

Gaslit Nation Transcript

27 December 2023

“American Cassandra: The Life of Dorothy Thompson”

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/american-life-of-95135045>

[opening song — [“Stand Apart” by Vague Pains](#)]

Andrea Chalupa (00:10):

Welcome to *Gaslit Nation*. I am your host, Andrea Chalupa, a journalist and filmmaker and the writer and producer of the journalistic thriller, *Mr. Jones*, about Stalin's genocide famine in Ukraine. It's based on a true story of an incredible era we're going to be exploring today; the rise of Hitler and Stalin, who of course led us into World War II. And the anti-fascist journalist who covered it all was Dorothy Thompson, one of my personal heroes and historical mentors for helping us make sense of the times we're in. You may know Dorothy Thompson from her 1941 essay, *Who Goes Nazi?*, which went viral when Trump came to power in 2016. Thompson was one of the most influential and extraordinary journalists and sought after speakers in the 1930s and 1940s; as famous as Eleanor Roosevelt. Her work inspired her husband, the Nobel laureate Sinclair Lewis, to write *It Can't Happen Here*, a now classic novel about an American Hitler coming to power.

Andrea Chalupa (01:23):

So gather in close because this is going to be a cozy slumber party fireside chat because this interview is one for the record books here at *Gaslit Nation*. We are a unique podcast in the sense that we are the first to ring the alarm about fascism in America, but we've done it from the perspective of the importance of making art, to fight back with art. I am very pleased to say that today's guest, the acclaimed author Peter Kurth, author of several must-read books, including on Isadora Duncan and the one we're going to be discussing today, *American Cassandra: The Life of Dorothy Thompson*. Peter's book—and I—are both attached to a historical drama inspired by the incredible life of Dorothy Thompson. This means that my next follow-up project to *Mr. Jones* is a Dorothy Thompson movie, and the underlying source material of that is Peter's fabulous book. So I'm obviously very nervous because I'm putting the finishing touches on my Dorothy Thompson screenplay and sending it to Peter over the holidays for Peter to read, shaking his head, shaking his fist at all my poetic license [laughs].

Andrea Chalupa (02:44):

So the first thing I want to start off by saying, which is so fascinating... So in my life, I have so many extraordinary friends who are anti-fascist journalists, anti-fascist analysts whose job is, you know, their work focuses on collecting war crimes. They stare at death, mass murder all day long. And in our very deep conversations about the times we're in, it always goes back to mental health and how we manage our mental health. And I always say to them, “Well, get a therapist. Get a therapist.” But they say, “No, no, no, I don't want to grow soft. I don't want to become mushy. I've got to stay strong. We're in a war.” But the reality is that Dorothy Thompson and all of the journalists of her generation that were covering Hitler and Stalin, they were seeing analysts because Freud and all of his disciples out of Vienna were a lot of these journalists like Thompson were based, that was the big thing. That was the hottest thing, was going to go see an analyst. I wanted to start off with that because I think today, in my field, we don't really normalize therapy. It's all about, “Suck it up, walk it off.” But back then, they were all seeing analysts. So I guess let's just start there.

Peter Kurth (03:55):

Well, I'll tell you, they were also all having sex with each other, if you don't know that.

Andrea Chalupa (03:59):

I picked up on that.

Peter Kurth (04:02):

You did? [laughs] I think it was in part fashionable.

Andrea Chalupa (04:08):

The analysts or the sex?

Peter Kurth (04:09):

Well, probably both actually, knowing these people, because they were all up here, and I know Dorothy wrote a great deal not mostly for publication, about in these terms, in the terms of analysis, she had seen Dr. Theodore Reich and she knew Freud. She knew him well enough to be able to call him in the middle of the night. So this was part of her circle, her very intellectual, inquiring circles; inquiring in every way. You mentioned art. Well, they were creating a new art actually with their independent reporting. I'm going to put it that way. That was the demand they all made on each other. It was freedom. They demanded it for themselves and they demanded it from each other if they were mixed up together. I mean, it was a fashion. It wasn't just in Vienna and Berlin and Europe. It was also in New York. It was building in New York. It became a definitely, decidedly upper class, or at least moneyed class. It wasn't like it is now where... I don't know what it's like where you are, but in Vermont where I am, anyone who wants to be a therapist can hang a shingle out. There's no requirements at all. And this is a very different thing from what she was encountering there.

