

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: LISA SERGIO: HOW MUSSOLINI'S
"GOLDEN VOICE" OF
PROPAGANDA CREATED AN
AMERICAN MASS
COMMUNICATION CAREER

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In 1937 Lisa Sergio, "The Golden Voice" of fascist broadcasting from Rome, fled Italy for the United States. Though her mother was American, Sergio was classified as an enemy alien once the United States entered World War II. Yet Sergio became a U.S. citizen in 1944 and built a successful career in radio, working first at NBC and then WQXR in New York City in the days when women's voices were not thought to be appropriate for news or "serious" programming. When she was blacklisted as a communist in the early 1950s, Sergio compensated for the loss of radio employment by becoming principally an author and lecturer in Washington, D.C., until her death in 1989. This dissertation, based on her personal papers, is the first study of Sergio's American mass communication career. It points out the personal, political and social obstacles she faced as a woman in her 52-year career as a commentator on varied aspects of world affairs, religion and feminism. This study includes an examination of the FBI investigations of Sergio and the anti-communist campaigns conducted against her. It concludes that Sergio's success as a public communicator was predicated on both her unusual talents and her ability to transform her public image to reflect ideal American values of womanhood in shifting political climates.

LISA SERGIO:
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CREATED AN AMERICAN MASS COMMUNICATION CAREER

By

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Chapter 1: Scope and Purpose

When Italian broadcaster Lisa Sergio (1905-1989) immigrated to the United States in 1937, NBC made her a guest announcer almost immediately, and she became a host for Metropolitan Opera performances and Berkshire music festivals. A press release publicizing her appointment stated Sergio was “making a study of American broadcasting.” The press release also claimed that Sergio had quit her job at the Italian Broadcasting Company, EIAR, in order to “visit the United States, the homeland of her mother.”¹

The trade magazine *Broadcasting* picked up the story, reporting that Sergio was in New York “to study American radio technique.”² *The New York Times* also announced Sergio’s arrival in print, commenting specifically on her beautiful voice and her gender, stating that “it is wondered in radio circles if the gate to the microphone will open for other female announcers.”³

But this was only part of the story. According to Sergio’s *New York Times* obituary, she had been a pioneer propaganda broadcaster in fascist Italy who had translated Mussolini’s speeches into English for overseas radio audiences. She lost her job and faced arrest, the *Times* reported, when she was caught modifying her translations in order to satisfy her growing anti-fascist sentiments. She escaped Italy only because of the aid of family friend Guglielmo Marconi. Sergio, a “slender, fiery

¹ NBC, “Lisa Sergio to Announce Dell Concerts,” July-August 1937. NBC Press Releases, Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division, Library of Congress.

² “A Guest of NBC Famous European Announcer to Broadcast Here” *Broadcasting*, 1 August 1937, 21

³ “Miss Sergio With ‘Fluent Phonetics’ Points Way for Women Announcers,” *The New York Times*, 18 July 1937, 10.

contralto,”⁴ obtained her U.S. citizenship in 1944 and worked hard to become known as a “fervent advocate of democracy, free speech and feminism,” said *The New York Times* upon her death.⁵

After her 1937 arrival in the United States, Sergio used her unusual experience to create a prominent career for herself as a news commentator during World War II on the local New York City station WQXR from 1939 to 1946. She was heard seven times a week in an era in which there were few women news commentators.⁶ Though her boss described her in his memoirs as temperamental, (after all, she was an “Italian and a woman,” explained Elliott Sanger),⁷ Sergio also created a reputation for herself as smart, serious and chic.⁸

Her ability to create a reputation and a career as a radio news commentator was no small feat for an enemy alien and the former employee of the fascist regime in the days leading up to and during World War II. Nor was it a small accomplishment for a woman at a time when radio audiences harbored prejudice towards women’s voices.⁹ Of her appointment at NBC, *Harper’s Bazaar* called her “the only woman to hold such a job in America.”¹⁰ A 1943 article in the *New York Herald Tribune* praised Sergio’s WQXR news commentaries, saying that “she understands what a threat fascism ... presents to the world today—and will present after the peace.”¹¹

⁴ “Lisa Sergio, Radio Commentator in Italy and New York, Dies at 84,” *The New York Times*, 26 June 1989, B8.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Elliott M. Sanger, *Rebel in Radio: The Story of WQXR*. New York: Hastings House, 1973. 86.

⁸ Lilian Mowrer, “Take Her Radio Word For It” *Vogue*, 15 April 1943, 86

⁹ Hadley Cantril and Gordon W. Allport, *The Psychology of Radio*. New York: Harper, 1935. 137.

¹⁰ George Dangerfield, “They Talk to the World” *Harper’s Bazaar*, November 1937, 98-99, 120, 99.

¹¹ Dorothy Dunbar Bromley, “Lisa Sergio Sees Duce Dreaming of Comeback,” *The New York Herald Tribune*, 12 September 1943, VI-8.

Nevertheless, Sergio's radio career ended after World War II. She lost her job in 1947 when WQXR discontinued news commentary. In 1950, Sergio was blacklisted in *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*.¹² But despite these setbacks, she was able to remake herself as a lecturer, biographer and author and continue a career in American mass communication that spanned 52 years.

According to a resume prepared in the late 1970s or early 1980s, Sergio became principally an author and lecturer after World War II. From 1947 to 1960 she was an editor for newsletters and news services, and from 1947 to 1950 she was also an instructor in international affairs at Columbia University. From 1960 to 1971, Sergio traveled to over 300 colleges and universities around the country speaking on international affairs. She wrote five books: *Prayers of Women* (1965), *I Am My Beloved*, a biography of Anita Garibaldi, the wife of popular hero and freedom fighter Guiseppe Garibaldi (1969),¹³ *A Measure Filled* on the life of Lena Madesin Phillips, founder of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women (1972),¹⁴ *Jesus and Women* (1975), and *You Can Upholster!* (1978), a guide for home upholstering, which she occasionally did for herself and friends.¹⁵

¹² American Business Consultants, *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*. New York: Counterattack, 1950.

¹³ Guiseppe Garibaldi (1807-1882) was credited with the 1860 overthrow of the Kingdom of Naples which made the unification of Italy possible, the event which precipitated Italian unification. Anita Garibaldi lived from 1821 to 1849.

¹⁴ Lena Madesin Phillips lived from 1881 to 1955. From 1947 to 1960, Sergio voluntarily edited this organization's newsletter *Widening Horizons* from 1949 to 1960 and also served as a member of the board of directors. Lisa Sergio, "Curriculum Vitae," Box 13 Folder 22, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 3.

¹⁵ Sergio told interviewers that she came up with the idea for the book while she was visiting Jordan for the wedding of King Hussein to Queen Noor. While she was staying with Crown Prince Hassan and Crown Princess Sarvath, 14 mahogany dining room chairs arrived from America. The princess wanted them covered in red silk velvet in time for a dinner party. "Ms. Sergio didn't see any problem," reported the *Woodbridge* (N.J.) *News Tribune*, "and had the entire royal party and staff lined up

During the 1960s and 1970s, Sergio also returned to broadcasting. She hosted a handful of public affairs programs for television in the 1960s such as NBC's "Frontiers of Faith" and ABC's "New Nations of Africa." And from 1962 to 1989 she volunteered her time announcing a once-weekly 15-minute program titled "Prayer Through the Ages" on WMAL in Washington, D.C.

She received several notable awards, including the French Legion of Honor in 1947 for her wartime commentaries on France; the Medal of Independence (or Order of Al-Istiqlal) of the First Degree by King Hussein of Jordan in 1976 for her work in integrating women workers into Jordan's industries; and the Cavaliere of the Order of the Star of Italian Solidarity in 1975, given to Italians who work to enhance the knowledge of Italian language and culture abroad.

In addition, she received three honorary degrees. Citing her as "journalist, radio and television news analyst and moderator, Department of State and Danforth Foundation lecturer," Keuka College of Keuka Park, New York, awarded Sergio the honorary degree Doctor of Humane Letters in 1963.¹⁶ St. Mary's College of Notre Dame, Indiana, honored her with a Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, for having "pioneered the field of communications, both through the written and spoken word," and having "made the communication of freedom her vocation to the world."¹⁷ And

helping her upholster the chairs." Vera C. Stek, "Furniture Upholstery," *Woodbridge News Tribune*. Clipping in Sergio scrapbook, Box 18 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 6 December 1978.

¹⁶ Keuka College, "Fifty-Fifth Annual Commencement." Graduation program, Box 11 Folder 4, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 16 June 1963.

¹⁷ St. Mary's College, "Commencement." Graduation program, Box 13 Folder 20, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 4 June 1966; St. Mary's College, "Doctor of Laws, honoris causa." Box 18 Folder 4, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University

in 1970 Valparaiso University of Valparaiso, Indiana, also gave her a Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, recognizing her as “outstanding lecturer, writer, and broadcaster, fearless militant for freedom, active, articulate Christian woman.”¹⁸

In each of these incarnations—writer, lecturer, broadcaster—Sergio always utilized her prominent and unusual experience in Mussolini’s fascist broadcasting operations. Yet the notoriety she achieved has not captured the attention of journalism historians; Sergio is mentioned in only three works on the history of female journalists.¹⁹ Attention to the history of women journalists dates from the early twentieth century but has, at times, been guilty of gazing a little too admiringly at only the most notable women journalists. Sergio, rightly, has been overshadowed by World War II-era giants, prominent columnists such as Dorothy Thompson, Eleanor Roosevelt and Anne O’Hare McCormick. Questions about her fascist background, McCarthy-era blacklisting and important role in the broadcast industry have perhaps cast shadows over the question of whether she is worthy of study.

But, as critical perspectives on the struggles of women journalists have become more accepted, hundreds of previously overlooked women have been reconsidered as having lives of historical interest. Similarly, this dissertation seeks to

Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 4 June 1966.

¹⁸ Valparaiso University, “Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*.” Box 18 Folder 5, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 7 June 1970; Valparaiso University, “Citation Upon the Conferring of the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws on Lisa Sergio.” Box 13 Folder 21, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 7 June 1970.

¹⁹ These works, which will be discussed in chapter two, are: Donna Halper, *Invisible Stars: A Social History of Women in American Broadcasting*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001; David H. Hosley and Gayle K. Yamada, *Hard News: Women in Broadcast Journalism*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1987; Marion Marzolf, *Up From the Footnote*. New York: Hastings House, 1977.

uncover the life of a woman broadcaster who—like so many other women journalists—has yet to be incorporated into the mainstream of mass media history. To that end, it argues that she should be because, while her story was unusual, it still sheds light on the struggle of many women to find a place in mass communication.

This dissertation, a historical study of Lisa Sergio's professional life, has aimed to examine her American broadcasting career and evaluate conflicting stories about her past. It has also endeavored to place Sergio in the cultural context of her times. Sergio lived all of her 84 years (1905-1989) in the 20th century. Hers was a life affected by key cultural moments such as fascism, World War II, the Cold War, and the feminist movement. Therefore, the central research of this question has been, "How did Lisa Sergio create a 20th century career in public communication, despite gender, political and social barriers?"

