

## HISTORY This Week EP 418: Axis Sally's Nazi Radio EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

*NOTE: This transcript may contain errors.*

**Sally Helm:** *Hello listeners! Today we're bringing you the episode that won our end of year producer pitch competition! If you want to hear the other entries, go back and listen to that episode, called "End of Year Pitch-a-thon." Thanks to everyone who voted – we received hundreds of emails from listeners, and I sat down with one of them, who voted for the winning pitch, to hear why.*

**Sydney Minix:** So, I'm Sydney Minix and I'm a junior at Purdue and I'm studying history.

**Sally Helm:** Cool. What are sort of like greatest hits areas of history for you?

**Sydney Minix:** Yeah. So, I'm currently in my historical research course, and been learning a lot about, like Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa, which I know you just did a podcast episode about that.

**Sally Helm:** Wow. Did it line up? Were there differences?

**Sydney Minix:** Yeah, I know that it lined up. I was like, yep. This is exactly what Sally said.

**Sally Helm:** Wow. I'm really glad to hear it. That's that. That's good. And I'm wondering why did you vote for the Access Sally pitch?

**Sydney Minix:** What really caught me was when Emma said the female Benedict Arnold.

**Sally Helm:** Hm.

**Sydney Minix:** I guess that I just hope to learn her side of it and her reasoning and her meaning behind why she did what she did. I mean, like, why would you wanna do that?

**Sally Helm:** Well, I really hope that we meet your expectations. Sydney, we have done our best. I hope that you come away sort of knowing a little bit more about Access Sally and who she really was.

**Sydney Minix:** Yeah, I'm sure it'll be amazing. I can't wait.

**Sally Helm:** *Alright, here is the show!*

**Sally Helm:** HISTORY This Week. March 10, 1949. I'm Sally Helm.

The jury did not reach a verdict last night. And Mildred Gillars is hoping that's a good thing for her.

She arrives at the courthouse in Washington DC on a bus, packed together with other prisoners. She's the last to step off. Throughout the trial, she's gone to some lengths to maintain her glamorous look. Her white hair is done up kind of in the style of movie star Rita Hayworth. A New Yorker magazine writer covering the trial said that to his eye, her whole outfit—black heels, blue scarf, fake tan—“suggests that she is torn by an inner conflict.”

But on this windy March morning, Gillars seems in good spirits. She greets her half-sister, who's been by her side throughout the trial. “Good morning, dear!” she says. She sounds hopeful. Maybe the jury has managed to find some sympathy in their hearts for her. This former actress who is now on trial for treason.

To a lot of people watching this trial, Mildred Gillars is better known as Axis Sally. The name comes from what she decided to do while living in Berlin during World War II. She got a job with Reichsradio, an influential arm of the Nazi government. And she broadcast propaganda. Anti-Semitic, anti-American messages aimed at soldiers overseas. An attempt to weaken their morale, and help the Germans win the ever-important information war. But throughout this trial, Gillars has been insisting that she's innocent. She swears she loves her country. That she was forced to do what she did...or die.

Today: the story of Axis Sally. How did a struggling actress from Maine become a potent weapon of the Nazis? And is there a way to understand the choices that she made?

(PREROLL)

**Sally Helm:** That trial in 1949 is not the first time that Mildred Gillars has seen the inside of a courtroom. She'd had a run-in with the law twenty years earlier, in 1928. For a very different—though not totally unrelated—crime.

Richard Lucas is the author of the first complete biography of Gillars. He told us, what happened in 1928 was essentially a publicity stunt gone wrong. Gillars was in her late twenties. Trying to make it as an actress in New York City.

**Richard Lucas:** She had fallen on hard times. She didn't have any work. So, she answered an ad for a film called *Unwelcome Children*.

**Sally Helm:** The filmmakers promise Gillars \$75 to go out into the world and play the role of: "pregnant woman abandoned by her lover." And she really sells it. In mock despair, she goes to the Benjamin Franklin bridge, which connects Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

**Richard Lucas:** And starts throwing her leg over the bridge, and the cops have to come and drag her over. She's crying, she's wailing. She says, I can't go on.