Andrea Chalupa (05:30):

It's just so odd to me. Her impact cannot be overstated. Could you just run it down for people? Because today she's largely forgotten, but at the time—

Peter Kurth (05:40):

Well, it's interesting about that. She is and isn't forgotten. Since I wrote that book, which was a long time ago—in 1990 it was published—it was my hope that she would spread, that her example and her words would spread further. And to some degree, I would say now looking back, they have. But I think in certain ways that I didn't expect to. I hadn't imagined it rather. She is a name now that signals one thing, which is anti-Nazi. And that is, I would say, obviously, her most important legacy was her recognition and action that she took against the Nazis rising and especially in power. And the example she made of rousing this country into fighting Hitler. She was the first—if you want all the firsts—she was the first woman to head a foreign correspondence bureau in Europe. She was made bureau...Curtis Martin newspapers, which were the *Philadelphia Public Ledger* and the *New York Post* at that time.

Peter Kurth (06:51):

And she was the first woman appointed to head the bureau. And this is only because she had distinguished herself as a stringer. She had gone to Europe with a girlfriend in 1920, and they were looking for... I expect she had many high ideas. One of them; I expect she wanted to write a brilliant novel about herself. I think that was definitely something she wanted to do [laughs]. But she just started writing. She started writing and submitting copy, and she persisted until some of her stories were

bought. And then she became known. And then she became dependable and reliable. So she was hired by Curtis Martin on the condition that she could write whatever she wanted and that they could reject anything that they didn't like. She was not bound to them in any editorial sense, and that worked so well. She was in Vienna. She moved to Berlin and they made her the bureau chief for all of central Europe, which became her specialty.

Peter Kurth (07:54):

She was really, really knowledgeable about the very confusing politics of that huge region of Europe, which included the Balkans. It included Greece, it included Turkey even, at least in her coverage. Her early stories are still on microfilm at Syracuse University where she left the bulk of her papers, and they're really, really a blast to read. There are dozens and dozens and dozens of her early stringer stories wandering around Europe by herself. She had a gift for knowing everyone. She had a gift for welcoming people. She had a gift for discerning their strong point. And it wasn't long in the European culture that she was deeply embedded and was accepted basically as one of them. She spoke fluent German quickly. She learned it and she always spoke it. Germany was where her heart lay in many ways. It was Germany and Austria. The German world was hers.

Peter Kurth (09:03):

And so when she saw Hitler on the rise, she at first was like everyone else. It was just another guy on the rise in a very bewildering political scene. If anyone remembers her at all, I just saw this yesterday in some publication online, I can't remember... Some radical sort of thing. It was complaining that Dorothy Thompson had not turned against Hitler until after he kicked her out of Germany in 1934, which is simply mistaken. That is why he kicked her out Germany in 1934, is that she was so militantly against him already. She wrote amazing profiles of the German world in the early '30s for the *Saturday Evening Post*, believe it or not. I can't say for sure, I don't know when it changed into a kind of homey, cozy magazine, the way it was when I was growing up. But in the '20s and '30s, it was serious magazine and she wrote really, really incisive long articles about what was going on in Germany in the early '30s.

Peter Kurth (10:12):

Her heart was broken by a handsome Hungarian. She married him even though she knew he would be unfaithful, and he was. And it wrenched her terribly. It was... If you've seen those letters, they are also at Syracuse, her letters to him and to a few other people during that time were heart wrenching. She was obviously traumatized and devastated by this experience because she had not... It was at that point her only relationship with a man that is on record that we could say she is actually involved with. She had lesbian experiences early. She had been in the women's suffrage campaign in New York State all the way through it, championing obviously for the vote. And she had made intense passionate friendships with women in those days, as was not uncommon, I think, in those circles in those days. And her sexual orientation, as we might say, becomes a little complicated because she did go on to have at least one other serious lesbian affair while she was married to Sinclair Lewis, but she didn't think of herself that way, and she didn't pursue it in any direction that we know of after that.

Peter Kurth (11:34):

She did not become a friend of [inaudible], let's say. She did not become that. In that sense, she followed her, I guess we can say her heart or at least her whim. She had a lot of affairs with men and was married three times. But before she married Sinclair Lewis, she had had her heart broken. He swept her off her feet in a manner of speaking, but I believe she was actually looking for someone to replace this. They were exactly different. They could not have been more different, Sinclair Lewis and her Hungarian, Bruno. He was really something, I'll tell you. And Sinclair Lewis was not. Sinclair Lewis was instantly not

just unappealing, but kind of a little bit horrifying in person because he had this condition on his face that made it bright, scarlet red. It's talked about a lot. He called them his hickeys.

