as soon as they meet they're surrounded by Europeans who want to talk to the two Americans, and the language issue just makes it impossible. Once she realizes what the issue is, she basically says, "I'll translate, no problem." She spends hours translating between German and French and English in these really intense political and economic and history discussions, and it literally goes on until dawn. She doesn't even get a single dance, and she loved it. She absolutely loved it. And a few days later Dick Little offered her the job as a combination translator and cub reporter for the Tribune. She didn't even ask how much it paid. She just said yes. It felt like she'd been training for that job her whole life. And she had. She was a reporter to the bone.

AT: I'm sorry, the fact that they sent someone to do a communications job in Germany but he doesn't speak in Germany, but he doesn't speak German...

PT: There were times when Colonel McCormick, who was the owner and publisher of the Tribune, actually made it a policy to send people that didn't speak the language. One of the stories that someone tells, not Sigrid, he called a meeting in Paris. All of his foreign correspondents are there, and he basically had them all stand up and said "okay everyone who speaks French. sit down. Everyone who speaks German, sit down." He went through it. At the end there's one guy standing, and he got the coveted job of roving reporter because that way he wouldn't be contaminated by any of these Europeans. (AT: What?) I know, and in point of fact McCormick was relatively worldly, but he had his little ideas. They ended up with Sigrid there for 25 years holding down the fort as men who didn't speak the language came and went.

AT: So I have talked about women in journalism in the mid-20th century, particularly my episode with Dr.

Kimberly Voss. We talked about women in U.S. journalism in the 1950s and '60s if anyone's interested in slightly later but more of a broad overview, but I also have an episode with Lorissa Rhinehart about Dickey Chappelle, who she wrote a biography of. It was a time where it was very unusual on multiple fronts what she was doing, the fact that she was in charge as the bureau chief, the fact that she is acting as a war correspondent, which obviously she wasn't the only woman doing that. We've got people like Lee Miller and, as I mentioned, Dickey Chappelle, but being someone who was in that leadership position she was very visible at this time covering, you were saying there's economics and international politics and even outside of war reporting, that is not an area that a lot of women were allowed to be working in at this time. So I just find this really fascinating that it seems like the kind of work that women have always been doing but we so rarely hear about.

[Listen to Dr Kimberly Voss on women in US journalism in the 1950s and '60s or read the transcript.](#)

[Listen to Lorissa Rhinehart on Dickey Chappelle or read the transcript.](#)

PT: And I think that's fair because one of the things that I realized as I got deeper into this, that there were a lot more women doing this type of work. And in my blog because I was coming up against them I was telling the stories of these women whose careers are smaller but who are not as visible. That said, nonetheless, most of the women who were reporters in the '20s and '30s were in soft news, not hard news. And Sigrid slips into it. She starts out as the translator/cub reporter and she spends a lot of time being Girl Friday, not so much to Dick Little but to the men who follow him. And over time she is doing more and more reporting. A lot of times she's going out and getting the story and then her boss is getting the byline. And when she finally gets promoted in 1925 to bureau chief, number one, the guy that she replaces is so annoyed. He does not want to be moved to Rome. He wants to stay in Berlin because he says "this is where the story is going to be." And then he says "of course she'll do much better in Italy because she speaks Italian and I don't," which was true, and that "she'll do much better because she'll be able to do it more cheaply than I can because she's a woman," by which they meant "we won't have to pay her as much." And he also says that I'm just selfish because Berlin's going to be the center and I want to be here.

And McCormick tells him no, and gives what I find to be one of the funniest rationales I have ever heard, which is that it's going to be too dangerous for a woman in Rome. That it'll be much better if she stays in Berlin, which just has a mic drop moment when you read that for the first time. But over time she's becoming more and more critical in that position, and at the point at which she is finally promoted, most of her colleagues admit that it's long overdue. And in fact one of them wrote her a letter of congratulations that says, "it's an open secret that you've really been number one for a long long time." So she is doing this, there's a behind the scenes piece to it, and even once she's in charge, there is a constant set of microaggressions. There is a constant attempt to take the position away from her, at least in the beginning years. There's a point at which it's pretty clear that, as far as the people in Chicago are concerned, they're not moving her anywhere. And that's actually very interesting because McCormick moves his guys around a lot, but he leaves her in Berlin and in some ways Sigrid being in Berlin is one of the the two balancing points for the whole Tribune European news service system. Is there these two poles, there's the guy in London and there's secret in Berlin and they don't move. But yeah, there's a lot of crap too.

AT: I just love that the cranky guy's saying "I don't even speak Italian" and their publisher was probably like, "yeah that's why I'm sending you to Italy." But also, I'm sorry, if you can't find news to report on in Italy with Mussolini, that sounds like a skills issue.