**Sally Helm:** Gillars, of course, was never really going to jump. She's just trying to drum up attention for the movie. But the police, and the public don't know that.

**Richard Lucas:** And for days, the Camden, New Jersey newspapers, Philadelphia papers, all the way up to New York had taken hold of the story in tabloid fashion.

**Sally Helm:** There are headlines like, “Deserted... Bride Leaves Suicide Note... Letter Discloses Tragedy of Love.” But parts of the story aren’t adding up.

**Richard Lucas:** The press found eventually that she was an actress, and the whole thing was a hoax.

**Sally Helm:** She’s sentenced to three months in the county jail in New Jersey. But a judge ends up taking pity on her. He suspends her sentence, blaming the film producers instead.

**Richard Lucas:** So, at the end of the day, she barely had enough money for car fare back to New York. But this is the kind of thing she would get into because she was desperate to be famous, desperate to be noticed.

**Sally Helm:** That seems to have been Gillars’s core motivation in life. Get famous and get noticed. Though, history Professor Michael Flamm reminds us: it is hard to totally understand what was driving Mildred Gillars. Probably impossible.

**Michael Flamm:** I often tell students that Mildred's story illustrates the limits of history. You know, we can know what happened, but we can't really know why it happened or why she made the choices that she did.

**Sally Helm:** Flamm told us, her childhood might provide some clues.

**Michael Flamm:** I don't think it's too much of an exaggeration to describe Mildred as a troubled soul. She comes from a dysfunctional family. She was, according to most accounts, a sort of shy and withdrawn child.

**Sally Helm:** She and her mother flee her abusive, alcoholic father when she’s just six years old. Her stepfather was also an addict, and he was controlling, maybe even abusive. Gillars escapes by going to college, where she cultivates a certain image. She wants to come off as impressive. Worldly.

A classmate later recalled, "she was always posing or acting. Always using words of which she had only the vaguest idea of the meaning, but if they were unusual or highbrow, they were for her."

And Gillars loves being on stage.

**Michael Flamm:** And in fact, all of the campus reviews of her acting focused on her dramatic tendencies, which suggests at least to me, that she had a pension for overacting.

**Sally Helm:** Gillars attended Ohio Wesleyan—the university where Michael Flamm now teaches. He has used the school’s archives to research the woman he calls its "most notorious alum."

**Michael Flamm:** She had a remarkable fashion sense. She was apparently the first female undergraduate to wear knickers and galoshes as a combination, a sort of a bold fashioned statement.

**Sally Helm:** I think of knickers as being like underwear. Like what is the look?

**Michael Flamm:** I thought knickers were more like golf pants, but now you're really out of my range of expertise here.

**Sally Helm:** I looked it up, and yeah, they're like, bloomers. Baggy pants that gather at the knee or the calf. So, that with waterproof rubber galoshes. Definitely a look.

**Michael Flamm:** Mildred was very popular with the young men, but not particularly popular with her female counterparts. Uh, she attracted the attention of the campus bohemian, who was supposedly the first male undergraduate to grow a beard. And the two of them apparently cut class and hung out, you know, at the soda fountain where they recited poetry and stared into each other's eyes.

**Sally Helm:** Befitting the campus bohemian.

**Michael Flamm:** Exactly.

**Sally Helm:** In college, things go well for Gillars. She's a member of the theatrical honors society. She's studying German. And by her senior year, she and the campus bohemian are engaged to be married. And then...she makes a dramatic decision.

**Michael Flamm:** She decides to blow up her life and leave Ohio Wesleyan without her degree, without her fiancé, in the spring of 1922. And this is only the first moment where we really don't know why.

**Sally Helm:** Some suspect she's in a romantic relationship with her theater professor—the two of them both move to Cleveland, and Gillars tries to make it as an actress. She has modest success. But it is the eve of the Great Depression. Tough time to land a big break.