This project contributes to the knowledge of journalism history not only by illuminating the overlooked history of one woman broadcaster, but also by examining that woman's cultural history. In particular, this examination of Lisa Sergio's life shows that she drew on these cultural movements, using them strategically to secure her future and preserve her past. Sergio does not fit the definition of journalist as neatly as women such as Dorothy Thompson and Anne O'Hare McCormick. She was not a newspaperwoman or syndicated columnist. Neither was she a reporter or an interviewer. But she patterned herself after women such as these, using the radio as a medium through which to discuss politics, the war, and social issues of her day.

Since Sergio was not primarily a broadcaster, after she was blacklisted in *Red Channels*, she can be better understood as a public communicator. Throughout her

life she sought a public stage, moving adeptly from the circles of radio broadcasting to public speaking to book publishing, from the circles of high fascist officials to the elite social circles of New York and Washington. Sergio, in creating a career as a commentator on public and political life, secured audiences on the basis of her unusual past and used her talents to keep them. Above all else, Sergio was a woman who always had something to say, and managed to find audiences in a variety of mediums to which to say it.

Nine chapters follow this brief introduction. Chapters two and three give the background needed to examine Sergio's life. Chapter two reviews works published about her and more clearly lays out this study's historical method and theoretical perspective. Chapter three elaborates on the historical roles women have occupied in the development of broadcasting in the United States during the early development of radio and World War II.

The study of Sergio's life begins with chapter four, which examines her childhood in Italy and her early experiences as a fascist broadcaster from 1932 to 1937. This chapter compares and evaluates the way Sergio presented and preserved her personal history versus the way this history has been preserved by documents obtained from the FBI through a Freedom of Information Act request. Chapter five describes Sergio's experience as a broadcaster at NBC from 1937 to 1939 and the well-known people she met through this position, such as professional journalists Dorothy Thompson and Ann Batchelder, both of whom had a significant personal impact on Sergio's life.

Chapter six examines Sergio's experience as a WQXR news commentator during World War II. This chapter asks whether or not Sergio was a "women's program" broadcaster and concludes that Sergio never aimed her commentary only at women. Sergio's experience during the latter-half of the 20th century begins with chapter seven, which examines the effect of growing anti-communism on the radio industry, describes Sergio's dismissal from WQXR, and looks at her transition from radio commentator to world affairs lecturer. Chapter eight more fully investigates the effects of anti-communist crusades on Sergio's experience of the Cold War, again taking up the topic of FBI investigations and additionally examining the influence of *Red Channels* on her career.

Chapter nine is an inquiry into Sergio's post-broadcasting career as a lecturer and author dealing with her overall career as a commentator. This chapter seeks to explain her positions on the three topics that dominated the majority of her public commentary: world affairs, religion and feminism. Finally, this dissertation concludes with chapter ten, which looks at Sergio's public image through the scores of news profiles published about her during her lifetime. This chapter pays particular attention to the symbolic meaning gender was given at key moments in the twentieth century, concluding that news profiles portrayed Sergio's femininity in different ways in different eras. These portrayals attributed to her the cultural characteristics of womanhood and feminism that were at any one time both popular and non-threatening, important factors in Sergio's ability to attain prominence as a public communicator throughout her life.

Lisa Sergio's experience in both Italian and American broadcasting alone makes her a worthy figure of study. In examining Sergio's entire mass communication career in the United States, this project also brings together the neglected histories of World War II radio commentators, local radio personalities, women broadcasters and communicators. This dissertation is not only an attempt to understand the "interplay of radio and society during the war" and afterwards, but it is also an attempt to piece together a small part of the marginalized history of women in the mass media.²⁰

²⁰ Louise Benjamin, "World War II American Radio is More Than Murrow," *American Journalism* 12, no. 3 (1995):334-341.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Sergio's colorful past, her experiences with NBC and New York City radio, and her frequent lectures later in life kept Sergio in the public eye and guaranteed coverage by the contemporary press. Her papers, housed at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., include 25 folders and 17 scrapbooks filled with news clippings on her from 1924 until her death in 1989.¹ Yet her life has received little scholarly attention. She is not mentioned in the major works covering radio in the 1940s, characteristic of the general exclusion of women from radio history.² This chapter will first review the few works of scholarly literature, biography and personal memoirs that address Lisa Sergio and her life. A discussion of the theoretical and historical perspectives that frame this project will follow, along with a description of the archival source material to be used.

Sergio in the Literature

Though Sergio has been featured in hundreds of news profiles during her lifetime (which have been used as primary source material for this dissertation) an

¹ Sergio's papers are housed in the special collections division of Lauinger Library on the campus of Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. They are hereafter referred to as "Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C."

² See: Maurine Beasley, "Women and Journalism in World War II: Discrimination and Progress," *American Journalism* 12, no. 3 (1995):321-333; Judith A. Cramer, "Radio: A Woman's Place is on the Air" in *Women in Mass Communication*, ed. Pamela J. Creedon (Newbury Park: Sage, 1989); Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination*. New York: Times Books Random House, 1999; Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997; Gianni Isola, "Italian Radio: History and Historiography," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 15, no. 3 (1995):393-400.

uneven and sketchy picture of her life emerges from scholarly literature. Three scholarly works focusing solely on women in journalism have recognized Sergio's life and work. But her treatment is minimal, at best. In a chapter on women broadcasters in her book *Up From the Footnote*, the first modern text to place women in journalism history, Marion Marzolf notes that "two women who did have beautiful speaking voices were Jane Cowl, the actress, and Lisa Sergio, WQXR's commentator."³ In Donna L. Halper's *Invisible Stars*, a more recent social history of women broadcasters, Sergio is remembered as a woman with an "international reputation, whose voice had been heard all over Europe via her short-wave broadcasts."⁴ However, Halper mistakenly asserts that Sergio was hired to be a consultant for WQXR and that her announcing for the station was principally for music programs and opera discussions.⁵

The most in-depth treatment to date of Sergio's life is a three-page section based on a personal interview and a letter in *Hard News: Women in Broadcast Journalism* by David H. Hosley and Gayle K. Yamada. The authors describe Sergio's entrance into broadcasting in 1932, her conversion to anti-fascism and her escape to America. The authors quote Sergio to emphasize that in the United States she never worked on women's programs:

I've never believed in the division between men and women; we don't in Italy. ... I just didn't think that there was any purpose in doing

³ Marzolf, *Up From the Footnote*. 135.

⁴ Halper, *Invisible Stars*. 92.

⁵ It is unknown why this historian chose to call Sergio a "consultant," especially since the article she cited ("A Guest of NBC Famous European Announcer to Broadcast Here") does not mention consulting, but states that Sergio "is in New York to study American radio technique and has been made a guest announcer of NBC." Sergio did announce music and opera programs while she was at NBC, but while employed by WQXR she was a news commentator.

programs for women, because programs for women in those days meant kitchen pointers or ... ridiculous things.⁶

The authors noted that “her career as a radio journalist faded after the fighting stopped,”⁷ which was a common occurrence for both news commentators and women journalists of the time.⁸

Three books that examined the 1950 publication of *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television* mentioned that Lisa Sergio was named in the publication. *Red Channels* was written and published by American Business Consultants, Inc., an organization founded by three former FBI agents who also published the newsletter *Counterattack*. These publications listed celebrities said to be affiliated with alleged front organizations.⁹ Of the books that analyze the publication of *Red Channels*—*The Golden Web* and *Tube of Plenty* by Erik Barnouw and *The Age of McCarthyism* by Ellen Schrecker—Sergio’s name is listed in the footnotes along with other professionals named in *Red Channels*.¹⁰

Sergio’s name also appeared in several biographies of newspaper columnist Dorothy Thompson and the memoirs of WQXR founder Elliott Sanger. None of the references, however, gave any depth or detail about the nature of her relationships. In *American Cassandra*, a biography of Dorothy Thompson, author Peter Kurth noted

⁶ Hosley and Yamada, *Hard News*. 35.

⁷ Ibid., 36.

⁸ For information on news commentators, see: Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web*, Vol. 2. New York: Oxford University Press, 1968. 219, 241. For examples of works on women journalists, see: Maurine Beasley, “Mary Marvin Breckinridge Patterson: Case Study of One of ‘Murrow’s Boys’,” *Journalism History* 20, no. 1 (1994):25; Beasley, “Women and Journalism in World War II: Discrimination and Progress.”; David H. Hosley, “As Good As Any Of Us: American Female Radio Correspondents in Europe, 1938-1941,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 2, no. 2 (1982):141-156.

⁹ Barnouw, *The Golden Web*. 254-255.

¹⁰ Ibid; Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990. 124; Ellen Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents*. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1994. 244.

that Sergio “was taken more or less permanently under Dorothy’s wing” and that Sergio stood by Thompson and was a “godsend” during the illness of Thompson’s third husband, Maxim Kopf.¹¹ Also, in her biography, *Dorothy Thompson: A Legend in Her Time*, Marion K. Sanders wrote that Sergio was a “devoted friend” of Thompson’s.¹² The author thanked Sergio for her help in gathering information for the book.¹³ Sergio is also remembered in the personal memoir of WQXR founder Elliott Sanger. In the book *Rebel in Radio*, a history of WQXR, Sanger praised Sergio’s work, saying “her comments on the current scene, couched in her beautiful delivery, soon attracted a large audience.”¹⁴ But he also referred to her as an “Italian and a woman,” writing that, “she and I had several scenes where we did not see eye to eye, and that often led to an explosion on her part and sometimes on mine.”¹⁵ Sanger did not elaborate on the nature of their disagreements.

One final, intriguing reference to Sergio is found in the book, *The O.S.S. In Italy 1942-1945: A Personal Memoir*, by Max Corvo. In 1942, Corvo was a U.S. Army Private who worked for the Italian Secret Intelligence branch of the Office of Strategic Services. (The OSS was the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency.) In his memoir, Corvo wrote that in September, 1942, he traveled to New York with plans to develop contacts in his efforts to recruit anti-fascist Italians for the agency. He met with Sergio in hopes that her knowledge of the fascist government could help the OSS plan operations in Italy. Corvo and Sergio met in the WQXR studios, where

¹¹ Peter Kurth, *American Cassandra: The Life of Dorothy Thompson*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1990. 438, 452.

¹² Marion K. Sanders, *Dorothy Thompson: A Legend in Her Time*. New York: Avon Books, 1974. 351-352, 367, 376.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Sanger, *Rebel in Radio*. 86, 87.

¹⁵ Ibid.

they “had a general exploratory conversation that was restricted to the subjects of propaganda and psychological warfare and the problems they posed during wartime.”¹⁶ Sergio asked Corvo for a “clarifying memo” so that she could get her station manager’s consent to work part time for the OSS. (Records available for examination at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., however, do not indicate that Sergio worked for the agency.)