Peter Kurth (12:27):

They were his tragic appearance all of his life. And also he was skinny and spindly, and someone described him as a man getting up in sections when he rose from his chair, that he was exactly bent in certain ways. And when he stood up, he was tall and thin. And she said, "his face like a flamethrower." And who knows why she went for him, but she accepted his marriage proposal almost instantly and dedicated herself to his genius, as she saw it. And she wasn't wrong to see it in him, a kind of genius. But she briefly turned herself over to that, to marriage and motherhood. They had one child, Michael Lewis, but it didn't help. It didn't hold her, I should say, because she was already back on the trail in 1930 when Lewis won his Nobel Prize. They had married in 1927, and by 1930 she was fully back at work. And that's when she produced these really, really remarkable articles about the situation in Germany.

Peter Kurth (13:35):

She met Hitler in 1931. People always cite this, I think, because she's a woman, they always cite this, that she met Hitler and said, "He's never going to lead Germany." She was writing an article. "Is Hitler", for *Cosmopolitan*, which was also in those days, a very different magazine. I assure your readers, very different. And she found him so unimpressive, so wobbly, so weird that she thought he could not become chancellor of Germany. And then she watched him become that. And I want to say here since I can on her behalf, she was not alone in that. None of them thought Hitler was going to get anywhere. None of them did. She had only made the mistake of saying it out loud: "He's never going to be chancellor." So that became a big thing. And then when she saw that he was gaining ground and could very well become chancellor, she declared the opposite.

Peter Kurth (14:38):

She changed her mind. She admitted that she had made a mistake. This is the big thing about Dorothy Thompson; she was never afraid to admit that she had made a mistake on this road that she was following in journalism. If she saw something that she thought was one way, and then she said later it was some other way, she would almost always acknowledge that this was a change in her thinking. She declared that a person who is seriously thinking and standing in principles is going to look different all around to all kinds of different people; that as things go around, she will be seen to be speaking mostly alone. And she was aware of that. This was her... I believe the way she actually comported herself. She decided to behave herself on principles, which is admirable, of course, but difficult in real life to accomplish.

Peter Kurth (15:33):

And just so I don't forget, she was the first correspondent to be expelled from Nazi Germany, the first foreign correspondent, and it made world headlines because she was Mrs. Sinclair Lewis. If it had only been Dorothy Thompson, it surely would have made headlines because all of her colleagues would've written about it because they admired and cared for her so much, all of her American colleagues. But it was because she was Mrs. Sinclair Lewis it became huge news. And that, in its way, as is not unusual socially in the past, that is what made her huge: Hitler and Sinclair Lewis. So that, within a year or about a couple of years anyway, she was offered a contract with Helen Ogden Reid, who was the publisher of the *New York Post* by that time, which was also a very different paper. And it was a Republican-leaning paper; right-leaning but not lunatic. Very, very mainstream garden club Republican ladies.

Peter Kurth (16:42):

And she was offered a column that went syndicated, twice weekly column three times. Thrice weekly. Imagine the work involved in that. I wrote a column monthly and I thought it would kill me after [laughs].

So she became syndicated and she became a national figure. And her cause was among a deep, deep suspicion of FDR and the New Deal on grounds of its socialist pungency. Her other cause was the defeat of Adolf Hitler. And she spent the next five years urging everyone, whipping it up for America in a time of great opposition to involvement in any foreign issue. This was the time of the America Firsters, Father Coughlin symbols of the people we now have still. This is obviously an American thing. It's not just American. You can look at Germany now and you can see that parts of Eastern Germany are reminiscent of the worst of Florida.

Peter Kurth (17:47):

They are. And that's happening all over Europe now, an anti-immigrant stand. So this is going to happen. And, of course, my theory is the same as what hers was, which is this is the problem with people; that we can look at it in terms of nationalities or countries or ideologies, but in the end, you look at history and you see the problem is there's a lot of people in it and they don't behave well, many of them. So I think she understood that. She was the daughter of a Methodist minister around upstate New York, and she instilled what she would've identified as a Christian value of tolerance and insight into the person over the group in terms of... I'm talking about this because when the war ended and Hitler was defeated, there was just, of course, the most enormous rage against Germany. And she was pleading for our involvement in rebuilding Germany rather than punishing Germany.

Peter Kurth (18:53):

But also she didn't think the Holocaust and the atrocities of the war were not a strictly German characteristic. They were a human characteristic made possible. That's when her decline began, as she put it herself. Began decline in 1949 when she was arguing first in favor of a just peace with Germany, a cooperative spirit with Germany. But also she was beginning to see the problem that the creation of Israel was going to pose in the Middle East. And she went a great deal into that, to her... Well, I don't know what to call it. It was to her honor, I think, but it was damaging to her career. She was perceived as... She's still called antisemitic when she was no such thing. Anyone who reads Dorothy Thompson's words can see that it's not what the issue is. That's not the issue she was on.