**Richard Lucas:** When she didn't work, she didn't eat.

**Sally Helm:** Richard Lucas again. By the early 1930s, Gillars seems unmoored.

**Richard Lucas:** She is a failed actress. She's failed in her personal life. She was involved with a British diplomat.

**Sally Helm:** She follows him to Algeria, in North Africa. But they grow apart.

**Richard Lucas:** And there she is in Algeria. She has no place to go, no career and no marriage.

**Sally Helm:** Lucky for Gillars, her mother wants to visit Europe. So, the two of them set off on a trip, all around the continent. And on September 4, 1934, they arrive in Berlin.

The United States, at the time, is still in the throes of the Depression. But the German economy is coming back.

**Richard Lucas:** Mildred became so entranced with the German situation. There was a feeling of positivity and there were jobs.

**Sally Helm:** Germany also has a new leader. Adolf Hitler. Michael Flamm told us that, when Gillars arrives in Berlin, the nightmare side of the Nazi regime is already emerging.

**Michael Flamm:** She can't help but notice that anti-Semitism has increased dramatically. There are signs in shop windows, there are posters on the streets, blaming German Jews for all sorts of things.

**Archival:** *In Germany, the brown shirts of Hitler's unarmed Nazi army command world attention by boycotting Germany's half million Jews, imprisoning thousands and impoverishing tens of thousands. And by reverting to medieval standards, burning books that conflict with Nazi ideals.*

**Sally Helm:** We don't have a record of Gillars' politics before she travels to Europe. We do know that in 1934, Gillars's mother heads back to the United States. And her daughter stays in Berlin.

**Michael Flamm:** She's a young, single American woman. She is fluent in German. She knows the language. There's an opportunity, within a year of arriving in Germany, Mildred has a good job. She's doing translations for UFA, which is the German Hollywood, the German film industry.

**Richard Lucas:** So, she was right on the edge of becoming a success. And then the war broke out.

**Sally Helm:** In September 1939, Germany invades Poland. Suddenly, Europe is at war. A ground war. An air war. And, increasingly, an information war. Particularly in Germany:

**Archival:** *In regimenting German thought, all radio programs emanate from the department of public [], every newspaper prints only what the state wants its people to read, and any letter in the German mails is subject to censorship.*

**Sally Helm:** The Nazis are attempting to dominate public opinion. Trying to spread their genocidal ideology. And radio is a big part of that.

**Michael Flamm:** I mean, the Nazis quickly consolidate and take control of the airwaves. They insist that everyone in Germany have a radio and that it be tuned to official stations.

**Sally Helm:** Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's propaganda minister, is particularly obsessed with radio. He even commissions a new, cheap, mass-produced radio set. He wants one broadcasting in every German home – and beyond. He tells the public: "We want a radio...that reaches across our borders to give the world a picture of our character, our life, and our work."

**Archival:** *First step to conquest in the Nazi scheme is to demoralize the enemy by propaganda...*

**Sally Helm:** The German Broadcasting Service, "Reichsradio," starts targeting listeners abroad. Taking the information war to countries they see as potential threats. In 1940, they decide: *we need to focus on North America*. The United States has not yet entered the war. And Germany doesn't want it to. So, they start a propaganda offensive aimed at American radio listeners. But Richard Lucas says, they soon realize, they're going to have a problem pulling this off. Most of their English-speaking broadcasters have thick German accents.

**Richard Lucas:** They needed someone with an American accent who could have that colloquialism that they needed.

**Sally Helm:** That's when Mildred Gillars gets a call. *Come audition for Reichsradio*.

**Richard Lucas:** Reichsradio at that point was located in a huge, massive, building near the Brandenburg Gate. It was incredibly, dense and, just, all stone.

**Sally Helm:** We don't know what Gillars is thinking when she walks into that imposing building in May of 1940. But whatever she does at the mic that day is enough to impress the station manager.