Corvo wrote that when he returned to his hotel that day, two men with guns were waiting for him. The men identified themselves as Counter-Intelligence Corps (CIC) members who believed that Corvo was a fascist spy. Corvo was released after an interrogation that lasted overnight and into the next day. A year later, Corvo found out that the interrogation was linked to his meeting with Sergio. Wary of her meeting with Corvo, Sergio had called Lt. Gioachino Titolo, who was in the Office of Naval Intelligence. The CIC had been called because of suspicion that the Italian military intelligence organization, Servizio Informazioni Militare, was trying to contact Sergio. “That explained the caution the CIC people had exercised when they were waiting for me in my room. It also explained why Sergio had insisted on using the studio for our interview,” Corvo wrote. “As for Miss Sergio, I never felt any chagrin at her attempt to protect herself from the fascists.”¹⁷

Since little has been written about Sergio, it is difficult to know how to interpret Corvo’s experience meeting her. The nature of available references offer little context for interpreting this experience, or for interpreting the overall significance of Sergio’s experience as a female radio journalist and mass

¹⁶ Max Corvo, *The O.S.S. in Italy 1942-1945*. New York: Praeger, 1990. 23.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

communicator. For example, these accounts only hint at the importance of World War II and the Cold War in Sergio's experience and offer no information on how Sergio's career continued during the latter half of the twentieth century. To fill this gap, this dissertation attempts to give a more complete account of Sergio's experience as a mass communication professional in the United States in the context of the cultural movements that shaped her experience.

Perspectives Employed

This study is informed by feminist theory, a rich, complex perspective that is, admittedly, often difficult to define. Feminist theory does not imply a single theory, but a "highly charged field of competing narratives about the nature and consequences of gender identities."¹⁸ Feminist scholarship focuses on the experiences of women and is activist in nature, questioning patriarchy and advocating a non-sexist society.¹⁹

Questions regarding the reliability and validity of data gathered through such a "highly charged" perspective are inevitable and even reasonable. But this study, a narrative historical inquiry, deploys gender as a lens through which to examine the past. It is important to understand that this does not imply a "present-minded"²⁰ analysis in which the past is judged according to the cultural standards of today. This study instead utilizes the concept of gender as a tool to uncover and dissect the power

¹⁸ Thomas R. Lindlof and Bryan C. Taylor, *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2002. 54.

¹⁹ Brenda Dervin, "The Potential Contribution of Feminist Scholarship to the Field of Communication," *Journal of Communication* 37, no. 4 (1987):107-120, 109.

²⁰ James D. Startt and Wm. David Sloan, *Historical Methods in Mass Communication*. Northport, Ala.: Vision Press, 2003. 53-54.

and political relationships that shaped at particular moments in history. Gender “seems to have been a persistent and recurrent way of enabling the signification of power,” wrote historian Joan Scott. “Gender, then, provides a way to decode meaning and to understand the complex connections among various forms of human interaction.”²¹ Particularly when examining media history, gender allows the researcher to uncover and examine cultural contradictions that are often hidden within media narratives by a “façade of normalcy.”²² Understanding this façade, and what it conceals, not only allows us to understand how social power was enacted at one point in media history, but how social power may have even shaped the narrative of media history itself.

Traditional distinctions between feminisms have been recognized between liberal feminism, concerned with the attainment of equal rights; Marxist feminism, which blames women’s oppression on the social organization dictated by capitalism; and radical feminism, which emphasizes sexual freedom and believes women are fundamentally better than male oppressors.²³ But differences in the feminist outlook are often much more personal than these political outlooks imply, wrote Shulamit Reinharz:

Differences in the definition of feminism exist among people of different classes, races, generations and sexual orientations. Differences among feminists exist around specific issues such as sadomasochism and pornography. Differences exist between academic and activist feminists as well. Sometimes people who do not want to be labeled “feminist” are given the label anyhow. Conversely, some

²¹ Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988. 45-46.

²² Hilmes, *Radio Voices*. 289.

²³ Lindlof and Taylor, *Qualitative Communication Research Methods*. 54; Liesbet van Zoonen, “Feminist Perspectives on the Media” in *Mass Media and Society*, ed. James Curran and Michael Gurevitch (London: Arnold, 1996), 31-52

people who want to be acknowledged as feminist are not. That these differences exist is fortunate because the lack of orthodoxy allows for freedom of thought and action.²⁴

Historians have defined feminism in various ways. Susan Hartmann has defined it as a “multifaceted...form of activism whose aims were to expand women’s opportunities in the public sphere, increase their autonomy and material well-being, and lessen their dependent status in the family.”²⁵ In her examination of the origins of modern feminism, Nancy Cott centered her definition of feminism around three core ideas: opposition to sex hierarchy, a belief that gender is socially constructed, and women’s self-identification as a social grouping.²⁶ Self-identification is also at the heart of Reinharz’s attempt to define feminist research methods.²⁷

For this study, perhaps the most influential definition of feminist theory comes from Liesbet van Zoonen. In her book *Feminist Media Studies*, van Zoonen defines what she calls a feminist culturalist perspective that sees gender as a discourse, or “a set of overlapping and often contradictory cultural descriptions.”²⁸ Viewing gender as a set of discourses implies that gender is not “fixed,” but “an ongoing process by which subjects are constituted, often in paradoxical ways.”²⁹ This perspective draws from Stuart Hall’s “Encoding/Decoding” model and James Carey’s conceptualization of communication as ritual. In the feminist culturalist perspective, the mass media are the central place where gender negotiation takes place. Thus, gender and

²⁴ Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. 6.

²⁵ Susan M. Hartmann, *From Margin to Mainstream: American Women and Politics Since 1960*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996. viii.

²⁶ Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987. 4, 5.

²⁷ Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. 6.

²⁸ Liesbet van Zoonen, *Feminist Media Studies*. London: Sage, 1994. 33.

²⁹ Ibid.

communication are bound by a cultural relationship that encodes meanings, values and power relationships that influence (and are influenced by) society.

Theoretical conceptualizations of gender and power are central to another key text that has influenced the theoretical framework of this project. In *Gender and the Politics of History*, historian Joan Scott argues that gender can be a powerful analytic category in history. Scott draws on Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault in arguing for the use of deconstruction as a method that can uncover the often hidden structures and workings of gender in historical texts. Similar to the aims of culturalist feminist media researchers, Scott argues that this analysis can decode conflicting gender discourses. This method allows historians to understand “the processes by which meanings are made,” processes that not only affect women’s status in society but also the ways history is preserved in order to normalize power hierarchies.³⁰ Feminist history, wrote Scott, is not just “the recounting of great deeds performed by women, but the exposure of the often silent and hidden operations of gender that are nonetheless present and defining forces in the organization of most societies.”³¹

A third work that has also influenced the theoretical perspective of this project is Michele Hilmes’ *Radio Voices*, which examines the social and cultural context of the medium’s origins. Hilmes’ informed cultural studies approach” examines radio’s portrayal of itself as “the nation’s voice,” a dominant discourse that implies a unified American experience not differentiated by race, class and gender. Hilmes argues that this consensus is an illusion created by the U.S. media that intentionally hides “the

³⁰ Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*. 9.

³¹ Ibid., 27.

conflicting, tension-ridden site of the ruthless exercise of cultural hegemony.”³² Thus, Hilmes argues that there is not just one history, but several histories—always based on ideology—whose arguments have to be evaluated. Hilmes connects the aims of the feminist historian and the feminist media researcher:

...media narratives, structures, and audiences are produced in, and themselves help to produce, the same crucible of negotiations of social power that shapes the histories through which we later understand them.³³

By identifying the gender discourses that are reproduced in the media, the feminist media researcher and historian can thus question the gender discourses reproduced in conventional history. Traditional scholarship on the history of women journalists has been slow to adopt similar approaches. In a study of historical works on female journalists, Maurine Beasley has written that historians of women journalists have been generally conservative and only recently have explored “the ambiguities between women’s experiences and journalism itself.” Beasley wrote that “if this is done in depth, a new, more truthful, and much more compelling journalism history will be produced.”³⁴

This biographical study has also been influenced by historian Susan Henry, who has observed that much of the scholarship on the history of women journalists has focused on biographies of individual women. Though she states that many of these studies are important contributions, she also notes that many topics in this field have been studied “within the accepted, male-developed framework of journalism

³² Hilmes, *Radio Voices*. xvii.

³³ *Ibid.*, 288.

³⁴ Maurine Beasley, “Women in Journalism: Contributors to Male Experience or Voices of Feminine Expression?” *American Journalism* 7, no. 1 (1990):39-54, 54.

history.”³⁵ And though some scholars have called for more biographies of women journalists in order to establish “the extent of women’s contribution in the history of American journalism,”³⁶ Henry advocates overcoming a substantially conservative research perspective by deploying frameworks that are “analytical and critical, moving beyond description to an understanding of why things happened and what they meant at the time to the women involved in them as media creators or audiences.”³⁷ Henry wrote that biographical scholarship should avoid creating heroes without critiquing them. Researchers should also explore women’s lives in a truly female context, which would avoid measuring women’s significance by the same measures applied to men such as basing professional aptitude on prizes won, the longevity of their careers and the status of places they have worked.

To develop a measure of women’s significance, the definitions of terms such as “journalist” must be redefined to include the unique perspectives of women, argues Beasley. In her article, “Recent Directions for the Study of Women’s History in American Journalism,” Beasley states that examination of women’s personal experiences—through oral histories, biography, family-oriented social history, and women’s networking—will lead to a broader history of women in journalism. She advocates studying women “on their own terms” to “allow for a new synthesis in journalism history which incorporates women by setting their activities within their social and cultural context.”³⁸

³⁵ Susan Henry, “Changing Media History Through Women’s History” in *Women in Mass Communication*, ed. Pamela J. Creedon (Newbury Park: Sage, 1989), 39.

³⁶ Catherine Mitchell, “The Place of Biography in the History of News Women,” *American Journalism* 7, no. 1 (1990):23-32, 31-32.

³⁷ Henry, “Changing Media History Through Women’s History”, 41.

³⁸ Maurine Beasley, “Recent Directions for the Study of Women’s History in American Journalism,” *Journalism Studies* 2, no. 2 (2001):207-220.

Drawing on the work of Beasley, Henry, and the other scholars discussed in this section, this study does not attempt to solely understand Sergio in the context of the most prominent part of her Italian or U.S. radio career during the World War II era, nor does it compare her career to those of the most famous male journalists and columnists of her day such as Walter Lippman, Edward R. Murrow, Eric Severeid, Walter Winchell and H.V. Kaltenborn. Rather than interpret her career through the exclusionary lens of journalist, this study argues instead for a broader understanding of Sergio as public communicator. This argument takes into account her activities as lecturer, writer and broadcaster, all of which were audience-seeking activities that continued decades after the most glamorous and visible part of her career ended.

