

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Terese Svoboda, author of the new book, *Hitler and My Mother-in-Law*. And I'll be the first to admit that when I saw that title, a lot of thoughts went through my head and none of them were expecting the synopsis that actually did accompany it. So why don't we start with an introduction to your book and your mother-in-law?

TS: In a time like our own, of intense propaganda and manipulation, the only World War II female correspondent who covered both theaters of war, Patricia Hartwell, identified Hitler from a pile of ashes for the U.S. military, and the troops awarded her with a million-dollar painting from Hitler's study. Really? She was the only woman in the CBS newsroom, assistant to the head of the Office of War Information, vice president of one of the largest public relations companies in the world, third in command of UNICEF, where she convinced Matisse to provide artwork for free, editor of her own Arizona newspaper, where she hustled naive art on the side, and eventually head of the Hawaiian Arts Council, a state of extremely complex political and social stakeholders, where she left a legacy of preventing art fraud. So it's a story through the twentieth century about art, women, and deception.

AT: I'm very curious how your mother-in-law's backstory came up. Is this just the result of years of conversation at family dinners and that sort of thing? Or is it something that wasn't really talked about, and you just sort of uncovered a lot of this stuff many years into the relationship?

TS: Well, the first time I met her, on our way out, she showed her souvenirs from World War II, and they included things like Goebbels's silverware, Hermann Göring's Luger and many of his medals, rifles, and a turban she had made in Paris out of Göring's sashes, and she also had a purse made. And she told us stories about each object, and then, because I was young, and we had our own war, the Vietnam War, World War II belonged to old fuddy-duddies. So I didn't pay too much attention to her, but then she pulled out a five-by-seven photograph, a promotional size, of her in a burly coat and a headscarf and pointing to a pile of ashes, and she said that the military had told her to tell the world, because she was a big-time correspondent, that those were Hitler's ashes, and even I knew that Berthes-Baden was not Berlin, and that, propaganda is propaganda, but there was something off about that. So that and the fact that her sons, not so much my husband, but the other three of them, they always rolled their eyes when they heard their mother talking about her exploits, and I kept wondering what in the world was true.

AT: I find that very interesting in part because one of the things that I talk about in my book, *Uncredited*, is that the reason that women often don't receive credit for the things they have accomplished is this sort of dismissal. Even in articles in publications like Smithsonian Magazine, even in recent years, you'll see headlines where it's literally, "did a woman actually do a thing?" And then it's like, "yeah. Yeah, it seems like she did the thing, so why are you making it a question?" And so I think it's very common for particularly children to listen to their parents' recounting of their own lives and say, "okay, yeah, sure," but I do feel like there is that larger pattern at play of dismissing even when a woman is telling her own story.

TS: That's been my experience as someone who's been and done a lot of different things in unusual parts of the world, that the moment a woman opens her mouth about some kind of astonishing experience, the topic gets changed, and that's particularly true of older women. There's a kind of a system of erasure that goes on. The older you are, the quieter you should become, and that's a big loss for our culture.

AT: You would think these are the people who would have the most interesting stories and hopefully the most wisdom. We know that's not always true. (laughter)

TS: I think it was particularly true in the mid-20th century, where it appeared that there was a movement toward a more liberated view of women, but in reality, the forces of patriarchy post-war were very great, and there

wasn't a lot of wiggle room in terms of redefining yourself and your achievements.

[Listen to Lorissa Rinehart on Dickey Chapelle](#) or [read the transcript](#).

AT: With that in mind, one of the things that I always like to point out is that I feel like people think women's participation in public life and professional activities, "oh, that's a new thing." And in fact, in most fields, there have been at least a few women the whole time. And in a previous conversation about another war correspondent, Dickey Chapelle, her biographer and I discussed some of the barriers that women reporters faced during World War II. So could you tell us about Pat's experience in that regard?