**Richard Lucas:** Because she was an actress, she sounded like what you would hear in an American film. And they hired her right away.

**Sally Helm:** At this point, her job is basically just to read station IDs and introduce music. Normal DJ stuff.

**Richard Lucas:** She was spinning records. She was playing American jazz, which was outlawed in Germany.

**Sally Helm:** Pretty soon, she starts acting in radio dramas.

**Michael Flamm:** I do want to note that Mildred begins her career with Reichsradio, as simply an entertainer. So, she doesn't begin as a propagandist or a political commentator.

**Sally Helm:** Still, Michael Flamm told us, she *is* an employee of the Nazi government. Which is about to become a big problem.

It's the spring of 1941. Gillars needs to visit the US embassy in Berlin to renew her passport.

**Michael Flamm:** The US government is already skeptical of Reichsradio because it's been making broadcasts that are anti allies. And they're very aware that Reichsradio has been spreading the message of Hitler and the Nazis. And the US embassy wants Mildred to resign her position with Reichsradio and return to the United States.

**Sally Helm:** But...Gillars *loves* her life in Berlin.

**Michael Flamm:** She has at last achieved her dream. She is popular. She is a celebrity. She is earning a good salary. She doesn't see a great future for herself back in the United States.

**Sally Helm:** So...she refuses to quit her job at Reichsradio.

**Michael Flamm:** The US government takes her passport away, but, and I think this is important for her later, legal troubles. The US government never formally or officially revokes her citizenship. And Mildred never renounces her US citizenship either.

**Sally Helm:** Gillars leaves the embassy without a US passport, in a kind of legal gray area. A few months later, that gets more complicated.

**Archival:** *Sunday morning, December 7th, 1941.*

**Sally Helm:** Gillars is in the Reichsradio studio when she hears about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

**Richard Lucas:** It left her in a crisis.

**Sally Helm:** Richard Lucas told us; Gillars can't control herself when she hears the news.

**Richard Lucas:** She had a huge outburst and they told her not to come back to work.

**Sally Helm:** According to Gillars' later testimony, this is the moment she's forced down a path not entirely of her own making. The radio station manager calls her into his office and says, *you need to sign a loyalty oath to the Nazi regime*. And she does.

**Richard Lucas:** She dashed off a note, she said, saying I will be loyal to the Reich.

**Sally Helm:** She leaves the note with the station manager on December 9—two days after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Two days later, Hitler declares war on the US. In some respects, Gillars is now a woman without a country.

**Michael Flamm:** She's sort of caught in this murky twilight zone. She's not a German citizen. She's still a US citizen. Does not have a passport. She's really quite trapped.

**Sally Helm:** But life for Gillars is not so bad. She's gaining recognition in the kind of job she's always wanted. And...she's in love, with her producer. A man named Max Otto Koischwitz.

**Michael Flamm:** Max Otto Koischwitz is a fascinating figure. He's a German scholar and academic who comes to the United States. By the end of the 1930s, however, he's developed a reputation as a rather outspoken, anti-Semite and pro-Nazi figure. And so, he's sort of pressured to leave the United States in 1939.

**Sally Helm:** Back in Berlin, he becomes a producer at Reichs Radio. And in 1942, he's promoted to manage political broadcasts aimed at the United States. Listeners in the US can tune into Reichsradio broadcasts using shortwave radio receivers. And Koischwitz wants Gillars's voice to be the one they hear.

**Michael Flamm:** He professionally takes Mildred under his wing, and he becomes the producer of her shows.

**Archival:** *Hello listeners of America. We hope you've been enjoying this musical cocktail coming to you from Berlin in the German overseas service.*

**Sally Helm:** That's really her! Broadcasting popular music back to the States.

Koischwitz is married with a fourth child on the way. But by Christmas of 1942, he and Gillars have embarked on an affair. And it is around this time that Koischwitz urges Gillars to branch out from playing music...and begin hosting political shows that push the Nazi message overseas.