This study draws on van Zoonen's feminist culturalist perspective by looking for evidence of gender discourses in mass media representations of Sergio. It also examines Sergio's own use of gender discourses in her many speeches and writings. In particular, this study also hopes to follow the "essential mandate" of all feminist research, according to scholar Brenda Dervin, to "allow us to hear the meanings of women on their own terms, including the observations of the structures that constrain them."³⁹

Source Material

Primary source material for this study is located in the Lisa Sergio papers at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., This collection of Sergio's personal

³⁹ Dervin, "The Potential Contribution of Feminist Scholarship to the Field of Communication." Also quoted in Henry, "Changing Media History Through Women's History", 41.

papers includes radio commentaries, autobiographical writings, letters and a large number of speech, article and radio manuscripts. The collection also features several recordings of speeches and radio broadcasts by Sergio, photographs of Sergio and famous people with which she associated and a large collection of newspaper and magazine clippings about Sergio. The collection spans the period from 1937, when she first arrived in the United States, to 1989, the year of her death. There are a handful of items (such as radio transcripts, recordings and identification cards) that date to Sergio's years in Italy before 1937. The collection is housed in 23 boxes and is available to researchers and the public. It is indexed in a finder's aid.⁴⁰ According to library staff, this collection has been seldom used by researchers.⁴¹ The vast majority of this material is in English. In the case of the handful of items that are in Italian, a translator was obtained if the subject of the material was deemed to be valuable to the study.

Valuable sources in the collection included: 297 pages of unpublished autobiographical writings, rough drafts of book chapters and outlines, a series of informal recorded interviews⁴² and numerous newspaper clippings preserved in Sergio's many scrapbooks. Friends remember Sergio as an entertaining story teller;⁴³ many of her stories were captured in her autobiographical notes and in two short stories which can be characterized as autobiographical fiction. (These two stories are quite clearly autobiographical, though inexplicably Sergio changed her own name to "Linda" in one of them, perhaps in an attempt to sell her rejected autobiography as

⁴⁰ The finder's aid is online: <http://www.library.georgetown.edu/dept/speccoll/clt5.htm>

⁴¹ E-mail to the author from Manuscripts Processor Kathy Banuelos. <Kb93@georgetown.edu> 4 February 2002.

fiction. Though she shopped her autobiography around to at least four publishers, all rejected it.⁴⁴⁾

Several Washington, D.C., libraries also provided useful material for this study. These included *The Washington Star* collection at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library in downtown Washington, the radio, oral history and reference holdings of the Library of American Broadcasting, University of Maryland College Park, and the manuscript and audio collections at the Library of Congress. Over 300 additional pages of material were obtained from the FBI through Freedom of Information Act requests. Also, the Central Intelligence Agency responded to a FOIA request and provided a limited amount of additional material.

Other manuscript collections also have been useful for this study. Eighteen pages of letters between Lisa Sergio and Dorothy Thompson were obtained from the Thompson collection at Syracuse University. These letters illuminate the professional relationship and personal friendship Thompson and Sergio shared. Additional letters to and from Sergio were obtained from the papers of Eleanor Roosevelt at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library. These 34 pages of photocopied correspondence document interview and meeting requests by Sergio to Roosevelt as well as speaking engagements and charity work in which both Sergio and Roosevelt took part. The oral history holdings at Columbia University also were consulted, along with the papers of Elliott Sanger, which are held there.

⁴² There are six cassette tapes of informal biographical interviews in Box 16 Folder 2 of the Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.

⁴³ Frida Burling, interview by author, 28 April 2005, Washington, D.C.; Sanford Garner, interview by author, 28 April 2005, Washington, D.C.; Eric and Mary Weinmann, interview by author, 25 April 2005, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Carnes to Lisa Sergio 22 September 1986; Robert Gottlieb to Lisa Sergio 1 August 1973; Al T. Kots to Lisa Sergio 29 October 1973; Evan Thomas to Lisa Sergio 22 August 1973

Furthermore, to supplement Sergio's *New York Times* obituary and the hundreds of newspaper clippings available in the scrapbooks preserved in the Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. numerous back issues of publications such as *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Variety*, *Newsweek*, *Time* and *Vogue* were searched using available indices. Two articles specifically proved to be very helpful. The first is an interview Sergio gave to an Italian-language women's magazine, *Gente*, in 1981.⁴⁵ Sergio translated the question-and-answer format of the article and kept it in her files as her own notes for a chapter of her autobiography. Second was an article about her that appeared in 1990, the year after her death, in the magazine *Virginia Country*.⁴⁶ This article was in the possession of Edward Lee, Sergio's former rector and friend. This article proved particularly useful since several of Sergio's now-deceased friends were quoted extensively in it and because the tone of the article was not as romanticized as many of the profiles published during her lifetime.

Though this dissertation was primarily based on archival research, several people who knew Sergio consented to be interviewed for this project. These people included Eric and Mary Weinmann, friends and fellow church members; Sanford Garner and Edward Lee, both former Christ Church Georgetown rectors; Kathryn Lee, the wife of Edward Lee and a friend and fellow church member; and Frida Burling, the daughter of Sergio's next-door neighbor and landlady, the deceased Mrs.

⁴⁵ Lisa Sergio, "Translation into English of two articles by Nicoletta Sipos appearing in *Gente*, a weekly magazine published in Milan, dated April 1981," Box 5 Folder 26, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁶ William F. Ryan, "Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America" *Virginia Country*, August 1990, 60-67

Tillman Leigh. These interviews were extremely helpful, but were limited since the interview subjects knew Sergio solely during the latter half of her life.

Another limitation included the nature of the Lisa Sergio papers themselves, which is emblematic of the limitations historians face when using archival materials. For example, an historian may never know what is not preserved in an archival collection. It must always be acknowledged that materials may have been “purged” before being donated to a library for preservation, or that materials were chosen selectively for preservation in order to promote particular views of historical events and obscure others. Of particular concern when working with this collection were the historical boasts made by Lisa Sergio herself. She made claims that during her life were taken as fact and never verified. For example, she claimed to be the first woman broadcaster in Europe and to have created the world’s first foreign-language news service. Because that claim was repeated so often and so insistently, it is examined in detail in this study. Other claims, however, had to be minimized. For example, Sergio claimed to have convinced Dorothy Thompson to leave New York City and move to Washington, D.C., just before Thompson’s death.⁴⁷ But this claim only appeared once in Sergio’s writings and no other primary or secondary material could be found to support it. This was emblematic of the often difficult task in this study of sorting out similar unverifiable claims from those that appeared to be historically accurate.

⁴⁷ Lisa Sergio, “Chapter XII From the Nation’s Capital,” Box 5 Folder 26, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 5.

Chapter 3: Historical Background

To explore Lisa Sergio's work one must be familiar with three areas that affected her life: Mussolini and his use of radio in 1930s Italy,¹ United States radio commentators and their influence in the 1930s and 1940s,² and women's involvement in and exclusion from radio history. Each of these areas will be explored in this dissertation. Italian radio will be discussed in chapter four, and U.S. radio commentary will be more fully described in chapter five.

Because this dissertation primarily explores Sergio's mass communication career in the United States and her experience as a female radio commentator here, it is necessary to first understand the contributions women have made to the development of radio in the United States, women's relationships to radio both as professionals and audience members, and the ideologies that shaped these connections.

¹ Historians have noted that the historiography of Italian radio has been slow to develop, and that little has been published about the lives and careers of announcers. (See Isola, "Italian Radio: History and Historiography.") And though Mussolini's close supervision of and involvement in radio has been noted, his work with individual broadcasts, announcers and his development of foreign-language broadcasts has not been explored in depth. See Philip V. Cannistraro, "The Radio in Fascist Italy," *Journal of European Studies* 2, no. 2 (1972):127-154.

² See: Giraud Chester, "Power of the Radio Commentator" *American Mercury*, September 1947, 334-339; Steve Knoll, "Demise of the Radio Commentator: An Irreparable Loss to Broadcast Journalism," *Journal of Radio Studies* 6, no. 2 (1999):356-370; Bryce Oliver, "Thought Control--American Style" *New Republic*, 13 January 1947, 12-13; Dixon Wecter, "Hearing is Believing," Three part series in *The Atlantic Monthly*: June, July, August, 1945.

Women as Radio Pioneers

Sergio started her broadcasting career in the United States less than twenty years after the birth of commercial radio and the broadcast of the first presidential elections returns by KDKA in Pittsburgh in 1920.³ That year also witnessed the greater public visibility of women in political and business arenas. The Nineteenth Amendment won passage that year and women were moving into the workforce in increasing numbers. By 1920, 25 percent of women over age 16 were in the labor force, up from 19 percent in 1890.⁴

In the 1920s, radio was a new, exciting and unproven medium. It held promising opportunities for women; because it was so new discrimination had not developed and women had a better chance of holding positions of responsibility.⁵ In these early days, it was common for women to serve as talent scouts, entertainers, program directors, announcers, writers and publicists for newly established radio stations. Women who were associated with music schools were particularly desirable radio employees. They knew musicians who could fill broadcast time and often had musical skills themselves.⁶

Women also served as station managers. In Chicago in 1922, for example, two women were called to manage brand-new stations, though neither of them even knew what radio was. Judith Carey Waller became station manager of WGU, which later

³ Gleason L. Archer, *History of Radio to 1926*. New York: American Historical Society, 1938. 201-204; Erik Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*, Vol. 1. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966. 69-70.

⁴ Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997. 156, 182.

⁵ Marzolf, *Up From the Footnote*. 123.

⁶ Halper, *Invisible Stars*. 17.

became WMAQ.⁷ Myrtle Stahl became assistant to the manager and was soon assigned to handle public service programming of WDAP, which later became WGN.⁸

These women played pivotal roles in developing programming and were known for their resourcefulness. Waller received permission from Chicago Cubs owner William Wrigley Jr. to broadcast baseball games on the radio.⁹ She created news programming using foreign correspondents, local reporters and feature writers from the Chicago *Daily News*, which owned a half-interest in the station's transmitter. She made what she contended was the first transatlantic news broadcast in 1925.¹⁰ She was also responsible for acquiring a blackface comedy act from a competing radio station, renaming the show "Amos 'n Andy" and pitching it to CBS and NBC for daily network broadcast. The show went on to become a phenomenal success on NBC (it reached as many as 40 million listeners, or one-third of the population of the country) and also generated much controversy in the latter half of the twentieth century for its stereotypical portrayals of African Americans.¹¹

In fact a woman—Mary Garden, opera singer and general director of the Chicago Civic Opera—is credited with launching the radio craze in Chicago the year before Waller and Stahl began their broadcasting careers. When Westinghouse opened station KYW on Nov. 11, 1921, there were only 1,300 radio receivers in the city and no sets for sale in stores. The station broadcast all opera performances, six

⁷ Mary E. Williamson, "Judith Carey Waller: Chicago Broadcasting Pioneer," *Journalism History* 3, no. 4 (1976-77):111-115.

⁸ Marzolf, *Up From the Footnote*. 118.