PT: The guy was actually a very good reporter. I spent a lot of time tracking, one thing I had to do with this because the sources are sloppy with who's where when. So I literally went through and tracked the bylines of all the men who were in and out to track when they were in Berlin and when they were somewhere else. And he was actually a very good reporter. I will give him credit. I found him amazingly annoying, but he was a good

reporter.

AT: Now as things got more dangerous she started using pseudonyms and falsified date lines. So she was claiming that this fictitious male journalist was reporting from other cities, but really it was her and this was all to give her at least a veneer of protection. (PT: Right.) And from what I understand, the lengths that she went to to create this false identity were pretty impressive.

PT: It really is. and she comes up with it to cover a specific story. 1936 September, the Chicago office sends a letter to her via Paris telling her they want her to write a in-depth report on the Night of the Long Knives, which had happened two years previously. It's the massacre of the stormtrooper leadership and anyone else that that Hitler thinks is a potential political rival. And Paris isn't under Nazi control yet and they don't have a gut sense of how dangerous things are. So they just give her the information in stupid ways. Dangerous ways. And she knows it's going to be dangerous to write the story and they've made it worse by the way they've handled it. But she really really wants to write it because they've just ended the Berlin Olympics, the 1936 Olympics and a bunch of Americans came and were taken in by what the Nazis did to make it all look great. And so people were going home and saying, "we think these reporters are crazy because it was clean and it was nice and people were polite and it was so well organized and the Nazis just aren't that bad."

And so she really wanted to write this piece about this horrifying episode as a counterpart to the idea that the Nazis weren't that bad. So she decided to use the fact that she knew they were tapping her phones and reading her mail and took several passes at telling the people back in Chicago that she wasn't going to write the story. There wasn't any more new information. She'd said everything she had to say in the 12 articles she'd written about it two years earlier. It was done, over and then she went to Paris where she could write the article and then when she sent it to Chicago from Paris, she suggested they run it under a pseudonym so that she could not have any repercussions from the Nazis. And I love the name she chose because it was John Dickson. And that was a sly tribute to Dick Little, because she had always seen him as her father in journalism and that meant she was Dick's son. That pseudonym was over some of the most hard-hitting reporting that came out of Nazi Germany, though she continued to report other stories that pissed the Nazis off under her own name. But she would send letters to the Tribune that she knew that would be read saying, "I don't know where this guy Dickson is getting his material." And she would sign letters "John Dickson" and send them off and it's funny because if you look at John Dickson's signature and Sigrid's signature, they're very similar in the scope, but who's looking at them at the same time? But yeah, she and the Tribune both went to great lengths to separate the person and the persona, and then that got more complicated by the fact that she then hired someone named John Paul Dickson to work for her later in after the war had started. So that was interesting to untangle because suddenly there's a John Dickson who seems to actually be real, in addition to John Dickson the pseudonym. (AT: She manifested him.) That's right, it was pretty amazing.

AT: Now I've also heard that she was actually Jewish and so she's also hiding her own Jewish identity, but then that seems like it may or may not have been true. So can you clear that up?

PT: We really don't know, is the answer. There is a group of three, I will say amateur historians in the best sense of that word and that they are lovers of what they do and they have devoted themselves to the stories of Sigrid Schultz. And they have at least made a plausible argument for her being Jewish. At the same time, she always said she wasn't. But there were plenty of reasons for her to have not acknowledged being Jewish in early 20th century Germany even before Hitler came to power. Anti-Semitism was an issue throughout Europe, but it was more of an issue in Germany. And quite frankly, Colonel McCormick had a good strong strain of anti-Semitism in his makeup as well, and occasionally when he would fire someone he would at least make snotty comments. It's hard to tell whether he would actually fire someone because they were Jewish. But once he was ready to fire them it was certainly an additional element. So the answer is we really don't know. It

sounds like on occasion that the Germans made every effort to figure out if she was Jewish. The fact that she described her mother's family history as "cosmopolitan" when that is a word that has become code for Jewish both under the Nazis and later under the Soviets is interesting. So we really don't know. It's at least possible.

AT: Now, more and more since the second Trump administration began, we've been seeing all of these echoes of rising fascism to the point that I actually visited the U.S. in May of 2025 and I remember telling my husband before I left that, "this doesn't even feel like early Nazi Germany this already feels like mid-Nazi Germany and we're only a few months in". And to connect that to Sigrid and journalism specifically, we know that there are such significant attempts to silence the media. As you mentioned they tried to frame her for being a spy. But there's also just the blatant censorship of media both by the state and also, in contemporary terms, we've got billionaire owners who are shaping the media landscape. I would say a lot of people really spoke out about the Jimmy Kimmel situation when he was almost canceled. But I remember thinking at the time Stephen Colbert is still canceled. And in the case of Jimmy Kimmel, yes, you've got the head of the FCC making not even very veiled threats, that was a pretty thin veil on that threat. But with Stephen Colbert, it was his own company that just decided to cancel his very popular show as a preventative measure. I think that there was a big corporate merger that had to get approved and so there was sort of a, if not explicit then implicit, quid pro quo of "we're gonna cancel this to make the president and his administration like us better and allow us to make this merger" that arguably shouldn't have happened because when we get these huge media companies, that's also very problematic because you're consolidating so much of how Americans get their news under one company and an even smaller handful of people shaping how Americans get their information and so I'm wondering, is the current political climate and the people in charge on that side of the things more of a threat than the billionaire owners?