**Archival:** *This is Berlin calling and I'd just like to say that when Berlin calls, it pays to listen...*

**Michael Flamm:** To what extent is Mildred a free agent? To what extent is she a puppet whose strings are being pulled by Koischwitz the puppet master? We really, really don't know.

**Sally Helm:** But this is the moment when listeners meet the woman, they will call Axis Sally: a radio host whose new assignment is to undermine American morale at every turn.

[AD BREAK]

**Sally Helm:** In 1942, Mildred Gillars begins her career as Axis Sally. A Nazi propagandist. Richard Lucas told us, some of her broadcasts are aimed at homesick American soldiers.

**Richard Lucas:** She did a show called Home Sweet Home, which was basically vignettes about being at home with your wife, with your girlfriend, back at the farm, your mother cooking in the stove.

**Archival:** *Just imagine sitting out on the old back porch in a good old rocking chair listening to the birds at twilight...*

**Richard Lucas:** Basically, designed to induce desire to come home for the servicemen.

**Sally Helm:** Michael Flamm said, she also spins conspiracy theories.

**Michael Flamm:** Most of her commentary centers around the idea that the British and the Jews have tricked the United States into fighting against their true allies, the Germans, on behalf of some either British conspiracy or it's a Jewish communist conspiracy.



**Archival:** *As one American to another, do you love the British? Well of course the answer is no. Do the British love us? Well, I should say not.*

**Michael Flamm:** So, the show sort of sprinkles some music, some sort of personal appeals to these young men not to give up their lives. You know, in some of the broadcasts, she casually uses anti-Semitic slurs. At other points she asks why young American soldiers should give up their blood for the king.

**Archival:** *After all, let the British get out of their own mess there and let God save the king, if he's worthy of it.*

**Sally Helm:** Some of her content is aimed specifically at women on the American home front. She'd taunt them, conjuring images of the men they missed, fighting overseas.

**Archival:** *Good evening women of America. Well, you know as time goes on, I think of you more and more. I can't somehow seem to get you out of my head. You women in America, waiting for the one you love.*

**Richard Lucas:** She would do medical reports of captured servicemen who had been wounded. And she would get very graphic about the nature of their wounds, how they looked, and then she would say, women of America, you don't want your sons coming home crippled.

**Archival:** *Useless for the rest of their lives. For whom? For Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Churchill, and their Jewish cohort.*

**Richard Lucas:** She hated Roosevelt. Part of the propaganda line of Germany was that Roosevelt was indeed a Jew, that he was in league with the international Jewish conspiracy and that this was a war between Germany and worldwide Jewry.

**Archival:** *Sacrificed by Franklin D. Roosevelt, perishing on the fringes of Europe.*

**Sally Helm:** These propaganda broadcasts ... are good for Gillars's career.

**Michael Flamm:** very quickly, Mildred is Reich's Radio's highest paid performer. So, for the first time in her life, she achieves, you know, not just popularity, but also economic security. She can finally support herself and live the lifestyle that she had always dreamed of having.

**Sally Helm:** Gillars is certainly living a glamorous life. She's invited to exclusive cocktail parties, put up in a fancy apartment, granted extra food rations. And she gets other special privileges. She can read American magazines, which are otherwise banned, to get information for her broadcasts. And she's even given access to German intelligence, so that she can taunt the soldiers in real time with real information about what they're facing in battle. As soldiers later told interviewers with the Veterans History Project:

**John A. Cerovich Archival:** *She would tell us where we were going to go, where we were going to bomb. She knew, and where she got her information, I don't know, but she got it.*

**Shields Wilson Archival:** *And then she sort of signed off saying, well, we know where you're coming, and we'll be there to greet you. We'll see you tomorrow. Whoa.*

**John A. Cerovich Archival:** *What was so bad about this was, she was right so much of the time.*

**Sally Helm:** Soldiers come to loathe this "Axis Sally."

**John A. Cerovich Archival:** *They called her the Berlin bitch.*

**Eli Drapkin Archival:** *Some of the stuff was really tough to listen to... She would say, "Lieutenant Tom Jones, do you know that your best friend back home is fooling around with your wife?" And that kind of stuff she would throw at the guys, and it would tear them up.*

**Sally Helm:** Gillars keeps at it until the very end. In 1944, the war is undeniably headed towards an allied victory. On the eve of the D-Day invasion in Normandy, France, Reichsradio airs a radio drama. With Gillars in a leading role.