⁹ "Whether he was intrigued by the fact that a woman was asking him for this privilege, or just because the whole venture was so new, I don't know," said Waller. Williamson, "Judith Carey Waller: Chicago Broadcasting Pioneer," p. 112.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹¹ George H. Douglas, *The Early Days of Radio Broadcasting*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1987. 196.

days a week, and no other programs. This sparked a demand for radio that was so great that amateurs assembled sets around the clock and at the end of the season, 20,000 sets were reportedly operating.¹²

There are other documented stories of women who pioneered new, high-paying careers for themselves in radio. An early 1930s-era newspaper article noted that CBS and NBC in particular welcomed career women and listed 12 who held high-ranking positions in the radio industry, including NBC's eastern program manager, Bertha Brainerd.¹³ Brainerd began her career in radio in 1922 at WJZ in Newark, N.J. By 1937, she was one of the five top-salaried women in the nation.¹⁴ Eleanor Roosevelt began delivering radio commentaries shortly after her husband was elected president in 1932 and was paid \$500 per minute, a salary commanded by the top radio stars of the day.¹⁵

Though women contributed to radio from its start, they were rarely accorded the respect they deserved. This is evident in an oral history interview of Ruth Crane Schaefer, a partial transcript of which appears in *Taking Their Place: A Documentary History of Women and Journalism* by Maurine Beasley and Sheila Gibbons. Schaefer, who spent 27 years as a broadcaster in Detroit and Washington, D.C., said that women were seldom respected though they received a great deal of fan mail and personal letters for their on-air work:

I think a phenomenon of the early days of both radio and TV—and, for all I know, it still exists—is that the Women's Director who had her

¹² Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*. 88.

¹³ "Women Storm Heights of Radio to Disprove Former Traditions of Industry," Undated newspaper clipping from an unnumbered scrapbook, Martin Codel Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

¹⁴ Marzolf, *Up From the Footnote*. 124.

¹⁵ Maurine Beasley and Paul Belgrade, "Eleanor Roosevelt: First Lady as Radio Pioneer," *Journalism History* 11, no. 3-4 (1984):42-45, 42.

own shows was inescapably considered a character by her station associates. Oh, of course, some were—I’ve known some who really were, and I’m sure you have, too. But, oddly, the lowest branch on the organization tree was usually that of the woman who did foods, children’s programs, women’s activities and so on, no matter how well sponsored and notwithstanding this woman in almost all cases was also her own complete staff—writer, program director, producer, public relations, innovator, outside speaker, often saleswoman for her own sponsors. ... Our efforts were not taken very seriously by our associates...and the jokes directed at her were not always innocent.¹⁶

The prejudice against women as radio workers was also manifest in the prejudice against women’s voices. Though a significant number of women worked as radio announcers in the 1920s, they almost disappeared in the 1930s and didn’t appear in large numbers as announcers again until the 1960s, wrote scholar George Douglas.¹⁷

Doubtless there were many people who made the argument that women’s voices are not as pleasing over the air as men’s voices. The sonic superiority of the male voice is debatable, however, and it seems more likely that the disappearance of women from key announcing duties during the thirties was due to the fact that males simply muscled in on what had become a very lucrative profession and taken all the spoils for themselves.¹⁸

A 1978 article in the journal *Frontiers* calls the supposed inferior quality of women’s voices “one of the enduring myths” of radio. “Rather than recognizing the prejudice for what it was, radio broadcasters in the 1930s began to accept the popular

¹⁶ Maurine Beasley and Sheila J. Gibbons, *Taking Their Place: A Documentary History of Women and Journalism*. Washington, D.C.: American University Press, 1993. 171.

¹⁷ Douglas, *The Early Days of Radio Broadcasting*. 189.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 65.

myth by stereotyping certain on-the-air activities as female and others as male,” said author Jacqueline D. St John.¹⁹

This debate apparently took root in the 1920s, shortly after the birth of broadcasting. It may have begun with a 1924 letter to the magazine *Radio Broadcast*, which said that women’s voices were irritating to listeners.²⁰ In 1926, the same magazine published the results of a listener poll that supported listener’s preference for male announcers. The poll of 5,000 WJZ listeners in New York found that male voices were preferred nearly 100 to 1. Said WJZ manager Charles B. Popenoe:

It is difficult to say why the public should be so unanimous about it. One reason may be that most receiving sets do not reproduce perfectly the high notes. A man’s voice ‘takes’ better. It has more volume. Then, announcers cover sporting events, shows, concerts, operas and big public meetings. Men are naturally better fitted for the average assignment of the broadcast announcer.²¹

Popenoe also noted that soprano voices reproduce well on the radio and that women were in demand as singers, but not as announcers. Historians, however, doubt the legitimacy of the WJZ poll. Michelle Hilmes referred to the survey results as “somewhat suspect.”²² Donna Halper contended that the survey was not a scientific sample of listeners, but mostly reported views of male “active” listeners who may have been very vocal about what they liked and disliked. These were the listeners most likely to write into the station, she argued.²³

The results from a more formal experiment appeared in *The Psychology of Radio* in 1935. The authors, Hadley Cantril and Gordon W. Allport, set out to

¹⁹ Jacqueline D. St John, “Sex Role Stereotyping in Early Broadcast History: The Career of Mary Margaret McBride,” *Frontiers* 3, no. 3 (1978):31-38, 32.

²⁰ Michele Hilmes, *Only Connect: A Cultural History of Broadcasting in the United States*. Belmont: Wadsworth, 2002. 48.

²¹ John Wallace, “Men vs. Women Announcers” *Radio Broadcast*, November 1926, 44-45

²² Hilmes, *Only Connect*. 48.

²³ Halper, *Invisible Stars*. 42.

“explain why women who are freely employed as singers or actresses on the radio are virtually barred as announcers.”²⁴ They concluded that dislike of women’s voices was not caused by the mechanics of a radio transmitter or receiver, but by the mindset of the listener. Eight listeners, when asked to judge male and female speakers on voice characteristics, rated men’s voices as more persuasive and natural, and women’s voices as more attractive. The authors found that listeners had no objection to women who read poetry or other such material, but did not enjoy “high-pressure saleswomen.”²⁵ Cantril and Allport showed that prejudice played a significant part in listeners’ preferences.²⁶

Women were heard more often on the air in Europe than in the United States where prejudice against them continued in the United States through much of the twentieth century.²⁷ A 1930s-era newspaper article claimed that prejudice against women’s voices was the main reason women had not become network announcers. The writer stated that “the radio bosses say it is impossible to send a woman out on an assignment like covering a baseball game,” since they were not “physically or by experience and temperament suited to the job.”²⁸ A 1940s-era man-on-the-street interview photographic spread in *Radio Guide* magazine quoted several people who were against women as radio announcers. These people cited reasons such as “women have terrible voices,” “women’s voices do not have the tonal quality to sell things,”

²⁴ Cantril and Allport, *The Psychology of Radio*. 127.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ “Women Announcers--Why Not?” Undated newspaper clipping from an unnumbered scrapbook, Martin Codel Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

²⁸ “Women Announcers? Voices Do Not Seem to Click,” Undated newspaper clipping from an unnumbered scrapbook, Martin Codel Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

“women lack pleasantly forceful voice quality to sell,” and “women’s’ voices are also monotonous.”²⁹

Prejudice lingered on for years. A 1971 book quoted NBC president Reuven Frank telling *Newsweek*, “I have the strong feeling that audiences are less prepared to accept news from a woman’s voice than from a man’s.”³⁰ In the same year, an Ohio radio station manager refused to hire a female newscaster because “news coming from a woman sounds like gossip.”³¹ Many National Public Radio (NPR) member stations raised similar complaints when Susan Stamberg became the first woman to anchor a nightly network radio news program in 1972. “Now, in those pre-satellite days of poor quality telephone lines, it was true that the upper end of our voices was distorted a bit—which made us sound less bass-y than men. But I can’t imagine the distortion was enough to make it objectionable,” recalled Stamberg.³² She said Bill Siemerling, NPR’s first program director and the man who created the program “All Things Considered,” dealt with the complaints and did not tell her about them until eleven years later. “He had great confidence in me, felt it would affect my performance if I knew of the objections, so kept them to himself,” said Stamberg. “After a brief while, the criticisms ebbed. And more and more women came onto NPR’s air, delivering the day’s news.”³³

²⁹ “Should Radio Use Women Announcers?” *Radio Guide*, 28 May 1938. Box 20, Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

³⁰ Quoted in Epstein, Helen. “Women on the Air.” In *A State of Siege: Survey of Broadcast Journalism 1970-1971*, ed. Marvin Barrett, 140-148. New York: Gosset & Dunlap, 1971, 141.

³¹ *Ibid.* The author notes that in 1971 several network producers were women and that two women produced two of the year’s DuPont award-winning documentaries.

³² Susan Stamberg to Stacy Spaulding, “Women in Radio” 19 November 2003

³³ *Ibid.*

The fact that Sergio succeeded as a broadcaster in the United States in the late 1930s and the 1940s was a tribute to her ability as well as the fact that women were more tolerated on the air during World War II than later. For example, a 1937 article in the *Providence Journal* reported that Sergio was one of three women to have announcing work at NBC. The others (who, according to the report, were like Sergio in that they were 30 years old or older and had voices lower than most women) included Rosaline Greene, who announced Eleanor Roosevelt's broadcasts, and Claudine MacDonald, who announced "Women's Radio Review" and "It's a Woman's World." Even before Sergio's arrival 1937, the network had a female announcer. It was Elsie Janis, who worked for six months or so, but whose contract was not renewed.³⁴

The *Buffalo News* wrote in 1943 that "while the idea [of a woman announcer] may be unusual, it isn't revolutionary," citing Sergio's employment at NBC and the dozens of women "pinch-hitting" for male radio announcers who had been drafted. The article reported that it was women who objected the most to hearing other women on the air. It added that men did not seem to mind providing "the speaker has a lower-register voice and gives facts, not opinions."³⁵

³⁴ C.E. Butterfield, "Suitable Voice Requisite for Feminine Announcers," *Providence Journal*, 29 August 1937. Box 19 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

³⁵ Helen King, "Networks Watching Reaction to Woman Newscaster," *Buffalo News*, 9 March 1943. Box 20, Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

Women as Radio Audience Members

A dichotomy between programs considered appropriate for women and men appeared almost immediately after radio's debut in the United States. Men's programs included commentary and news; women's programs included homemaking and household hints and cooking.

Not all female listeners clamored to hear kitchen programs, however. In a 1925 column in *Radio Broadcast* titled "Do Women Know What They Want in Radio Programs?" writer Kingsley Welles praised a forum which called for talks "of a non-domestic character" for female audience members. Referring to a call for listeners to express their own views, Welles said 80 percent of the letters received sided with a college graduate who asked for more varied and intellectual content:

Cookery, child welfare, and household management talks were not wanted. The general cry was: "Take us out of the kitchen and take us out of ourselves!" The letter writers wanted talks on music, literature, travel, women's movements, etc., with an occasional fashion talk or humorous [*sic*] reading.³⁶

Welles called for similar talks at American radio stations:

Almost without exception American broadcast stations, when they have a program for women, have limited it to the obvious domestic things. No broadcaster has had the courage or the intelligence to arrange a program to appeal to the intelligence of a woman. One wonders whether this failure is due to a belief that it would be useless to make the attempt or because the program designers simply fail to appreciate the necessity.³⁷

³⁶ Kingsley Welles, "Do Women Know What They Want in Radio Programs?" *Radio Broadcast*, November 1925, 34

³⁷ Ibid.