PT: Rich men shaping the media landscape is not new. It was very much a part of the newspaper world when Seagrid was working. You would never mistake coverage from the Chicago Tribune with coverage from the New York Times for instance. And interestingly enough the Chicago Tribune was reporting a lot more on the rise of Nazi Germany than the New York Times was because the head of the Berlin Bureau for the New York Times was a Nazi sympathizer, and also was not a very good reporter. He held his job because he was actually very good at office administration and he kept the budget in line. So there is that, so that even though Colonel McCormick was very conservative, definitely a isolationist, did not want America going into the war, ends up being a strong supporter early on of the America First program. But he believes first and foremost in putting out a good paper and he does not stop Sigrid from publishing her stories. Now he doesn't always put them on the front page when it's a story we think should go on the front page, sometimes they get buried. Though there were also big things happening in the United States at the time and you don't know what's going to be the big news retroactively. But she would occasionally end up with an important story buried in the entertainment section for instance. But wealthy men have always shaped the news around their own political beliefs. And we may think there was a golden age in which that wasn't true, but if there was, it was for about 15 minutes in 1968 and that's it.

That said, a lot of things happened in Nazi Germany that controlled what came out and the first is that, soon after Hitler came to power, some new rules that affected foreign journalists came out. A foreign correspondent always, there was an implicit understanding that it was always kind of dangerous. You could get thrown out, you could get thrown in jail, you could get beat up if the host country didn't like what you wrote. But with the Nazis, that became explicit. Now the rules were that if you reported something that was not in the best interests of Germany it was treason and that if a foreign correspondent reported something that did not reflect what the Nazis perceived as the truth, that you could be thrown out of the country. That's now law. Before it was implicit. So that's one thing that happens and you did get some reporters thrown out and you also got reporters leaving of their own free will because of being afraid. Sigrid was always trying to walk this tightrope to tell the truth but do it in a way that won't get her thrown out of the country. And she developed some interesting

ways of doing that. So the one thing you get is that it really is now against the law to report things the Nazis don't want you to report. And they are shaping the news they're telling the story they want it to be and there's a lot of false news. Sigrid does actually use the term "fake news" and she calls it out both when it's on the German side but also when she sees it in the Chicago Tribune, where somebody has inserted something in one of her stories that is not so. So she's very conscious of that that fake news issue.

Censorship is also an interesting subject here, because the print media doesn't actually get censored, at least not ahead of time. It gets censored after the fact, so that if you send a story and someone reads it later and doesn't like it, then they report back to the Gestapo that there's this story. And sometimes it's just Germans living in the United States who read something that pisses them off and they contact the embassy. Sometimes it's German officials who read something that they don't like it. The first time Sigrid gets called into the Gestapo, it's five months after the Germans are in power and she thinks she's going to be called in because she's been doing this real hard-hitting reporting on the Enabling Acts, which are a series of laws the Nazis pushed through the Reichstag that allowed Hitler to rule by decree and basically renders the Reichstag irrelevant. And if that doesn't send shivers down your spine, I don't know what will. So she thinks that's what she's there for. And instead it's because of this relatively minor article that she published a couple of months before that someone was annoyed by. And admittedly it was an ugly story but it wasn't the Enabling Acts. It wasn't the Reichstag fire. It was not a big story. It was a small ugly story. But she's really there to be given a slap on the wrist and but they said, "where do you get this information?" And she says it was in the German newspapers, and they're like, "that doesn't count, you can't use that." So there's this after-the-fact censorship that happens.

The other thing they do is they try to control what information you get up front. So they're providing press conferences at which they're handing out information. If someone's there who's relatively new, they'll try and set up interviews, they'll try and set up sources. So they're trying to control information that way. Censorship is much harder on the radio front, possibly because it's live. There you have to get your stuff approved by three different sensors before it goes in. There's one time where she goes in, there's a story. She's reporting on a meeting that she went to that day at which Hitler makes some really amazing comments about not allowing manufacturers to profit from the war. And she includes it in her story because it's absolutely clear that's the big story, not what he was there for the meeting for. And she shows up with her copy that night at the radio station and the censors say, "no, we've got the official transcript. That's not in there, you can't say that." And at that point, it was early enough in the regime that there were still secretaries who would go and would take dictation at the meetings and then produce typescripts of the actual speeches and sell them to reporters. So she whips out this complete transcript and says, "yes, he did, it's right here." So they're trying to just say it didn't happen. And it was late enough and it was close enough to time that they didn't call a superior and she ended up getting this one big win at being able to say, "yes they did." So there's this taking the stories out. There's one point where they massacred her script so thoroughly that she just refused to go in the air, period. So the Germans are reporting false news to their own people, trying to stop foreign correspondents from getting the news out and threatening them when they do get the news out. So there's layers and layers and layers of shaping the stories.