**Archival:** *We now present a special feature program: Visions of Invasion. Produced by the radio players of the German shortwave station in Berlin.*

**Richard Lucas:** It was written by her lover, Max Otto Koischwitz, and she acted as the mother of a boy who is on a ship going from Britain to the D-Day invasion. And the intent was to convince men that they were going to their deaths. She played a mother back in the United States. She dreams of the boy drowning after a German ship sinks his boat. So, most of it is her being hysterical at the death of her son.

**Archival:** *[screams] What's the matter dear? Bad dreams again?... something happened to Alan [screams]*

**Sally Helm:** Around the time of the radio drama, Gillars and Koischwitz make what will be one of their last propaganda efforts. They start visiting American prisoner of war camps in Germany to record interviews with injured troops.

**Michael Flamm:** What Koischwitz and Gillars were hoping was that they might be able to entice some soldiers to make anti-US statements to criticize the war.

**Sally Helm:** That effort mostly fails. Gillars is pretending to sympathize with the GIs, but a lot of them see right through her. One even passes her a pack of Chesterfield cigarettes...that is filled with horse manure.

**Michael Flamm:** During those visits to the POW camps, Mildred often poses as a Red Cross volunteer—

**Sally Helm:** Hm. So, she lies?

**Michael Flamm:** Yes. And that's gonna be important later.

**Sally Helm:** Very soon after that visit, Gillars suffers a personal tragedy. Koischwitz suddenly dies. She's beside herself. And...anyone in Germany who's paying attention can see that the allies are closing in. In May of 1945, Berlin falls. Russian troops enter Reichsradio...but Gillars manages to escape out the station's back door. She dodges the city's occupying troops for some time. But in 1946, American officials track her down.

**Michael Flamm:** She was hiding under an assumed name. She has very few possessions, although she does have this photograph of Koischwitz, her great love.

**Sally Helm:** Gillars is brought back to the States and locked up in a U.S. Army prison. In 1949, she stands trial for treason.

By the time Gillars appears in the courtroom, public understanding of Nazi atrocities is widespread. Americans have learned about the German concentration camps, and the millions of Jewish people who died in them.

**Michael Flamm:** And so suddenly, what Mildred was saying during World War II, which may not have been that different from what people were hearing from friends or family or neighbors or at the country club, now it's really beyond the pale. You know Mildred will always maintain that she had no idea about the fate of the Jews. She had no, no understanding of the Holocaust but certainly she had to know how difficult life was becoming in Nazi Germany for German Jews.

**Sally Helm:** Right. You're saying she can't be living in Berlin for the years that she is and not see that playing out very publicly.

**Michael Flamm:** Not as a prominent member of Reichsradio and not as someone who is fluent in the German language.

**Sally Helm:** There are no Jewish jurors at Gillars's trial. The judge says he doesn't think they'd be able to be fair...and he dismisses them. Gillars's defense lawyers argue that she hadn't *acted* against her country—she'd just *talked*. But the government says, words have consequences.

**Michael Flamm:** Mildred's broadcasts did at least potentially affect public opinion in the United States, affect home front morale, and possibly even affect the morale of US soldiers in the field.

**Sally Helm:** Gillars' attorney says she had no choice but to obey. If she'd refused to do these broadcasts, the Nazis would have thrown her in prison...or worse. *And anyway*, Gillars insists:

**Michael Flamm:** She's an artist and a performer, not a propagandist.

**Sally Helm:** But the government prosecutor uses Gillars's own words against her. He has a phonograph brought into the courtroom, and 40 sets of headphones. Jurors listen to recordings of Gillars on the radio. Urging American GIs to give up the fight. Slinging anti-Semitic slurs. Denouncing President Roosevelt.