TS: Dickey Chapelle really carved out her own position in World War II. When she discovered that there weren't any female photojournalists, she decided that that's what she would do instead of the strict reporting. So she is an amazing exception to what was really well-educated and well-heeled women who were attracted to the art of reporting during World War II. So in terms of the barriers that women encountered during World War II, I think that because Patricia Hartwell was a magazine writer, she had a different agenda. They were longer pieces. She had more time to write them. She wasn't shouldering her way all the time to the front. So by the time she got there in 1944, a lot of the prejudice had fallen away, both in the final push to win the war. They were so fussy about what was going on. And I think that the women had really established themselves as important contributors to the sorts of things that the government wanted the people back home to know. So the only time she got into real trouble was once when General Patton became very annoyed with her when she accidentally liberated a German city before his troops arrived and she used the bathroom in an elegant hotel, because those were usually booby-trapped and she could have been a fatality. And then at the very end of the war, she "liberated" von Ribbentrop's red Mercedes convertible for her own use. And then she just went where she wanted. Early on, when she first arrived, I think it was somewhere in the Pacific in 1944, she did write down the experience of putting up her tent and discovering somebody wandering in in the middle of the night. And she said she didn't know whether it was the general whose lawn it was or someone else that had tried to force his way in. And I think that maybe she didn't talk about it. Maybe things happened, but she didn't tell people about that kind of problem.

AT: Let's go back a bit to how did she end up in this situation in the first place? Not to make it sound as though she just wandered into war. But could you give us more of her backstory and tell us how she grew up and how her career evolved to this point where she was in these places that, typically women were less common?

TS: Born in Texas, she was the eldest of, I think, five, and her father expected her to do well. He said obviously, she was going to be president, when she was born. She was named Patricia instead of Pat; Patton, which was the family name, just because they expected her to be a boy. She went to the University of Texas for a year and then finished her academic career in Wellesley, her undergraduate degree. And then she went on to Columbia School of Journalism in one of the early classes there. And started off her journalism career in a tiny little place called the University of career in a tiny little place called Mexico, Missouri. And I think she picked it because the year before, the newspaper had a bold headline which said, "no news today." And the guy had a sense of humor. But nonetheless, she didn't last long because she went home at Christmas and a colleague of hers had invited her to interview for this job at CBS, which she got and stayed there for three years. And then she moved with her boss, who was Elmer Davis and very prominent at the time, when he went to head the Office of War Information. And that's where she dealt with propaganda and misinformation for a couple of years. At the same time, she was writing some magazine articles, and there was a magazine called Women's Home Companion, which had a circulation of four million, and previous authors were like Jack London and Willa Cather. They decided that she would be their star reporter. And they took her down to Saks and outfitted her. And she went to Hollywood and was wined and dined and all very embarrassing later on when she met other female reporters. But nonetheless, she was granted by Admiral Nimitz access to the front in the Pacific and she went to Saipan and did an article on the wounded there. She was the first female reporter to arrive in

Guam in the midst of the battles there. And then most famously, she was the first to land in Iwo Jima, four days before Dickey got there, and had the unnerving experience of dealing with thousands of wounded men. Then she went to Europe and really saw the end of the war in Europe. [Listen to Holly Marsden on Moll Cutpurse](#) or [read the transcript](#).

AT: As we mentioned earlier, there is this tendency to dismiss women's stories, even when they're the ones telling them. But something that has come up on other episodes, most notably I would say the Moll Cutpurse episode, is that women are not always necessarily the most reliable narrators of their own stories because like anyone else, they might exaggerate things or it might just be that their story seems so fantastical that it is hard to believe that this really happened. And particularly if you have multiple instances of, well, okay, maybe I'll accept one of these things, but you're saying all of these things happened? Really? And so in your book, you question how much of the story is fact versus what might have gotten a bit fictionalized, shall we say, over the years? And so you have chapter titles like Fake, Artifice and Erasure and Propaganda or Promotion. And particularly for someone who quite literally worked in propaganda and misinformation, I'm curious how these factors played into when you're trying to figure out what to believe and what maybe was not exactly accurate.