It is not known if early radio executives ever grasped the power and influence of female audience members. In her book, *Radio: The Fifth Estate*, published in 1946 as a textbook for use with NBC's Northwestern University Summer Radio Institute, Judith Carey Waller said that women's programs were frequently "unwanted children—there to fill the air until something better came along."³⁸ They were always "a matter for perennial discussion and controversy" by male executives who considered women's preferences as "more than slightly mysterious."³⁹

An executive herself, Bertha Brainerd argued these programs—and the women who listened to them—represented radio's primary sales audience. In a 1932 memo to the head of NBC's sales division objecting to the practice of setting daytime ad rates lower than prime time rates, Brainerd said she was "looking forward to the day when you and the sponsors realize that the daytime hours are our most important selling times."⁴⁰

These women's views were validated, in part, by survey research conducted by Paul Lazarsfeld. His research performed in 1940 found that in rural areas, women tended to spend more time listening to radio than men did.⁴¹ In a 1941 survey of ninety three women, three-quarters remembered at least one instance in which they had been influenced by radio in their purchasing decisions. Of these women, over half

³⁸ Judith Carey Waller, *Radio: The Fifth Estate*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1946. 142.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁴⁰ Memorandum from Bertha Brainerd to Roy C. Witmer, August 23, 1932, in Hilmes, *Radio Voices*. 139.

⁴¹ Paul F. Lazarsfeld, *Radio and the Printed Page*. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1940. 225. For research on rural women and radio, see J. Steven Smethers and Lee Jolliffe, "Homemaking Programs: The Recipe for Reaching Women Listeners on the Midwest's Local Radio," *Journalism History* 24, no. 4 (1998/99):138-148; J. Steven Smethers and Lee Jolliffe, "Singing and Selling Seeds: The Live Music Era on Rural Midwestern Radio Stations," *Journalism History* 26, no. 2 (2000):61-71.

said they tried a new product because they wanted to support a radio program.⁴²

Research published in 1948 established that women—always considered daytime listeners—were also evening listeners as well:

We can summarize our findings this way: A radio fan in the morning is one in the afternoon and evening as well. Because of their psychological characteristics, their time schedules, and their lack of competing interests, women who are heavy listeners at one period of the day will tend to be radio fans throughout the day.⁴³

The idea that women did indeed listen to news is a reasonable conclusion during World War II, an era when news programming increased dramatically. During the war the networks aired about twenty foreign broadcasts a day.⁴⁴ In the summer of 1940, 11.9% of the networks' evening hours was devoted to commentators, talks and news, and by the summer of 1945, news and commentary filled 19.3% of the evening schedules.⁴⁵ It seems unlikely that women did not listen to news in such an environment—indeed, it seems more probable that women could not escape listening to news.

Another study, published in *The Psychology of Radio* in 1935, found that news programs ranked among the top ten program preferences of women. Also, 72 percent of women surveyed for this research reported they preferred listening to news events on the radio rather than reading about them in the newspaper, evidence that radio heightened women's interest in news. And 91 percent reported that they

⁴² Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank N. Stanton, *Radio Research*. New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1941. 270-272.

⁴³ Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Patricia L. Kendall, *Radio Listening in America*. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1948. 16.

⁴⁴ Barnouw, *The Golden Web*. 140.

⁴⁵ *Broadcasting Telecasting Yearbook*. Washington, D.C.: Broadcasting Publications, Inc., 1940, 26; *Broadcasting Telecasting Yearbook*. Washington, D.C.: Broadcasting Publications, Inc., 1948, 40.

preferred listening to a speech on the radio rather than reading it in the newspaper.⁴⁶

Yet the misconception that women did not appreciate news as much as household hints and cooking shows unfortunately thrived in early radio research, even when research data consistently showed women preferred news and informational programs. For example, Lazarsfeld noted in one study published in 1948:

The average American woman, just like American youth, is not interested in current affairs. This fact has been discovered in so many areas of behavior that we are not surprised to find it reflected also in program preferences. And it is indeed reflected, for twice as many men like discussions of public issues and considerably more men are interested in evening news broadcasts.⁴⁷

This generalization, however, does not adequately represent Lazarsfeld's own data. Lazarsfeld's assertion that men listened to more news than women is true only for audience members who spent less than one hour listening to the radio in the evening. However, the more radio that women listened to, the higher they ranked news and public discussions. And though news broadcasts were considered "programs preferred by men," the statistics cited in the study showed that news broadcasts were the most popular type of program for all groups of women. This finding was unchanged from the original survey, published in 1946. In that study, both men and women reported that they listened to news more often than any other program during both daytime and evening hours.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Cantril and Allport, *The Psychology of Radio*. 99.

⁴⁷ Lazarsfeld and Kendall, *Radio Listening in America*. 27.

⁴⁸ Bureau of Applied Social Research Columbia University, *The People Look at Radio*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1946. 103, 133, 135, 138-139. For a more in-depth comparison of Lazarsfeld's generalizations about women and the data used to support them, see: Stacy Spaulding, "Did women listen to news? A critical examination of landmark radio audience research (1935-1948)," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 82, no. 1 (2005):44-61.

Gender Ideologies

Criticism of women's tastes in radio programs was a product of social and cultural factors, according to Hilmes. In *Radio Voices*, she argued that the primarily female radio audience, along with the number of female pioneers in the field, created a feminized medium that worked "to define the gender role conflicts facing women and men during [the] highly formative post suffrage decades."⁴⁹ Hilmes wrote that in the 1920s women found various jobs in radio, but that in the 1930s they were restricted to women's programs. This exclusion, she maintained, was a result of the debate over radio's primary function: Was it a public institution that existed primarily to broadcast news and sports (seen as men's programs, even though women listened)?⁵⁰ Or was it a commercial institution, dependent on selling a product to an economic base of female audience members thought to be interested in household tips and daytime soap operas?⁵¹ Hilmes wrote that radio's "mass/private/feminine base constantly threatened to overwhelm its 'high'/public/masculine function."⁵²

These gendered radio genres were in part a creation of early radio ratings services, argued Eileen R. Meehan. "The ratings producer was no scientist motivated by curiosity, but rather a company seeking its self-interest through the profitable

⁴⁹ Hilmes, *Radio Voices*. 33.

⁵⁰ It is interesting that a 1940 article in *Variety* noted with surprise that women listened to sports programming. Apparently station WTMJ in Milwaukee, in a bid to find a sponsor for a 10:45 p.m. sportscast, sponsored a contest that garnered 6,508 entries of which 47.7 percent were from women, "amazing even the station execs (sic.) themselves." The article appeared next to a report on "Reactions of Males to Radio News." "New Light on Milwaukee's Sidewalks, Sportswomen," *Variety*, 10 July 1940, 31.

⁵¹ Hilmes, *Radio Voices*. 33, 140, 143.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 153.

manipulation of demand,” she wrote.⁵³ An examination of the political economy surrounding the emergence of radio ratings, she argued, showed that “ideology and economics interpenetrated to ‘naturalize’ both the consumerist ideal of domestic division of labor and the artificial market definition of the ‘real’ audience for radio.”⁵⁴

Women’s exclusion from the men’s world outside the home was also affirmed by the growing importance of news in the late 1930s and 1940s as Europe, and then the U.S., prepared for war, wrote historian Susan Douglas in *Listening In*. Edward R. Murrow’s legendary broadcasts from London, were “romantic while appearing to be antiromantic” and “contributed significantly to the image of the foreign correspondent as a daredevil with nerves of steel, defying danger to come his way.”⁵⁵ Douglas argued that as radio news developed during World War II, it presented images that reaffirmed middle-class values and masculinity.

Though it has been said that “no other medium has been more thoroughly forgotten,”⁵⁶ it is evident that historians today are paying more attention to the influence of gender on the early days of radio broadcasting. Several important works on the subject have been published in just the last few years, including Douglas’s *Listening In* (1999), Hilmes’s *Radio Voices* (1997) and Halper’s *Invisible Stars* (2001). Nevertheless, more study is needed to understand the ideologies identified here and how they have shaped not only women’s experiences as media workers and audiences, but the writing of radio history itself.

⁵³ Eileen R. Meehan, “Heads of Household and Ladies of the House: Gender, Genre, and Broadcast Ratings, 1929-1990” in *Ruthless Criticism: New Perspectives in U.S. Communication History*, ed. William S. Solomon and Robert W. McChesney (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 209.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Douglas, *Listening In*. 189-190, 198.

⁵⁶ Hilmes, *Radio Voices*. xiv.

Hilmes argued that gender discrimination was incorporated early into the practice of radio broadcasting. Gender ideologies (such as the conventional wisdom regarding women's voices or program preferences) were later incorporated not only into television practices, but also into the historical scholarship that has described both mediums, she contended. Hilmes stressed that alternative practices and voices did exist and must be incorporated into historical narratives and classes or else these "will continue to circulate and reinforce versions of history that incorporate a very real ideology—all the more insidious because they refuse to acknowledge their own partisan position."⁵⁷

The ideologies identified here include the disparagement of both women's voices and program preferences. Such ideologies were often seen as normal, even as they were questioned. When *The New York Times* announced that Lisa Sergio would become a broadcaster at NBC in 1937, the paper noted that "in America *for some reason or other* the male species captivated the 'mike'" (emphasis added).⁵⁸ Though the newspaper did wonder "if the gate to the microphone will open for other female announcers," such a reference to women's exclusion from announcing duties allowed this ideology to continue without questioning its origins or existence.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid., 287.

⁵⁸ "Miss Sergio With 'Fluent Phonetics' Points Way for Women Announcers."

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Chapter 4: Her First Life (1905-1937)

I firmly believe now that whatever I plan for myself rarely if ever comes to pass, whereas anything important and worth pursuing appears unexpectedly, in unforeseen circumstances. With the passing of time and the adverse knocks that life often dispenses, I have learned to wait for the “unforeseen circumstances,” to notice signs of impending change and to take action when an inner urge prompts me to do so, even if common sense militates against it.

—Lisa Sergio, *date unknown*¹



FIGURE 1. A Young Lisa Sergio

A photograph of Lisa Sergio taken in Italy, before her immigration to the United States. This photograph was most likely taken in the 1930s. Photo used with permission: Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Box 14 Folder 50.

¹ Lisa Sergio, “Chapter II Where It All Began,” Box 5 Folder 26, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 17.



FIGURE 2. *Albo Professionale dei Giornalisti*

Lisa Sergio was issued this *albo professionale dei giornalisti*, or professional journalist's registration, by the Fascist Regime Association. The album stated she was a journalist from Rome and a recognized correspondent. It was signed by the association's album committee president. Image used with permission: Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Box 13 Folder 30.