Those recordings are very damaging to Gillars's case. But they're not enough to prove treason.

**Michael Flamm:** You must have two direct eyewitnesses. It's in the Constitution. You can look it up. Court of law.

**Sally Helm:** Wow, eyewitnesses, that's tough when you have a lot of ear witnesses, but you're alone in the studio.

**Michael Flamm:** That's exactly right. You have ear witnesses, but no eyewitnesses.

**Sally Helm:** But some people did see her. Those prisoners of war. Several of them testify about how Gillars posed as a Red Cross volunteer. They even describe that cigarette pack with the horse manure.

And...the prosecution tracks down one person who *was* in the studio with Gillars. A fellow actor in that radio drama where Gillars played a grieving mom.

**Archival:** *[screams]*

**Sally Helm:** The jurors listen to that recording. And hear evidence that the point of this broadcast was to try and thwart the American D-Day invasion.

In the end, that is enough.

**Michael Flamm:** And so here is the irony. She is eventually convicted on her sole charge of treason, for a radio drama in which she performed words that were written for her. A scripted drama.

**Sally Helm:** On that one charge, Gillars is found guilty. On the others—which cover the many hours she spent speaking freely in favor of the Nazis, not reading a script—on those charges, she is acquitted.

Gillars is sentenced to ten to thirty years in a federal prison. Not the worst one.

**Michael Flamm:** Sometimes described as club fed. It, in fact resembles a liberal arts college, although it has barbed wire around it on the outside.

**Sally Helm:** She takes classes. Converts to Catholicism. And after twelve years, she's released on parole. She becomes a teacher in a convent in Ohio.

**Michael Flamm:** The condition of her parole is that she maintain a low profile. She gives a few interviews, but she's very careful to comply with the terms. I will say that in, in her few public statements, she expresses no remorse. No regret for her actions, says that she would do again, precisely what she had done. But she does at, at whatever personal cost, avoid her natural inclination to seek the limelight, and instead she complies with the government's requirements.

**Sally Helm:** Gillars will die alone in 1988.

Biographer Richard Lucas told us, you can't tell the story of Mildred Gillars without at least acknowledging the pressures that she faced. She was alone, she didn't have a lot of money, she fell in love with Max Koischwitz. And she was corrupted by fame. By getting what she'd longed for since childhood: the attention of an audience.

But Lucas also told us that after he'd published that biography, he met a woman on his book tour. Who said she'd spent a lot of time with Gillars in her final years. She told a story about the way that Gillars had revealed herself in an unguarded moment.

**Richard Lucas:** When she had visitors, she would bring out a teacup that she would serve her guests with. And it was important to her because it was from a night that she had met Himmler, the head of the SS. That story completely turned around my perspective of her. I think I would've written the epilogue a little bit differently about culpability and about what she knew and when she knew it.

[CREDITS]:

**Sally Helm:** Thanks for listening to History This Week. For more moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today. If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, [HistoryThisWeek@History.com](mailto:HistoryThisWeek@History.com), or you can leave us a voicemail: 212-351-0410.

Special thanks to our guests: Richard Lucas, author of *Axis Sally: The American Voice of Nazi Germany*, and Michael Flamm, professor of history at Ohio Wesleyan University. Thanks also to the Veterans History Project at the Library of Congress, which supplied the interviews you heard from American troops recalling memories of Axis Sally. Those veterans were John A. Cerovich, Eli Drapkin, and Shields Wilson. And thanks to Sydney Minix, and all the other listeners who voted in our pitch-a-thon!

This episode was produced by Julia Press. It was story edited by Jim O'Grady and sound designed by Brian Flood. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Corinne Wallace, and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks, who initially pitched this story. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn, and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

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