

THANK YOU, 72



- Speaker 1: [00:05](#) This is the *Thank You, 72* podcast brought to you by the Wisconsin Alumni Association. This podcast salutes outstanding Badgers from every one of Wisconsin's 72 counties. Here's your host, Tod Pritchard.
- Tod Pritchard: [00:16](#) The sound of a single haunting cello plays in Middleton's Marshall Park on the shores of Lake Mendota. A large crowd gathers on a brilliant sun-splashed afternoon. It's the kind of day one Milwaukee native and UW grad would have loved, the woman everyone is here to remember and celebrate. Her name: Mildred Fish-Harnack. Madison Mayor Satya Rhodes-Conway steps up to the microphone.
- Satya R.: [00:44](#) Thank you. Today we are honoring the life, legacy, and heroic anti-Nazi resistance work of Mildred Fish-Harnack, UW–Madison alumnus, who was the only American civilian executed by the Nazis for her work to save lives, foster peace, and create a more just society.
- Tod Pritchard: [01:10](#) A large, black sculpture glistens in the sun behind the mayor and the other speakers. The art piece being dedicated on this day is simply called *Mildred* by John Durbrow. Who was Mildred Fish-Harnack? Hers is an unlikely love story set at UW–Madison, which becomes a war story set in Nazi Germany. Her saga, tragic, misunderstood, and then lost, is now being rediscovered. Let me tell you the story of Mildred Fish-Harnack.
- Tod Pritchard: [01:47](#) She was born on September 16th, 1902, one of four children. Mildred grew up on the west side of Milwaukee. Although she wasn't German, she could read, write, and speak the language. She attended West Division High School, now known as the Milwaukee High School of the Arts. After the death of her father, the family moved to Chevy Chase, Maryland, where Mildred graduated from high school in 1919, then went on to Georgetown University for two years. She returned to Wisconsin to attend UW–Madison.
- Tod Pritchard: [02:19](#) Mildred studied English. An assistant professor described Mildred as "quite distinguished as a poet." Mildred graduated

from the University of Wisconsin with a bachelor's degree in 1925 and stayed at Wisconsin to teach English and attend graduate school. As legend has it, a Rockefeller scholar from Germany named Arvid Harnack went to the wrong campus building and accidentally stumbled into Mildred's classroom. Struck by her beauty, he summoned the courage to introduce himself and proposed that he help her with her German, if she helped him with his English. While helping each other, they fell in love. Harnack often wrote letters to his mother, who was still in Germany, about Mildred and their adventures in Wisconsin.

- Arvid Harnack: [03:03](#) Spent the day of brilliant sunshine on Lake Mendota. Lots of flowers under the green trees and exotic, wonderful birds. On another Sunday we went to Devil's Lake. It's a crystal-clear lake between two high cliffs. We laid down on the highest point and looked down and across the wide countryside. The cliffs here are an exception. The rest of Wisconsin is fairly level and flat.
- Arvid Harnack: [03:30](#) I've read Faust with Mildred. Mildred seems to have a feel for languages. She learned Greek quickly enough to be able to read Homer very quickly.
- Tod Pritchard: [03:40](#) Arvid and Mildred were married in August, 1926, at her brother's farm near the village of Brooklyn, Wisconsin. At about the same time, Mildred earned her master's degree from UW-Madison. In a few years, they would move back to Germany. It was a fateful decision that radically changed the course of their lives and brought them in direct conflict with Nazi leader Adolf Hitler.
- Speaker 1: [04:04](#) You're listening to the *Thank You, 72* podcast brought to you by the Wisconsin Alumni Association. Now back to the story of Milwaukee County native and UW alum Mildred Fish-Harnack.
- Adolf Hitler: [04:25](#) [German 00:04:16].
- Translator: [04:27](#) One of the greatest problems I found were the relations of Germany with Poland. It seems as though this enmity might become hereditary, but instead of dealing with a democracy, I dealt with one man, and the result was a treaty for 10 years, which will prevent any clash between Germany and Poland.
- Announcer: [04:49](#) The National Broadcasting Company is bringing you this address by Adolf Hitler from Berlin, Germany.
- Translator: [05:01](#) The whole people is now united, and we are absolutely confident of victory.