SOCIETÀ ITALIANA RADIO MARITTIMA ROMA - Via dei Condotti N. 11		DA NAVE A NAVE		DA TERRA ALLA NAVE	
MARCONIGRAMMA					
SHIP TO SHIP			SHORE TO SHIP		
Prefisso Prefix	N.°	Ufficio di origine - Handed in at	Parole N.° N.° of words	Data di origine Date handed in	Ora di origine Time handed in
P	5077/60	ROMA	16	28/6/37	17.35
Istruzioni di servizio Service instructions	VIA COLTANORDO	Data di ric.° Date Rec'd	Ora di ric.° Time Rec'd	Stazione r.t. Rec'd from	Firma del R. T.
		29/6/37	00.28	I. A. C.	Z/31
Durante il viaggio predispo- nete i Vostri affari per mezzo della radiotelegrafia.		La tassa per una risposta immediata è di Lit. per parola. The charge for an immediate reply is Lit. per word.			
A LISA SERGIO		To PFO CSAVOIA = COLTANORDO			
Arrange your business in advance by wireless No man is too busy to read a marconigram.		VIVISSIMI AUGURI DI BUON VIAGGIO GOOD LUCK.=			
		GUGLIELMO MARCONI			

FIGURE 3. *Marconigramma*

The Marconigram sent to Sergio by Guglielmo Marconi aboard the Conte di Savoia on 28 June 1937. Marconi sent Sergio his best wishes for a good voyage. Image used with permission: Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Box 19 Folder 2.

“Who are the famous announcers of Europe?” asked the host of NBC’s Magic Key of RCA broadcast in March, 1936.² He answered his own question, stating that Signorina Lisa Sergio was the “most famous of them all” and “familiar to millions” for her accounts of the Italo-Ethiopian war.³ “It may strike you as unusual that a woman should have received such prominence as a microphone reporter,” said the announcer, Milton Cross, introducing Sergio on the broadcast.⁴ “But in European

² *The Magic Key of RCA Radio Broadcast*. Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division, Library of Congress. ICD 26134. 8 March 1936.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

radio circles women at the microphone are no novelty and Signorina Lisa Sergio deserves her position at the pinnacle of her profession.”⁵

The hour-long Magic Key program, created in 1935 by NBC (which was owned by the Radio Corporation of America), was a Sunday matinee intended to spotlight famous stars, entertainers and musicians. It often featured segments from around the world via shortwave radio.⁶ Though she spoke only for a few moments to introduce the NBC symphony orchestra, that she was featured at all—a year and a half before she came to the United States—is an indicator of Sergio’s success as an English-speaking Italian radio announcer.

The subject of this chapter is that life in Italy: Lisa Sergio’s childhood, her early career, and her experience as an Italian radio broadcaster. This chapter is drawn from her own accounts in the numerous notes she made for an autobiography that was never published, and also from Sergio’s FBI file. These documents tell a little-known story of Italy’s pre-war invasion of European airwaves via short wave propaganda broadcasts, and they address whether or not Sergio really did have the right to call herself Europe’s first woman radio announcer. Neither of these episodes of radio history have been told in the English language histories of Italian radio.⁷

These documents also tell two other stories—both inexplicably about the same woman. One set of documents, penned by Sergio’s hand, paints her as an anti-fascist

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Luther F. Sies, *Encyclopedia of American Radio, 1920-1960*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2000. 348.

⁷ Such as: Philip V. Cannistraro, “The Organization of Totalitarian Culture: Cultural Policy and the Mass Media in Fascist Italy, 1922-1945” (New York University, 1971); Cannistraro, “The Radio in Fascist Italy.”; Walter B. Emery, *National and International Systems of Broadcasting: Their History, Operation and Control*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1969.

refugee from Mussolini's Italy. The second set of documents, compiled by FBI investigators, chronicles the exile of a woman who was said to have been too vocal about her affairs with high fascist officials.

Childhood in Florence

The only portrait of Lisa Sergio's childhood is contained in her autobiographical writings. She was born Elisa Maria Alice Sergio in Florence, Italy, on March 17, 1905. Though originally named after a Scottish grandmother she never met named Eliza, as a baby her father called her Lisa (pronounced as *Lee-za*) and the name stuck.⁸ Sergio's father was Baron Agostino Sergio, a landowner. Her mother was Margherita Fitzgerald, the daughter of Charles Hoffman Fitzgerald from Baltimore, Maryland, and Alice Lawrason Riggs of Virginia. American news coverage of her while she was an Italian radio announcer and immediately after she immigrated to the United States emphasized her mother's Baltimore connection, although Sergio's American grandparents had long roots in Italy.⁹ Sergio claimed the Fitzgeralds were direct descendants of that branch of the Gherardini family of Florence, who immigrated to Ireland taking the name of Fitz Gerald, meaning sons of Gherardo. She also claimed the Mona Lisa belonged to the branch of the Gherardini family that remained in Tuscany.¹⁰ Though originally from the United States, Sergio's grandparents spent most of their married years in Europe, "wintering in the

⁸ Sergio, "Chapter II Where It All Began," 23.

⁹ "Lisa Sergio, Radio Commentator in Italy and New York, Dies at 84."

¹⁰ Sergio, "Curriculum Vitae," 4.

gay capitals of the pre-war era, summering in elegant resorts” and finally settling in Florence when their youngest daughter married an Italian and bore Lisa, their first grandchild.¹¹

Florence, the center of the Italian renaissance and an obligatory stop on the European grand tour, was a cultural beacon during Sergio’s childhood. Musicians, actors and actresses, artists, poets and writers flocked to the city. The university drew some of the best students in the country. Thriving colonies of foreigners, especially poets and artists, contributed to the cultural life of the city and many lived there for years.¹² (English residents of Florence included Robert and Elizabeth Browning, who lived there from 1846 until 1861. D.H. Lawrence traveled to Florence in 1919 and settled in a villa where he wrote *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*.¹³) Writers and intellectuals intersected in the atmosphere that permeated Sergio’s childhood. Her father’s house, in fact, sat near the *Cimitero Degli Inglesi* along Boulevard Viale, “the quaint old English cemetery where such romantic people as the Brownings had been laid to rest” and where Sergio frequently played as a child.¹⁴ Sergio recalled sitting by Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s graveside as a teenager and weeping after discovering that Robert Browning’s remains had been interred at Westminster Abbey, leaving Elizabeth alone.¹⁵

¹¹ Lisa Sergio, “The Dream was Veiled in Blue,” Box 8 Folder 26, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1961, 9.

¹² Walter L Adamson, *Avant-Garde Florence*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993. 33.

¹³ Olive Hamilton, *Paradise of Exiles*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1974. 138, 161-162.

¹⁴ Lisa Sergio, “Roots and Blossoms, Tragedy and Fun,” Box 5 Folder 27, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 14.

¹⁵ Ibid.

In the middle of this intellectual, artistic society, Sergio was raised by her nurses and her American grandparents.¹⁶ She grew up speaking both English and Italian at home. Her childhood education consisted of private tutoring.¹⁷ She boarded for a short time at Sacred Heart School, a local English school.¹⁸ Sergio wrote that she often felt different from the other children because she was always more interested in books rather than playing.¹⁹ She maintained this love of books and reading was enhanced by an interest in news as Sergio began reading the newspapers to her grandmother, whose eyesight was failing. “I found it challenging to become her official informer of the day’s news. I read papers from Paris, London and New York in addition to four Italian dailies which she had learnt enough Italian to understand.”²⁰

Sergio’s parents, however, were rarely around. Their relationship had always been strained and ended in an official separation after a violent altercation in 1910, just after Sergio turned five. Sergio wrote two accounts of the incident, both of which start with her father’s anger over her mother’s defiance—in one account Sergio’s mother lets her play in the English cemetery instead of confining her to the family garden,²¹ and in the other account Sergio’s mother gives Sergio a bath, despite the baron’s orders not to bathe the child, fearing a chill would make her cold worse.²² Both accounts end the same way:

¹⁶ Sergio, “Chapter II Where It All Began,” 22.

¹⁷ Sergio, “Curriculum Vitae,” 1.

¹⁸ Sergio, “Chapter II Where It All Began,” 24.

¹⁹ Lisa Sergio, “Forty Little Heads,” Box 5 Folder 27, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 3.

²⁰ Sergio, “The Dream was Veiled in Blue,” 9.

²¹ Sergio, “Roots and Blossoms, Tragedy and Fun,” 15.

²² Sergio, “Chapter II Where It All Began,” 24.

He raised his voice, she raised hers. He dashed out of the room returning with something in his hand. She yelled, grabbed me in her arms and ran out on the terrace above the garden. The single shot missed us both by a hair. He dropped the small revolver, flew down the stairs and out of the house. I remember hearing his electric car start up and take off down the street.²³

For a time afterwards, Sergio lived with her grandparents and her mother, seeing her father on Mondays. But the visits soon stopped. Despite the absence of her father, Sergio never grew close to her mother. Their relationship remained rocky and, at times, hateful. “I thought of my mother as a stranger,” she wrote.²⁴ “The only friend I could really trust, the one I knew would sympathize and understand was my Virginian grandmother.”²⁵

War and personal tragedy forced Sergio to make peace with death early on in her life. Though Italy at first attempted to remain neutral during World War I, the country declared war on Austria-Hungary in 1915 after signing the secret Treaty of London. Sergio was ten. During the war Sergio saw even less of her mother, who joined the Red Cross and worked in the surgical division of a local school converted into a hospital. At times during the war, her mother didn’t even come home to sleep.²⁶ When she was home, the relatives of soldiers often came to see her mother to receive personal items recovered from soldiers who had died in her hospital.²⁷ Sergio visited wounded soldiers in the hospital every Sunday. “I could not understand why a man

²³ Sergio, “Roots and Blossoms, Tragedy and Fun,” 15.

²⁴ Sergio, “The Dream was Veiled in Blue,” 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

²⁶ Sergio, “Chapter II Where It All Began,” 25; Sergio, “Forty Little Heads,” 7.

²⁷ Sergio, “Chapter II Where It All Began,” 28.

was now dead who, the week before, had made such a lovely wooden horse for me,” she wrote. “It was not easy.”²⁸

The following year, in 1916, Sergio’s father died. Sergio was spending the summer at the beach with the Braggiotti family, where she was nicknamed “summer sister” and called Mrs. Braggiotti her “summer mama.” After receiving news of his death from Sergio’s mother, Mrs. Braggiotti told Sergio what had happened. “It was my first encounter with death and she made it beautiful,” Sergio wrote.²⁹

Because of what my “summer Mama” told me that day I have never been afraid of death, often as it has been my destiny to encounter it. ... Many many years ago she led me to understand that death is only the end of a journey to which, sooner or later, we all come and that beyond it is another life, filled with light and without sorrow. Crying silently, I accepted her words then, but as I grew up they became my own and have remained one of my greatest strengths.³⁰

This was the first in a long line of deaths that would touch Sergio’s life. In 1919, Mrs. Braggiotti died just three years after informing Sergio of her father’s death. Both of Sergio’s grandparents died before her twenty-first birthday in 1926, the man she said was her lover and husband died in 1931, and the American woman who adopted her as an adult died in 1955.