Peter Kurth (19:53):

It was not antisemitism. In fact, her first... One of her big first published pieces was interviewing Chaim Weizmann, I think. Yes. Well, it certainly was on the boat. She was traveling to Europe, and I think she met Weizmann a little later in London, but she was traveling on a boat with Orthodox Jews on their way to a conference, a Zionist conference in London. This is 1920. And she was full of praise, nothing but praise, for these valorous people and their principles and specifically their pledge for Israel to be a cooperative state rather than a lone... It was to blend. It was not to determine the nature of the state in Palestine. She called it when Israel was created. She said, "This is a bad idea. You're trying to assuage your conscience for what happened in Europe. That's why there was so much support so quickly for a Jewish state."

Peter Kurth (20:52):

And I should get clear that I have... Well, we don't have to talk about me and the Jewish state, but I have no affiliations one way or the other on this issue. None. My father was converted to Islam in his later life. He was living and married in Morocco, and so he converted and he ended up before he died being a quite faithful and devout Muslim. I don't know much about that except that I know it's the case. But I grew up in the belief that Israel was a good thing. I have always regarded Israel as a noble cause in my heart somewhere. I wonder where to put that now. I'm not sure because it conflicts with an awful lot in my head. And I think the same happened with Dorothy Thompson. I think she found that this one—this particular issue—was too large for her to absorb wholly.

Peter Kurth (21:48):

And so she, in my view, did become pro Arab, pro-Palestinian, and in a sense, anti-Israel; not antisemitism, but anti-Israel. And it cost her dearly in her public reputation. I am told that recently this came up at the Overseas Press Club in Washington where they were going to dedicate a room to a woman journalist, which apparently they had never done. This is a club in Washington. It's not affiliated with the government or anything. And the question... It rose between Dorothy Thompson and another woman journalist of her time, Flora Lewis, who wrote a column for the *New York Times* for many years. And here's two things: nothing against Flora Lewis, but she's not half as exciting as Dorothy Thompson and she's not going to be an example to people or to women, young women, in journalism. She's not going to be an example the way Dorothy Thompson is an example of courage and dedication, and as I say, principle.

Andrea Chalupa (23:02):

Dorothy Thompson was instrumental in helping the Jewish refugees of World War II.

Peter Kurth (23:09):

She certainly was.

Andrea Chalupa (23:10):

There's that extraordinary series by PBS, *The US and the Holocaust*, a three-part series that I recommend everyone watch.

Peter Kurth (23:17):

Oh, yes, it's wonderful.

Andrea Chalupa (23:18):

And they talk about how in the 1930s, American sentiment, they blamed the Jews for what was being done to them in Germany. And there's all these stories of Jewish ships of refugees being turned away and having to be sent back to their deaths. And Dorothy, with her column, the pen being mightier than the sword, where she was really waging war against fascism through her column, she was grabbing Americans by the collar and saying, "We have to care about what's being done to the Jews. That's our struggle."

Peter Kurth (23:46):

She certainly was. And very early.

Andrea Chalupa (23:48):

Very early. And she would have columns straight up saying, headlines saying something like, "This is why we have to care about what's being done to the Jews." And she was instrumental specifically with refugee rights. From what I understand, she turned her beautiful farm in Vermont... I want to just present some color for our listeners. On her birthday in Berlin, when her divorce from that hot Hungarian guy was being finalized, Sinclair Lewis shows up to her intimate birthday party, immediately falls in love with her, immediately proposes to her and promises that night that he will build her a farm in Vermont, even takes out a piece of paper and draws what it's going to look like. And that's what they

ended up building. And they build together their farm in Vermont, and she goes ahead and she turns that farm into a refugee camp.

Peter Kurth (24:39):

Yes, she does.

Andrea Chalupa (24:40):

And it's pretty incredible because he wants to divorce her because of Hitler, because she's become so obsessed with Hitler. And one of the things he would always—

Peter Kurth (24:47):

That's right, that's what he used to say.

Andrea Chalupa (24:49):

Yeah, he'd always say that in his divorce to Dorothy Thompson, he would list Hitler as the reason.

Peter Kurth (24:55):

Yeah, he would name Hitler as the correspondent. He would come into the house and he would ask suspiciously, "Is she talking about *it*?" And "*it*" became Dorothy's world in his mind. They were actually, in the end, not suited at all for each other. And he was, of course, a hopeless alcoholic. I say that kindly. I know he tried in his many ways. He went to sanitariums, as they used to call them. We would call them treatment places now. He just couldn't do it until the last couple of years of his life. And this was, of course, more destructive than anything Dorothy might've brought home with her from work.