- Crowd: [05:14](#) Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil! Sieg Heil!
- Translator: [05:15](#) The applause that you hear are the well-known words *Sieg Heil* — Hail Victory.
- Crowd: [05:20](#) (singing)
- Tod Pritchard: [05:28](#) Berlin, 1938. Adolf Hitler had gone from obscurity to leader of Germany. His Nazi regime is in power and his army is moving across Europe. The Germany Mildred Fish-Harnack and her husband, Arvid, moved to 10 years earlier has changed dramatically. They had settled in Eastern Germany, where Mildred worked on her doctorate at the University of Giessen. Arvid worked for the German government. Just a few months later, international stock markets crashed, triggering the start of a global depression, which helped propel Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party into power. By 1931, Mildred was teaching American literature at Berlin University, but she was fired just over a year later. She was told she was not Nazi enough. She then taught English in an evening secondary school. She also worked as a translator for several publishers, and helped Irving Stone translate his biography of Vincent van Gogh, *Lust for Life*, into German.
- Tod Pritchard: [06:25](#) Arvid and Mildred made a heroic but dangerous decision. They felt that they had to fight the Nazis in whatever way they could, so they joined a small resistance group, which included some of their friends that they had met at the University of Wisconsin.
- Tod Pritchard: [06:39](#) The U.S. Embassy closed in December 1941, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor and America's entry into World War II. The group continued to transmit vital information to Moscow via radio supplied by the Soviets. The Gestapo called this resistance group the Red Orchestra. *Red* for communist, *orchestra* for the transmission of secret coded information — like an orchestra playing music. In 1940 and '41, the Red Orchestra passed on vital information about the upcoming German attack on the Soviet Union.
- Tod Pritchard: [07:10](#) Then, tragedy struck. The group was exposed when the Nazis broke a secret Russian communications code, which the Red Orchestra was using. Mildred and Arvid were arrested by the Gestapo in September of 1942, while on vacation at the Baltic sea. After horrific treatment at the hands of the Nazis, Arvid was convicted by a military tribunal of high treason and espionage. Mildred was convicted as an accessory to espionage, sentenced to six years of hard labor. Arvid wrote Mildred a final letter. It

was a tribute to their love and remembrance of the days they spent together in Madison, Wisconsin.

- Arvid Harnack: [07:50](#) Despite all of the hardships, I can gladly look back on my life up to now. The light outweighed the darkness, and our marriage was the primary reason for that. Last night I spent a long time thinking about all of the beautiful moments in our marriage and the longer I thought of them, the more I remembered. It was like looking into a starry sky, and the longer you looked, the more stars appeared, and the more they grew in number, and the more intensely you looked at them.
- Arvid Harnack: [08:26](#) Can you remember Picnic Point, when we got engaged? And before that, our first serious talk at lunch in a restaurant on State Street? That talk became my guiding star and has remained so. You are in my heart. My greatest wish is that you are happy when you think of me. I am when I think of you. Many, many kisses. I hug you tight. Your A.
- Tod Pritchard: [08:59](#) Arvid was executed three days before Christmas 1942, still believing Mildred would serve her prison time, perhaps even return to the Madison they loved. But Adolf Hitler had other plans. The Führer ordered the Nazi courts to retry Mildred. She was found guilty, this time of treason. On February 16th, 1943, she became the only female American civilian to be executed on the direct order of Adolf Hitler. Her last words: "I also loved Germany so much." She was only 40 years old.
- Tod Pritchard: [09:38](#) Mildred and Arvid's heroic resistance work was lost in the fog of the Cold War. Because the Red Orchestra fed so much of its information through the Soviet Union, the CIA investigated the group as communist spies. Shortly after the sculpture dedication in Middleton, I spoke about this lost and found history with Heinz Klug, professor of law at UW–Madison.
- Heinz Klug: [10:00](#) Because of the Cold War, his initial response was that she was finally recognized, think as late as 1976 in East Germany where a school was named for her and because the West treated this like this was all a Soviet spy ring. But now, finally, the new histories have been written and it's been shown that these were people who were first of all, an independent group who sought to help the allies in whichever way they could.
- Heinz Klug: [10:29](#) And after the war broke out, the American Embassy was still open in Berlin before the U.S. declared war, and they had equal connection with both the U.S. Embassy and what was then the Soviet Embassy. And then the U.S. Embassy closed as war was declared after Pearl Harbor, and they proceeded to continue to

the connection. The only connection then with the Allies was through the Soviets. And that's why they were provided that equipment from the Soviets. Now, the Soviets did build a network of many communists across Europe that became the Abwehr, the German counterintelligence, called the Red Orchestra. But then after the war, because they were associated, everybody treated this like they were all communists, and therefore — given the Cold War — not people we would associate with — which is outrageous anyway — but the fact is, is that whether they were communists or not, now becomes irrelevant. These were people who were engaged in resistance against fascism, period.