TS: One of the most interesting stories that she would tell is that she had been present when Hermann Göring, who was second in command of the Führer's troops, surrendered. And then that night they had a big chicken dinner, which is verified that he had a nice larder aboard his very big car, at the Castle Fischhorn where there was a guard who was interviewed a few years ago about the evening. And she says that, and I heard her say this quite a number of times, that that night she danced with him. Now, Hermann Göring at that point was 300 pounds, and although he was a ladies man, his wife was there, and so were a number of rather unhappy German generals. The guard remembers that there were shots fired, and that was in exuberance, apparently. I think Hermann Göring was glad not to have been killed by the SS and was happy to be alive, although now a prisoner of the US. So she was in the neighborhood. I can verify that by her letters and by other people's recollections, the 101st Airborne's diaries and so forth. There were three vehicles that were present during Göring's initial surrender on the roads when he was wandering around the castle trying to find somebody to surrender to. One of them could have had press. The guard said that there were no press photographers available or they would have had a heyday that night, but he didn't say there was no press, and maybe he didn't realize that she was with the press. Of course, she had the moxie to do something like that. Reporters cross the line, and they get information in ways that you don't expect. She also said she interviewed him twice, and I couldn't quite figure out when the second time was, but he did surrender three times, one very efficiently with all his medals and so forth, and then to another official before he had the final sign-off. So there were opportunities for her to have shown up at various other places too. So it's very complicated, and to some extent the detail that she provided in some of her experiences convinces you that she was there or she had achieved these things, but you don't have the two outside sources that would verify it for sure. That's why it becomes lore at one point.

AT: I think I saw the difference between a memoir and an autobiography, which obviously this is neither, but the difference is that a memoir is just how you remember things, whereas an autobiography you have to factcheck, and so that idea that none of us are necessarily going to be 100% accurate narrators of our own story. But when you were talking about her memorabilia, shall we say, and the idea that she was able to get a hold of things like his luger and his sashes and make a turban and a purse out of them, which I love that detail. Make it fashion. But is there any way to actually verify, for example, that this luger wasn't just a random luger that she is attributing as having belonged to him versus no, we can actually definitively prove that?

TS: I only glimpsed at that once. I don't know what happened to it after that. So I didn't see whether or not they had carved in his name or anything. I have a receipt for Hermann Göring's Iron Cross that she sold to a radio broadcaster for, I think, \$250 after the war. So I know she had it. And the turban, the ribbons can be verified

because you can see the sample of the ribbon that was used. So the question of Hermann Göring's medals is an interesting one because there is a whole website about all the fakes and the man in charge of him toward the very end of his life before he committed suicide took them away and melted them down. But they keep appearing and some of them have to be real. So it's all very complicated. And also people, as my friend, Daile Kaplan, who was on The Antique Roadshow said, there are so many people of our generation who have inherited this cache of memorabilia that show up at The Antique Roadshow that they have been very strict about provenance now because no one knows what to do with these things or who even to return them to if indeed they could be returned. She does walk away with this very important German painting. And she keeps it for 20 years in her living room and then sells it to a dealer who then makes 100 times more the amount by selling it to the National Gallery in London. And I did quite a bit of work to try to figure out who owned the painting before she was given it. And I know in 1919 it was sold at auction but not to whom and then it appears again in the late 30s and eventually ends up in Hitler's study. But whether or not it was taken forcibly from a Jewish refugee in payment for their lives as it were, like many artworks were, it is still up for question. There has been a website for quite a while put up by the National Gallery describing everything that they know about the artwork and no one has ever come forward to place a claim. It's possible that it was handed legitimately from one possessor to the other. On the other hand, it's easily possible that it came into Hitler's study by way of a gift from the very important automobile czar at the time, Robert Almers, who then had purchased it from a woman, a Vogel estate in another German town. It was a textile production centre and there were many Jewish manufacturers there and it could have been seized from them, but I couldn't get past that part.

AT: So from what you were describing earlier about Patricia Hartwell as a person, she doesn't seem like the kind of figure who would be content to say, "okay I went and had an adventure and now I'm just gonna chill out." So I feel like there are a lot of biopics and that sort of thing, like people who might be trying to tell her story in a certain kind of way who would get to the end of the war and say, "okay, that's it, we're done." But I would actually argue that her post-war years, at least to me, actually seem even more interesting than her war years, from what you were describing earlier of what she was doing later in life.

TS: I agree. The first thing she did after the war, well she went to the Nuremberg trial but she also traveled to South America for four months and she went to seven countries and the itinerary was like James Bond goes from one exotic locale to the next and she never wrote anything about it. She told some people that she was looking for Hitler's friends and I guess that's kind of logical since they had already asked her to identify Hitler's ashes. And then she told her parents that she was investigating job opportunities for women in South America. So there you go. And then after that she went on to become vice president of Carl Bjor's public relations firm and moved on from there to actually switching her job with her husband. This was her second husband and he had started to become a syndicated columnist and decided he no longer wanted to be director of information at UNICEF, which was a very powerful job because UNICEF at the time wasn't funded by the UN and it really relied heavily on what kind of PR could be put out about children who needed milk in the rest of the world. And so they switched jobs and there's a little article in York Times about how that came about. She then was the person in charge of selecting the artwork for UNICEF's very popular greeting card series and went all over the world to do that. First she started as a consultant under her husband and then took it over. That was because she had dealt with some of the big art dealers before the war. She was very good at just proceeding on, you know, "sure, I can do that. When she was asked to become mayor of Berchtesgaden, she said "well I guess it's appropriate. I took political science at Wellesley and of course I can do this."