Andrea Chalupa (25:35):

I got emotionally exhausted just researching him, reading about him.

Peter Kurth:

Oh yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

He must've been a piece of work.

Peter Kurth (25:41):

Oh, I know. Well, again, he is a kind of genius. She wasn't wrong about that. A lot of writers look at him as a hack now, basically.

Andrea Chalupa:

Really?

Peter Kurth:

Yeah. Well, I don't know. You know how writers are, they get into—

Andrea Chalupa:

[laughs]

Peter Kurth:

[laughs] They decide they have to have an opinion. Everyone has to think something about Sinclair Lewis. I don't know.

Andrea Chalupa (26:01):

Why do you think she stayed with him for so long? He was a monster, and he would call her “the talking woman.”

Peter Kurth (26:07):

He was a monster. She stayed with him two ways. One is they were mostly apart. They were mostly meeting each other again. It was a reunion. And so there could be always that kind of excitement about it. But she was mostly away. She was mostly preoccupied—and not with their child, I add sorrowfully.

Andrea Chalupa (26:29):

My heart breaks. When I was reading your book, my heart breaks for Michael Lewis, their child. And I read how he died. There was some obituary or some notice saying that he just passed at a young age. And for some reason I got the impression that maybe it was suicide.

Peter Kurth (26:44):

I don't think... I haven't heard anything that would make me think it was, except to the extent that he knew he wasn't taking care of himself at all. I expect he was still pouring booze down his throat and smoking cigarettes until his last breath.

Andrea Chalupa:

Wow.

Peter Kurth:

And I have been very close to his sons, Gregory and John Paul, who are Dorothy's and Red's heirs. They have a half-sister from Michael's second marriage, but I have been close to both of them. And John Paul died last summer, not this past one but the one before, older but in much the same sense. It was a cancer and there was cigarettes. And he was wonderful. I love John Paul. And Gregory, who I don't know quite as well, but they're both... Gregory's still, we're still in touch. But no, she did not put her attention on being a mother. She did it in the way she thought a mother of means would do it. Michael was Michael himself and became Michael. So it wasn't just the way he was raised. And everyone blames her. They never say anything about him, about Red Lewis.

Andrea Chalupa (27:57):

Sinclair Lewis was a horrific father—

Peter Kurth (28:00):

Yeah, oh, no. I know.

Andrea Chalupa (28:00):

—that had nothing to do with his kids. I want to just add some things to Dorothy Thompson. She was a suffragette, as you mentioned. New York State was a critical state to finally securing women the right to vote. And Dorothy Thompson was a general in that war.

Peter Kurth:

She was.

Andrea Chalupa:

She physically went above and beyond to make sure that everything was in place to finally get New York in line. She was a massive general.

Peter Kurth (28:27):

She was very deep in on that. I'm very proud of that.

Andrea Chalupa (28:30):

And then also, she was the inspiration of the Katharine Hepburn/Spencer Tracy movie, *Woman of the Year*, where Spencer and Hepburn met and fell in love. And that character is based on Dorothy Thompson.

Peter Kurth (28:44):

The idea came from the image of Dorothy Thompson, yes.

Andrea Chalupa (28:47):

Yeah, where there's this cosmopolitan woman who speaks all these different languages.

Peter Kurth (28:52):

And she's a specifically European reporter who goes over there and knows everything about Europe as well as doing her column, so that was where there became... Dorothy was wondering if she could sue on that.

Andrea Chalupa (29:04):

Oh, really?

Peter Kurth (29:05):

Well, I don't think she wondered very seriously. She called it an abomination or something, because of the way they... In the end, Katharine Hepburn gives up her career and starts cooking eggs for Spencer Tracy. So on those grounds alone, she might've said, "Well, that's not realistic." But she was friends with all of them. This is the thing. She was friends with the writer. She knew everybody. Everyone knew everybody. And I was very close also with Jane Gunther, John Gunther's wife.

Andrea Chalupa (29:36):

John Gunther was one of the leading journalists of the day. He covered the Soviet Union and Hitler's Germany and he talked about how there's no difference between them.

Peter Kurth (29:47):

That's right. And that was Dorothy's view as well, is that there's really not. Now we have this thing that's happened in America with Trump supporters who are going on the same impulses and urges that the Nazis were, which is the reverence for the leader, the veneration of the leader. All fascists have had that. In Spain and Italy and Germany, they all had the leader who had to be worshiped.