- Tod Pritchard: [11:29](#) In 1986, Wisconsin established Mildred's birthday, September 16th, as Mildred Fish-Harnack Day. UW-Madison also created the Mildred Fish-Harnack Human Rights and Democracy Lecture, held each academic year. Again, Professor Klug.
- Heinz Klug: [11:45](#) For me, the most important thing to remember is that she, as a really ordinary person — she wasn't a politico who was committed to some future, except that she was committed to dignity — and that she stood by that and was willing to take the risks that eventually led to her death, based on her resistance to the regime that they were facing.
- Tod Pritchard: [12:11](#) She was just like many of us, right?
- Heinz Klug: [12:14](#) She was. She was just like many of us. She was a Wisconsinite, through and through, who found herself in situations where, to her credit, she was willing to stand up.
- Tod Pritchard: [12:25](#) We now welcome to the podcast, New York Times best-selling author and Madison resident Jennifer Chiaverini. Jennifer, thank you so much for being here on the podcast.
- Jennifer C.: [12:34](#) Thank you.
- Tod Pritchard: [12:35](#) She has a new book called *Resistance Women*. It's based, in part, on the life of Mildred Fish-Harnack. And so first off, so many people have described Mildred's life as that of an ordinary person determined to resist the rise of evil, and you really captured that well in your book. I mean, it's a fascinating book. It's a great read. How did you first discover Mildred's story?
- Jennifer C.: [13:01](#) Well, I first heard about her because, as you probably know, every year we celebrate Mildred's birthday as Mildred Harnack Day here in Wisconsin. And it's noted in the Wisconsin public schools, and I have two children who are in the Wisconsin

schools, so I heard about it in some way through them, something they had heard at school. And then that idea for learning more about her and writing about her stayed in my mind from that point forward. And then it was reinforced later when I saw a social media post from the Wisconsin Humanities Council. And this not only announced that this is Mildred Harnack Day in the Wisconsin public schools, but it also had this picture of Mildred. And she was just someone who just looked like someone you'd want for a friend. She had a lovely gentle smile and just a kind look on her face, and she seemed like someone you would want to get together with and talk about books and talk about what's going on in the in the Madison scene.

Jennifer C.: [14:09](#) And then the caption of the photo noted that she was the only American woman who was executed on direct orders of Adolf Hitler. And then when I saw the juxtaposition of that harrowing caption with this lovely woman, smiling and looking like such a kind, gentle person, that just struck me as so astonishing that I wanted to know how in the world did this young woman from Wisconsin, this aspiring writer, an English major and teacher, how did she end up in Berlin during these crucial, dangerous years, and how did she end up on Hitler's enemies list? So that was really what inspired me to learn more about her and to see if I could find answers to those questions that provoked my curiosity.

Tod Pritchard: [15:01](#) You did an amazing job of researching Mildred's life. You can really tell in the book that you took a lot of care in finding the facts of her life and what she went through. Tell me, what were some of the things that really caught your attention, that you thought were the most startling facts about her life?

Jennifer C.: [15:22](#) Well, I think that the fact that she came so far, she started out with a very — she struggled, her family struggled when she was young and growing up, but she was committed to her education, and that is something. The drive to learn, and to write, and to be a creative person never left her. So I found that very intriguing and interesting. But I think something else that struck me throughout my research process and inspired me throughout the writing process was that Mildred, and her friends, and her husband, and the others that she worked with in this resistance circle, they were not trained spies. They were not professional espionage agents who were trained by a military outfit and snuck into Germany and did their jobs. They were ordinary people from all walks of life who, when millions of others were willing to go along or look the other way when there were atrocities and oppression ever increasing in

Germany, and in Berlin in particular, she just could not look away.