AT: Now you mentioned that she obviously did eventually leave Germany and then later came back. But can you tell us what was her life like after that tenure as the bureau chief?

PT: The reason she doesn't go back until '45 is she ends up very ill. She catches what they called war typhus and she was just supremely ill for several years. And then there was at a point where it wasn't quite clear where they would put her and what they would do with her once she was well enough to go back. But she goes back in February of '45. She does some amazing reporting in the death camps and on the war crimes trials at Dachau and Bergen-Belsen. The plan was that she would report from Nuremberg but she went back to the United States for a speaking tour that she had been putting off and putting off. And while she was there, she

stopped to talk to Colonel McCormick when she was in Chicago, something she always did. And while they were talking about the war crimes trials, he said, "we've got some officers who I think we've got some officers who should be put on trial too." And she just kind of gets, you can't see my face on the radio, sorry. She came to a dead stop and her jaw dropped and I don't actually know that, but then what she said was, "I'm sorry, Colonel I just can't go along with that." And they changed the topic and they continued their conversation and when she left his office she went downstairs to the general manager and immediately resigned.

And it was effectively the end of her career. Not technically. She could have gotten a job with one of the Tribune's competitors, but she was 53, which was a lot older then than it is now. She was in questionable health, being a war correspondent didn't do anything to make that better. She's the only child of an elderly mother who needed to be taken care of. So she tried to cobble together a job doing freelance reporting related to Germany and to being a central European specialist. For 10 years, she did regular reporting trips back to Germany for national magazines. She would be called on for radio or later television when they needed a German specialist to explain what was happening in Germany. But she really never quite made the transition to the post-war world. The things that had made her so special in Berlin, her language skills and that network of sources, really weren't a lot of use in the United States. And she never was really able to make the mental shift that Russia was now the big bad in the American political world, not Germany. And that really left her being a political dinosaur and it's hard to be a political reporter when you're a political dinosaur.

So she slowly faded into relative but not absolute obscurity. In the '70s she ended up becoming a source. So younger journalists, younger scholars were coming to interview her about what it was like in Nazi Germany and what it was like working for Colonel McCormick and being a woman war correspondent and foreign correspondent and that was pretty exciting. There's some fascinating interviews that come out of that period even though at that point she is definitely a cat lady. She's living in a little old cottage in Westport, Connecticut and it's dirty because she's really not very interested in housework. And there are cats and there are unfiled documents. And yet they would come and see past all that for her very real charm and intelligence and just wit. So she faded but she was never entirely forgotten.

AT: And she wrote a book called *Germany will try it again*.

PT: She wrote it in between 1941 when she came back and 1945 when she went. It's pretty much unreadable for a modern reader. It's sort of part memoir, which is absolutely fascinating, part ranting, a certain amount of conspiracy theory, a certain amount of "Germans are bad bad bad bad bad." But it did quite well at the time, it went into a second printing within a matter of four months. There were people who thought everyone in power in the United States should read it. And there were people who thought she should be shot at dawn. So it certainly got attention. But it was not a very good book, and she really struggled with it.

AT: And with biographers I'm always curious what was it about this person, because obviously she is a very fascinating individual, she is in a unique position for women in this time period. But what was it about her that made you say, "oh man I need to write a book about this woman"?

PT: At some level I think our subjects choose us. I was literally working on a proposal about a totally different woman when I stumbled onto Sigrid entirely by accident. Item was in my newsfeed one morning, this architectural salvage vendor had found a bunch of glass plate photographic negatives in the attic of a house that he had bid on being able to take useful stuff out of before they demolished it. And they were pictures from the end of the 19th century of a young woman and a really small child and a really big dog. And he went out to try and find out who they were, and it turned out that the little girl was Sigrid Schultz and the woman was her mother and the pictures were taken by her father and then the punchline was "and she grew up to be this groundbreaking foreign correspondent." And I kind of, "what?" and went digging in and just I was hooked almost immediately. It just in some ways was such a modern story. And it really felt like it was a story that

needed to be told right then. And she pretty much knocked the other woman off my desk and said “it’s my turn.” All the time I was writing my editor would occasionally say to me, “I really wish this book were a lot less relevant,” because it just became more and more relevant as time passed. But it was just this sense that it was a story that needed to be told now, about a really kick-ass woman.

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