Andrea Chalupa (30:16):

The strongman. He alone can fix it. He's going to crush our enemies and get rid of all our problems.

Peter Kurth (30:22):

The strongman. Oh, yes. In the followers, it had to become an exalted religious feeling. It's not just that they were all ordered to do that.

Andrea Chalupa (30:32):

It's human nature. I want to ask about the famous story of Dorothy Thompson crashing the Nazi rally in Madison Square Garden, and she's in a ballgown laughing at the top of her lungs, surrounded by all these thick-necked Proud Boys.

Peter Kurth (30:47):

Well, she was on her way to a party, which was probably true of any night that you would see her in New York in the '30s. And she was on her way to a party, but she knew this was happening. She knew that the German American Bund was rallying. She had already sent her daggers toward its leader, Fritz Kuhn and Father Coughlin, who was called the Radio Priest, who was way, way, way rightwing, antisemitic. There's one who was, openly, and just right populist, we might call it now. I don't know. But she knew they were gathering there, and I expect she knew that she could make herself noticed. That was her goal was for people to see what she was doing. It wasn't just that she did it; she wanted people to see what was going on there. So she went in and she sat in the press box where she could always sit at Madison Square Garden.

Peter Kurth (31:42):

I don't remember exactly how many tens of thousands of American Nazi sympathizers were there. Something like 30,000 anyway. And she burst out laughing when they tried to make their speeches. She just kept laughing and laughing from the press gallery. And then they heckled her and she heckled them back. And then they had to get her out of there, as it was put, "for her own safety." She was hustled. She was being surrounded by the little fancy boy Nazis, thugs, all these little boxers and "little men", as she would call them. She was being surrounded by them. And so the police who were there to keep order escorted her out and said, "It's best you don't come back." She didn't want to go back.

Andrea Chalupa (32:31):

What were some of the things she said to them when she was heckling?

Peter Kurth (32:34):

“Bunk!” She kept crying, “It's pure bunk! Total bunk! Nonsense! Don't be ridiculous!” That's what she was yelling, and laughing in between. “Oh, get out! Hahaha.” Wonderful, right? I simply love that story.

Andrea Chalupa (32:51):

Tell the story of how she destroyed Charles Lindbergh's public career.

Peter Kurth (32:56):

I think he destroyed his own. Lindbergh, destroyed his own public career, but she certainly helped. I was friendly with Anne Lindbergh, the daughter of Charles Lindbergh, who lived in Vermont for a long time before she died. There was still a lot of... It wasn't bitterness so much as reserve on that when you got near that topic. And I don't think they were trying to protect their father's reputation so much as I think it had been a hurtful thing for them to hear him called a cretin. What did she call him? A somber cretin, [Dorothy Thompson] would've said. She really went after him. But look at it. He was exactly the kind of strongman, if we're going to call it strongman. He was the guy. He was an American hero already. He was a serious isolationist. He thought we should have nothing to do with anything going on over there. And as such, he was building a following. And it would be very, not at all as we can see now, not at all unusual should he really go far with that. I mean, not to generalize, but the American character seems to have something in there that is so independent, it wants to glue itself to some leader [laughs]. Do you know what I mean? Because they're all about freedom and independence, and there they are stuck like little gummies onto the big leader.

Andrea Chalupa (34:27):

Did she get death threats for the work that she was doing in the us, like taking on the Nazis?

Peter Kurth (34:32):

Oh, yes. There are files in her archive at Syracuse that contain some of the hate mail she got.

Andrea Chalupa (34:40):

Wow. And what were some of the things that people said to her?

Peter Kurth (34:43):

She was “a dirty Jew lover.” That's what they were saying before the war. She who later was called anti-Semitic, she was being mostly abused for that and also for wanting to “kill our sons” by sending them to war.

Andrea Chalupa (34:59):

Right. Being a warmonger.

Peter Kurth (35:00):

A warmonger and a Jew lover.

Andrea Chalupa (35:02):

Yeah, a warmonger and a Jew lover. So after Hitler kicks her out of Germany, she regroup. She goes to New York City. Her old friend from the Suffragist movement, Helen Reid, who is the scrappy assistant

who marries the heir of the rich family that owns the *Herald Tribune*. Helen, she runs the *Herald Tribune*. She stacks it full of women.

Peter Kurth:

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

She's very modern and innovative—

Peter Kurth:

Yes.

Andrea Chalupa:

—and as part of her whole strategy to push for greater equality of women in the workplace at powerful newspaper, she hires Dorothy to write a women's column three times a week. But it becomes a column column.