AT: That was the town that she liberated as the war was coming to a close in Germany?

TS: Yes. She was the first female reporter to arrive at Hitler's Eagle's Nest, which was just above Berchtesgaden. And so she was in the neighborhood and apparently perfectly positioned to take over. And she was the only civilian to command a German town post-war, and there were lots of problems. There were like

200 children orphans left over from the German breeding program. There was many thousands of marks that were hidden under the floorboards in a farmhouse. There was Hermann Göring's entire art collection. There was not much to eat and she had to commandeer various things for the army. So it was a rather exciting assignment. But that prepared her then while she was working for UNICEF in Czechoslovakia, her husband decided they were leaving New York and going to Arizona. And so they sold that painting and bought a weekly newspaper. And it didn't do well because she then decided to divorce him, and circulation was going down. She was always good at getting these very toney things going but it was hard to get them supported. So after she sold the newspaper, she didn't become a receptionist like everybody else in that era. Instead she taught Asian history at a community college, while at the same time taking a class in Asian history at Arizona State. So that all worked out. And at the same time she volunteered to catalog all the art in Scottsdale and that led to putting together exhibits and eventually they gave her nine months to find an architect, go all over the country and look at museums and determine what would be appropriate for the town and help raise money. And then they didn't make her director, so she went off to Hawaii, where she was very familiar with having spent time there during the war. She was the second leader of the Hawaiian Arts Council. The first guy only lasted a few months and which is a very tough job because it's not only geographically spread out but it's very complicated culturally. And the first thing she did was to prevent them from tearing apart the one percent for the arts fund and she raised enough interest and excitement about it that she got the Hawaiian Philharmonic to play before the Senate at the opening every year for 10 years and then she had noticed that there were so many prints sold on downtown Honolulu by Dali and various other famous artists that couldn't be legitimate and then she was instrumental in preventing art fraud. Poor soldiers would come up with fake prints that they'd spent all their life savings for. She figured out a way to verify their authenticity and made it safer for tourists to spend all their money there.

The other thing is that I wanted to mention was among the prominent women correspondents, there were very few that survived the war in terms of really picking up their lives and doing something worthwhile. Some of them became alcoholics like Lee Miller, some of them really didn't write anything else. One of the most prominent ones, Sigrid Schultz, she had met Hitler and he kissed her hand and she was Jewish and he didn't know that. And all she ever published after that was a book of recipes. Martha Gellhorn was really an essayist to start with and so the fact that she continued on afterwards made sense but otherwise. And then there was Helen Kirkpatrick, who was offered a very prominent job in the State Department and she demurred because she knew she was going to face so much prejudice as a woman in such a powerful position and she retired.

AT: Coming back to that question of how people tell different stories and why, you mentioned that you didn't really have a chance to get to know Patricia very well and so you're largely going off of family stories particularly those from her sons, including your husband. I'm always interested in how biographies differ when you are able to talk to the person, interview them and you're actively working on this and you are collaborating with them to tell their story versus once they've passed away and you no longer have their version of events, you can't ask them those questions, and so then how the people you can ask questions of shape that narrative.

TS: Well. fortunately she did two lengthy interviews before she died and those are very helpful and it is true that you have to weigh why this person is telling you this information and the motive behind their selective memory. I had also access to brother Jay's interviews that he conducted before the turn of the century, in 1998 or '99 about his mother. And so I didn't have context for that but I just had historical context for some of the people that he talked to. And of course they weren't talking to me, they were talking to the son – not only a male but also someone who had more emotionally invested relationship with the subject. So I tried to take that into consideration and discount some elements of the interviews.