- Jennifer C.: [16:30](#) She and her friends were not trained in this field. They were not experienced spies, but they used the skills that they had and the life experience to resist, to fight back against the rise of fascism, and to protect those who were unable to protect themselves. And in Mildred's case, she used her teaching skills, her writing skills. One of the important things that she did was to teach young people in Berlin, her students, about propaganda and how to recognize it, and how to resist it. And so just little by little, using her teaching skills, using her interpersonal skills. This was one very important way that she fought back, and she tried to bring other people around to the idea of that they could fight back, and they could stand up against the ever-increasing atrocities.
- Tod Pritchard: [17:29](#) As I was reading your book, I, a little voice was going off inside of my head. It kept saying, "Get out of there." And, of course, I'm sitting reading it in hindsight, as well as we all are, and we all know what's going to happen, but at the moment they didn't know what was going to happen, or how things would unfold. Was there a point that they could have escaped but they felt like they didn't want to, or they needed to stay, or — I mean, why didn't they leave?
- Jennifer C.: [18:04](#) Right. And you're absolutely right. We have the benefit of hindsight, and we knew how it was going to end for them. And I think in part, when things just keep getting steadily worse, you kind of absorb it. You learn to accept it and — well, not accept it. That's definitely not the right word. But you deal with that. And then the next worst atrocity that happens, it's a little bit easier for you to accept that, and you get used to terrible things happening, and you become accustomed to it. So, where it was going to end, they didn't know. On the other hand, they were very well aware that they were risking their lives and they were in danger.
- Jennifer C.: [18:48](#) For Arvid's part, he wanted Mildred to go back to the U.S., and she could have. She had a U.S. passport. He had even purchased her a ticket on a ship with no particular date. She could just book her passage and go. And he wanted her to go back to the United States where he thought she would be much safer, but Mildred would not leave her husband. As long as he was going to stay there, she wanted to stay with him. She wanted to be with the man she loved. She wanted to fight to try to bring the Nazis down from within, and restore the country to what it had

been, the country that they loved before all these terrible things began happening.

Jennifer C.: [19:34](#) So it was both duty and love that kept Mildred in Germany, even when she very easily could have left. It would have been more difficult for her husband to leave because he had a very high-ranking position within the Ministry of Economics, and it would have certainly caught the attention of the Gestapo and others if he suddenly wanted to go to America other than on a particular mission for his ministry. He sometimes did make trips to the United States and elsewhere on business for the Nazi government. But if he just suddenly wanted to take off, it would have been questions. And then they had a lot of family and friends in Germany still.

Jennifer C.: [20:20](#) So even if they had escaped the United States, they knew that the loved ones that they left behind could be punished for what they did. So of course, that factored into it too. So it was a combination of wanting to protect their loved ones, wanting to make sure they remained together, and then wanting to continue the work of the resistance that kept them in Germany when, to preserve their own lives, they should have left, if they could have left. But they were willing to make that sacrifice. They knew what they were risking. They had seen other people arrested. They knew of other people who had been killed, so they were well aware of what the cost might be, and they were courageous enough to take that risk.

Tod Pritchard: [21:06](#) In your book, you kind of merge fact with fiction and I would like you to talk a little bit about the technique that you used in writing your book, and why you told her story in that way.

Jennifer C.: [21:20](#) That's a very interesting question because I do love to do historical research, and when you write historical fiction, really you are allowed to take as many liberties with the historical record as you want. It's one of the rules of fiction writing. You are allowed, and in fact you're encouraged to make things up. However, I know that from speaking with my readers, they really do appreciate it when I strive for historical accuracy, so I do try to stick to the historical record as much as I can.

Jennifer C.: [21:51](#) That said, there are a lot of omissions from the historical record. You don't know what people's innermost thoughts and feelings were. You don't know what happened in private conversations. Some things are deliberately never entered into the official historical record. And then sometimes the historical record is wrong. Sometimes there are errors.