Peter Kurth:

It does.

Andrea Chalupa:

It becomes a column for the whole world, including Churchill and FDR, and she's advising these world leaders. But she ends up having a falling out with Helen Reid because they both joined forces with this idea, Helen Reid's *Herald Tribune* being a Republican, a stately garden party Republican newspaper. They sort of joined forces very early on to have this column because, one of the reasons that Dorothy appealed to Helen is because Dorothy feared FDR, because she saw socialism as a dictatorship moving very quickly in the Soviet Union. And Walter Duranty advising FDR. And so she wanted to curb FDR because FDR was trying to move quickly. He was trying to pack the courts.

Peter Kurth (36:33):

Oh, yeah. She had real fears about FDR.

Andrea Chalupa (36:36):

And Helen Reid loved that. That really united them. And in the final hour, Dorothy switches alliances betrays Helen Reid by using her column that Helen Reid is paying for to endorse FDR.

Peter Kurth (36:53):

That's right. She had been a backer of Wendell Willkie, who was the Republican—

Andrea Chalupa (36:55):

A businessman. Wendell Willkie was a businessman who sued the federal government for overreach.

Peter Kurth:

Yeah.

Andrea Chalupa:

And that appealed to Dorothy because he was standing up for the Constitution.

Peter Kurth (37:05):

That's right. But I'll tell you, in the end, she couldn't vote for Willkie. She felt he didn't have it for the job. I have never heard of anything more than that behind it. I have never heard anything but her own consideration for switching in the middle of the election campaign. But she did. She decided she could not endorse the Republican candidate. And so she endorsed FDR. And this was big news, of course. It ultimately did lose her the column in the *Herald Tribune* and the *Post*. Not instantly, but very soon afterwards. She was syndicated by other people.

Andrea Chalupa (37:41):

And it was the end of her friendship with Helen Reid.

Peter Kurth (37:43):

It was. I'm sure they were very cordial.

Andrea Chalupa (37:45):

Well, not in my script.

Peter Kurth (37:48):

That's how they all behaved with each other. I mean, I knew some of the women, some of her friends—her women friends. This was a long time ago, you know? There was a lot of people still around. They all knew how to behave with each other. There was a purported feud between Dorothy Thompson and Clare Boothe Luce, who was married to Henry Luce, the founder of *Time*, and who was herself a great socialite. She told me that it was mostly press whipping up interest. There was nothing much going on between her and Dorothy, nothing more than they would expect as witty writers [laughs]. You know, little put-downs and things like that. But it was not a serious political feud. And so I assume with Helen... I mean, I know with Helen it was because Dorothy had let down the newspaper and the Party and the side. It wasn't just a personal thing.

Andrea Chalupa (38:44):

I want to end our interview on love; the love story between Dorothy Thompson and Christa Winsloe.

Peter Kurth (38:51):

I love Christa. I have such warm feelings about Christa. Isn't that something? She died tragically in the Second World War, mistaken for a Nazi synthesizer.

Andrea Chalupa (39:03):

Oh, wow. So she was killed by the resistance?

Peter Kurth (39:07):

Yeah. She and her girlfriend of the time. It was more local. It wasn't because she was German, specifically. They were caught on the edge of the wrong side of whatever was going on in the center of France. It was the resistance in Central France. And they just were dragged out, I assume, like many people, and shot.

Andrea Chalupa (39:26):

Wow.

Peter Kurth (39:28):

But there's a lot of her letters in German that I have that are at Syracuse, but I have copies of them because I love them so much. That shows you what an intelligent and warm and uplifting and fun person Christa was.

Andrea Chalupa (39:46):

She was a playwright, a novelist.

Peter Kurth (39:49):

And very famous because of *Women in...* *Mädchen in Uniform*, the German... It was a big movie in 1932, and it was all over the US. *Girls in Uniform*. She was famous for that.

Andrea Chalupa (40:02):

She wrote that.

Peter Kurth (40:03):

She wrote that.

Andrea Chalupa (40:05):

What was her love affair with Dorothy Thompson like and how did her murder impact Dorothy?