AT: Well and something that has definitely come up before in previous conversations is the biases at play when you consider who the recipient of the information is right so for example when I was talking with Ramona Houston about African American and Latinx histories in the U.S. and how those are often hidden, she was

talking about WPA interviews of formerly enslaved people and how when she was learning about these in college her professor pointed out to the class they were being interviewed by white people, and so how honest is a formerly enslaved person who knows that this is all going on the record, how honest are they going to be when they're being interviewed by a white person? Or in a separate interview about Hannah Cullwick, who was a Victorian maid we talked about how she has these incredible diaries like extensive diaries but they were explicitly written for her husband. Her husband wanted her to keep them and he read them. And so I love getting into these questions of how even someone telling their own story is going to edit that story depending on the listener. So like you were saying there was a story where a strange man wandered into her tent and maybe there were darker things that happened that a mother wouldn't necessarily want to tell her sons for example, or that a war correspondent who wants to be taken seriously wouldn't necessarily report back to her boss that something happened that might get her removed from an assignment that she wanted to be on. So this question of fact versus fiction and mostly fact I think just keeps coming up in this conversation.

TS: There's the question why would you lie about dancing with Hermann Göring? What do you have to gain by saying that? And as the interrogator of her facts at some point you just have to take it for truth. Now she claimed over and over that Eleanor Roosevelt was a friend of hers and I had very little evidence of how that could be true. I have a letter that the two of them exchanged and little else. But there were other correspondents who were her friends and who stayed at the White House and also her boss Elmer Davis being the head of the War Office was often, almost every single day, invited for lunch with the Roosevelts. It's logical to me that as his Girl Friday, his assistant she would attend those lunches and her little anecdote about correcting FDR's manners seems to verify her claim to me. So verification comes from many different sources – eyewitnesses interviews and letters and so forth but also eventually the confirming anecdote.

AT: Now one of the things that you're also doing with this book is actively questioning standard mother-in-law tropes and narratives. I find this really interesting from a biographer perspective that coming in as an in-law, you're coming into this family situation that you are both part of but also an outsider in and that just seems like a really fascinating dynamic from which to approach a project like this, to say "I am going to tell a story about someone whom I am very closely related to but also that I maybe barely know."

TS: I was surprised to learn there are very few memoirs that have anything to do with mother-in-laws and fewer novels for such a loaded subject because it's such a delicate relationship, as you say the outsider/insider. For example the daughter-in-law doesn't want to listen to her mother-in-law about children, yet the mother-in-law raised one that was worth marrying.

AT: Do you think that this idea of mother-in-laws as adversarial particularly with daughters-in-law I feel like that mostly comes back to this idea of pitting women against each other and the idea that women's lives have to be centered around men. Not to say that there aren't plenty of women for whom their husband or their adult son is the center of their life, but this idea that you must view all women as competition for the attention of the men in your lives and it just feels like a really tired trope to me.

TS: Well you put that very well. I wondered for a while why all of the jokes about mothers-in-law were always from the male point of view. "I haven't spoken to my mother-in-law in 18 months. I don't like to interrupt her." There are all kinds of serious insults that depict the fear really involved in the relationship. But mostly it depicts the power structure being leveled.

AT: Do you think that's part of it, that it's rooted in this misogyny that a woman with power, a matriarch, because that is what a mother-in-law is, has to be brought down in her power and we do that by making fun of her?

TS: Yes of course. I'm sure that's the cause and she continues to exert her power no matter what. They can

make all the jokes they want but still there is a deep emotional bond that can't be gotten around.

AT: So clearly Patricia Hartwell's story is fascinating in and of itself and particularly I would hope for her family and other people who knew her seeing this story in print, I would hope is very satisfying for them but what do you hope that readers will get out of this book beyond just "well that's a really cool story"?

TS: So I begun to understand that I probably should never have questioned her. But I am a product of a patriarchal society and her exploits were astonishing. So that's kind of a coda to the book. I began by quoting Carolyn Eadie, who was an author of a definitive book about women correspondents. We journalists all know too well the saying, "if your mother says she loves you check it out." But what if your mother is a journalist or even a historian? The short answer is that you approach her statements the same way. So I felt justified overall in pursuing my quest to understand at least what she had done, if not understand why. So someone from the outside without my motivation might be enlightened as to how truth is crafted in media as well as in private life and begin to understand the role of eyewitnesses and how they are so often discounted the amazing strength of propaganda. Why you might believe one story over another the psychology behind memory and how that plays out in a life story. And sympathy with older women in particular who have given their lives to amazing accomplishments and yet still face persistent erasure.

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