- Jennifer C.: [22:13](#) One of my favorite sources to use are historic newspapers so that I can get an idea not only of what was going on at the time, but what my characters, especially those historical figures would have been learning in real time. Because as you've mentioned, we have the benefit of hindsight, and they did not. So sometimes historical newspapers, sometimes those articles were written before all the facts were in, and they might include errors that my characters would not have known were false. But, of course, I know all these many years later.
- Jennifer C.: [22:47](#) So why write fiction instead of just a straight history? Well, to me, I feel like fiction allows us into the mind of the characters that, whether they are fictional characters or whether they are historical figures used fictionally in a way that straight history or biography does not. It really allows the reader to see the time, and the place, and the events through that character's eyes. And I think that that makes the experience more immediate and more intimate. And I think it really allows the reader to build a stronger empathy for that character. And I like to think that that exercise in reading fiction and empathizing with fictional characters translates over into real life.
- Jennifer C.: [23:43](#) So the more we learn, the more we read fiction, the more we learn to see events from someone's perspective other than our own. I like to think that that hones our skills for doing that in real life, to really try to understand where other people in our own real lives are coming from and why their views might be different from ours, and how we can try to engage with them despite our differences.
- Tod Pritchard: [24:06](#) I've really enjoyed how you, and I'm sure alumni enjoyed how you've woven in Lake Mendota and their walks on State Street, and their memories as a reoccurring theme of some of their thoughts. And it's clear they both loved Madison, they both loved being at the University of Wisconsin. And so, I really enjoy that you wove that in there. Have you gotten any reaction from alumni on that?
- Jennifer C.: [24:36](#) I've heard from a few via email, but I'll let you in on a secret. I had three chapters in the beginning of the book that were all set here in Madison, and were set at the university, and the book was running a little bit long, so I was strongly encouraged to cut those chapters. So, I started the book in Madison and at the UW and showed all those scenes with them. But the novel in its finished form starts when Mildred is reuniting with Arvid in Germany.

- Jennifer C.: [25:09](#) So I don't know, maybe it was self-indulgent to want to write about all these places that I love, that they also loved. But I did weave it in through the novel later on because I think it's an important part of their story as a couple, as a married couple, as two people who cared about each other deeply, to even in the midst of the struggles that they had when the situation in Berlin was deteriorating and it was becoming more and more dangerous that they had these wonderful happy memories from Madison and the UW to draw upon and to reminisce about and to give them hope in dark times.
- Jennifer C.: [25:51](#) In one of his very last letters, Arvid even reminisces about a lot of those things, in a letter that he was able to write to Mildred and was able to get to her while they were both in prison. So, it is something that they carried with them. And I also think it's very significant that several other friends that they made while they were here on campus, they later reunited in Germany and these other people became members of their resistance network.
- Jennifer C.: [26:22](#) For example, Greta Lorke Kuckhoff. She also, just like Arvid, she attended the UW as an exchange student from Germany, or a foreign student from Germany, and it was here that she met Mildred and Arvid and became friends with them, and when she was back in Germany, she became drawn back into their network. And there were a few others as well, who play smaller roles in my novel, that Mildred and her husband originally befriended here, and then renewed their ties once they were all back in Germany together. And the friendships they forged here, and the trust they built here extended into their resistance work in the years to come.
- Tod Pritchard: [27:06](#) That's amazing, isn't it? I mean, to think of that connectivity continued from Madison all the way over to Nazi Germany.
- Jennifer C.: [27:13](#) Yeah. All those Badgers over there in Berlin fighting the Nazis. I just think it's — I think that's remarkable.
- Tod Pritchard: [27:20](#) One final question for you. What is Mildred's legacy? What is the takeaway that we should all remember from her life and her loss?
- Jennifer C.: [27:29](#) I think that we need to honor and remember and respect her sacrifice. She knew what the dangers were. She did not turn away. And I think that that's something that can inspire us when we see injustice, and of course there's injustice in the world all around us every day. I think it would be great if we could all take inspiration from her. We don't all have to be superheroes

or people in positions that are focused on solving these kind of problems.

Jennifer C.: [28:04](#)

But there are all things that we can do with our own experience, with our own education and skills to make the lives of other people better. And sometimes we might think, “Well, I can only do so little.” Well, that is a contribution. You could probably do more than you give yourself credit for. But I think that if we can take inspiration from her, use the skills we have, the education we have to make the lives of other people better. If people are being treated unjustly, if they are being oppressed, we can speak out. We can make our concerns known and like Mildred and her friends, we can refuse to turn away even when millions of other people are doing so.

Speaker 1: [28:50](#)

So you can learn more about the book *Resistance Women* by visiting jenniferchiaverini.com. Special thanks to actor and UW grad Hans Obma for his reading of Arvid Harnack’s letters to his mother and to Mildred. You’ve been listening to the *Thank You, 72* podcast, stories of amazing Badgers from the Wisconsin Alumni Association. For more podcasts, visit thankyou72.org. That’s thankyou72.org.