Peter Kurth (40:12):

There's one letter from Dorothy on hearing her death, and it's truly broken-hearted but it's not addressed to anyone directly involved with Christa. It sounds broken-hearted to me. Maybe I'm reading into it. She talks about "that fine sensitive soul" with Christa. There was a period from 1932 when they met in Austria to 1935, I would suppose, when Christa having tried to live in the United States, went back to Germany. And they were very, very much together as a known couple at that time. I mean, I'm speaking about their friends. I don't mean publicly known. No one was. Among their friends. One of the first people that I talked to was Lillian Mauer, who had been there on the night Sinclair Lewis proposed to Dorothy Thompson [laughs]. And we were just talking and then she said in the middle of it, "Of course Dorothy was a big lesbian on the side." [laughs]

Peter Kurth (41:15):

And I said, "Oh, yes. Well, can you tell me more about that?" And Lillian would say, "Well, they would stumble in together, Christa and Dorothy." They'd been out, maybe they'd been drinking. They would stumble home together. They'd be laughing and they'd collapse and go into Dorothy's room. It was not a

secret in that sense among people who knew them. In Vermont, Twin Farms is still... If there's anyone who still remembers, it's still called a lesbian haven from the people that Dorothy had there before, during and after the war. She sponsored a lot of her friends, among German refugees. She wasn't just working on behalf of increasing immigration quotas, which she could not succeed in getting the United States to do. But she did import a number of her own friends and so it was known, it was called Lesbians in Them Hills. Really. I'm just saying. Locally. It was one of the first things I ever heard.

Andrea Chalupa (42:16):

So she created a lesbian refugee camp.

Peter Kurth (42:18):

Yeah, basically. And settled her friends all around her. Years ago, I was giving a talk about Dorothy in Florida with and while Blanche Wiesen Cook was talking about Eleanor Roosevelt. And Blanche Cook was the one who really blew the lid off Eleanor Roosevelt's lesbian identity.

Andrea Chalupa (42:36):

That's confirmed? That Eleanor Roosevelt was a lesbian?

Peter Kurth (42:39):

Well, Blanche Cook interprets it that way. I was just about to say, I'm not so sure that these women can be called that. These were women of a certain generation, the first educated class of women in the United States, basically. College educated. And they're off in suffrage. They're wrapped up in suffrage. They're fighting for women's rights. They're involved with each other. And it is perfectly natural, of course, that there would be love between them and among them. And I believe a lot of these women who may have had female lovers—some of them certainly did—were aware that men weren't up to it. Men couldn't meet them where they were. Only other women could meet them where they were. And I believe that has a lot to do with it. But Blanche Cook asked me why had I dropped the issue of Dorothy's lesbianism in the book after the breakup or the end with Christa? And I said, "I didn't drop it. She dropped it." And that's the truth. There's nothing else in her papers that she left behind that would indicate that that was anything she wanted to talk about further.

Andrea Chalupa (43:53):

Well, that was just the love of her life.

Peter Kurth (43:55):

That was. Exactly. So I'm always reluctant when they hold these women up as lesbian banners or when that happens in any identity group. It happens with gay men all the time, too. And I'm gay, so I can say that. Don't worry. But anyway, it happens all the time. "Ah! James Dean was homosexual. Gay." What? James Dean was not Rock Hudson. Okay? Let's put it that way. Let's put it that way. I understand the need or the perceived need for heroes and banners, but I'm natively suspicious of them because they sound like the thing Dorothy was against.

Andrea Chalupa (44:35):

Mmmhmm <affirmative> She was first and foremost a free spirit and non-conformist independent thinker. And that was her gift.

Peter Kurth (44:42):

Yes. And I can say with gladness that she did not betray herself as she went along. She was ultra courageous.

[outro theme, roll credits]

Andrea Chalupa (44:58):

Our discussion continues and you can get access to that by signing up for the Truth-teller level or higher on Patreon at patreon.com/gaslit.

To help the refugees of the Israel— Hamas War, donate to Doctors Without Borders at doctorswithoutborders.org. We also encourage you to donate to the International Rescue Committee, a humanitarian relief organization helping refugees from Ukraine, Syria, Afghanistan, and Gaza. Donate at rescue.org. And if you want to help critically endangered orangutans already under pressure from the palm oil industry, donate to The Orangutan Project at theorangutanproject.org.

Gaslit Nation is produced by Andrea Chalupa. Our production managers Nicholas Torres and our associate producer is Karlyn Daigle. Our episodes are edited by Nicholas Torres and our Patreon-exclusive content is edited by Karlyn Daigle.

If you like what we do, leave us a review on iTunes; it helps us reach more listeners. And check out our Patreon; it keeps us going.

Original music and Gaslit Nation is produced by David Whitehead, Martin Vissenberg, Nik Farr, Demien Ariaga, and Karlyn Daigle.

Our logo design was donated to us by Hamish Smyth of the New York-based firm, Order. Thank you so much, Hamish.

Gaslit Nation would like to thank supporters at the Producer level and higher on Patreon...