Without the clear influence of her own mother and father during her childhood, Sergio wrote that she drew strength from the Braggiotti family—she loved them and felt they loved her in return.³¹ Like Lisa, the Braggiotti family later found their way to the United States. Mario Braggiotti became a well-known pianist and

²⁸ Ibid., 22.

²⁹ Ibid., 30.

³⁰ Ibid., 31.

³¹ Ibid., 32.

Stiano Braggiotti an actor. Gloria Braggiotti was a dancer and actress and the fashion editor for *The New York Post* before marrying Philadelphia artist Emien Etting. She was later named by *Life* magazine as one of America's top ten hostesses and for over twenty five years was an occasional writer for *Town and Country* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. Francesca Braggiotti married John Davis Lodge, the grandson of Sen. Henry Cabot Lodge (R-Mass.). John Davis Lodge went on to become a member of the U.S. House of Representatives and the governor of Connecticut.³²

Sergio came of age at a time when Fascism was a struggling political party and growing slowly. Italy, at this time, was governed by a parliamentary system under which the king retained executive powers. In 1919, Fascism was among two new political groups demanding radical change. Fascism made the same kinds of demands for democratization as political parties such as the Socialist, Catholic Popolari and Republican parties. The working classes initially remained loyal to the Socialist party, which resulted in a humiliating showing for the Fascists in the November, 1919, elections. By the summer of 1920, however, the movement had grown to include 36 branches and 20,000 members, mainly in the northern urban and metropolitan areas. In 1919 and 1920, a time called the "red two years,"³³ a growing and more militant working-class movement participated in a series of militant strikes, protests and violence against socialist opponents. A backlash movement that became known as "agrarian fascism" grew up suddenly in opposition to the Socialist party,

³² "Like Elizabeth Arden," *Time*, 17 March 1947, 21; "Milestones," *Time*, 13 June 1938, 52; "Milestones," *Time*, 15 July 1929, 18. Gayle Ronan Sims and Andy Wallace, "Gloria Braggiotti Etting, 94, traveler, writer and hostess," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 19 September 2003, <<http://www.macon.com/mld/inquirer/news/obituaries/6806454.htm>>.

³³ John Pollard, *The Fascist Experience in Italy*. London: Routledge, 1998. 27.

spreading fascism to the southern and rural parts of Italy, and turning into a “violent, extra-parliamentary” movement that attracted support but had no parliamentary representation.³⁴

When the Fascist riots broke out in Florence, Sergio, then fifteen, happened to be taking her last university admittance exam. It was in the subject of drawing, which she was afraid she would fail. “In the midst of it a rain of huge stones came inside the class room from the outside window that looked on the Arno river,” Sergio wrote.³⁵ The students were rushed into the school’s basement and were not sent home until the riots moved further into town. “The better part of it was, for us, that we were all given passing marks for the exam we never could complete!”³⁶

A year later, a 16-year-old Sergio met for the first time a man she only named in her writings as “Morris,” a “beautiful man who was a member of a very elegant cavalry unit.”³⁷ Sergio never used Morris’ last name in her writings and gave few personal details about him, other than to say he was decorated for bravery in World War I and had two brothers, one in the Italian navy and another who made movies.³⁸ The Ryan profile of Sergio, published the year after her death, names him only as “Fabrizio.”³⁹ A friend of Sergio said that this man’s name was Gelasio Caetani (1877-

³⁴ Ibid., 38.

³⁵ Lisa Sergio, “Chapter III The Family and the Fascists,” Box 5 Folder 26, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Agnes Palazzetti, “Europe’s First Woman Broadcaster Recalls Career ‘Boost’ From Mussolini,” *The Buffalo (N.Y.) News*, 11 April 1986, C1. Box 14 Folder 22, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

³⁸ Sergio, “Chapter II Where It All Began,” 22a.

³⁹ Ryan, “Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America”, 61.

1934).⁴⁰ Caetani, however, was the Italian ambassador to the United States in 1922, and not a member of a cavalry unit. Also, according to the ages Sergio gave for “Morris” in her writings, it is probable that “Morris” was born in 1887, not 1877 as Caetani was. (Though Sergio claimed to have carried a picture of “Morris” with her throughout her life, there is no such picture in the Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.⁴¹ There is a negative of a portrait of Gelasio Caetani in the Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. It is inscribed, however, to Washington hostess Mildred Bliss and was obtained by Sergio in 1969 after Bliss’ death.⁴²)

According to Sergio’s writings, when she finally turned 18 “Morris” noticed her and asked her out for coffee. “The French have a word for what happened to us that morning—*coup de foudre*.”⁴³ The start of their romance was not unlike that of her own father and mother: her father was an aristocrat in his forties and her mother only twenty five with parents that initially did not approve of their relationship.⁴⁴ Similarly, Morris was eighteen years Sergio’s senior (making him thirty six at the time of their first date) and Sergio’s mother, knowing Morris’ reputation for

⁴⁰ Weinmann interview.

⁴¹ *Desert Island Disks* Radio interview with Lisa Sergio for WETA, recording provided by Eric and Mary Weinmann. 1986.

⁴² Gelasio Caetani photo negative, 1924. Box 14 Folder 32, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁴³ *Coup de foudre* is an idiomatic expression that means love at first sight, or literally “a lightening strike” or to be “struck by lightening.” Sergio, “Chapter II Where It All Began,” 18.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 22a.

womanizing and hoping Sergio would marry another beau, was against the match, Sergio wrote.

In 1922, with the encouragement of her grandfather, Sergio became an associate editor of the only English-language weekly in Italy, the *Italian Mail*. She eventually became the assistant editor and then the editor. While there she claimed to have edited the work of Aldous Huxley, Ezra Pound, and D.H. Lawrence before leaving the position in 1927. Sergio described the paper as non-political, and concerned chiefly with art “in all its forms” for an English-speaking readership throughout Italy.⁴⁵

The year Sergio began working for the *Italian Mail*, 1922, was the same year that Mussolini led his March on Rome, successfully using his “extra-parliamentary” movement to persuade King Victor Emmanuel II to appoint him as prime minister and invite him to set up another government. Though it would be another seven years before Mussolini was able to consolidate enough power to establish a firm dictatorship, fascism began to change daily life in Italy. The government enacted legislation to protect workers, made improvements in health care and education and started many building projects. The Fascist government also sought to nationalize women, involving them in the daily duties of nationhood. Yet, paradoxically, it also acted to prevent their political freedom, either individual or collective emancipation.⁴⁶ The state glorified motherhood, and yet stripped women of power. For instance, though in other countries political rights expanded as maternity practices modernized,

⁴⁵ Sergio, “The Dream was Veiled in Blue,” 21.

⁴⁶ Victoria De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992. 6, 15.

in Italy the reverse happened. “The provision of welfare services was stamped with the arbitrariness of power,” wrote scholar Victoria DeGrazia. “This power was exercised with a clear-cut ideological bias against women.”⁴⁷

Sergio wrote that fascism made it fashionable for women to work. Though she still lived with her grandfather and then her mother, Sergio’s job gave her a sense of independence from her mother and traditional society. About this period in her life, Sergio later wrote:

The Florentines are not strangers to each other, everybody knows everybody, alas, in this absurd society which is dying for lack of fresh air, new blood and new ideas. That’s why I am glad my grandfather is an American with other views of life, because he helped me to make up my mind about working for the newspaper, just as he also got me the job. If I did what my mother thinks I should I would asphyxiate and die.⁴⁸

Sergio wrote that she desired to lead a useful life, “beyond the usefulness of bearing children.”⁴⁹ She wrote that work, to her, was more than just an interest. Sergio wrote that it was also an inspiration and a psychological salvation.⁵⁰ In fact, as more women began to consume Italian media, journalism became the fastest growing profession in Italy in the years between the two World Wars. In 1921, women made up seven percent of writers and journalists in Italy, a figure that increased to twelve percent in 1931.⁵¹ Italian women also increased their numbers in other professions, including nursing, social work and teaching. But professional women, though a privileged caste, were to remain low in number. This was in part due to the elaborate

⁴⁷ Ibid., 59-60.

⁴⁸ Sergio, “The Dream was Veiled in Blue,” 35.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 90.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*. 196.

patronage systems that helped establish (or bar) women in a professional practice such as law or medicine. And though modern professional organizations formed during these years, it was against a backdrop of state sanctioning women's nearly total exclusion from the workplace. This is evident in the decree-law of September 5, 1938, that ordered state and private offices to cut back female workers to no more than ten percent of their entire staff.⁵²

Travels during this period of her life brought Sergio into contact with a man who was a friend of her father's and would prove to be a salvation later when she needed to escape Italy: Guglielmo Marconi. Dates of their first encounter vary throughout Sergio's writings—she wrote variously that they met at a reception held at the Italian embassy in London either in 1923 or 1929⁵³ or later in Rome in 1932.⁵⁴ At their first meeting, however, Sergio wrote that Marconi asked Sergio to translate his notes and to help him prepare for a London speech.⁵⁵

Around 1929 or 1930, Sergio left her family's home and took up residence in Rome. It was an unheard-of thing to do, Sergio wrote, mostly because, "those were still the days when young unmarried women did not travel without a chaperone and never, never took up residence alone in any town!"⁵⁶ But Sergio had other reasons for moving to Rome as well. The cavalry officer that she was in love with was transferred

⁵² Ibid., 197-198, 166.

⁵³ Lisa Sergio, "Chapter IV Breaking the Rules," Box 5 Folder 26, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1; Lisa Sergio, "Guglielmo Marconi: The Silent Man Who Made the Ether Speak," Box 7 Folder 40, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1; Sergio, "Gente translation," 3.

⁵⁴ Sergio, "Guglielmo Marconi: The Silent Man Who Made the Ether Speak," 2.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Sergio, "Chapter II Where It All Began," 19.

there. Sergio wrote she longed to marry him, but there was no money for the dowry required of military brides.⁵⁷ Sergio's mother was against the marriage, and, according to Sergio, when she left the house her mother insisted that she leave for good, taking all of her possessions and books.⁵⁸ Sergio wrote that she and "Morris" were able to see each other more often in Rome, becoming engaged and spending weekends together. The Ryan profile stated that she lived with him, creating "the scandal of Florentine society."⁵⁹ It would not last long. Sergio's lover became ill with what was first diagnosed as dry pleurisy and later lung cancer. They were told he had six months to live.⁶⁰ He was taken to a hospital run by English nuns on Coelian Hill, across from the Villa Calimon Tana where Sergio worked.⁶¹ Sergio wrote that they married on June 14, 1931, just before Morris's death, ironically on Sergio's mother's birthday. About his death, Sergio later wrote:

It was a loss from which I have really not recovered sufficiently to ever get married to anyone else. Fifty seven or more years have passed and I still miss him. I always will. The pain of it is still there, much as a very old scar can still be painful at times.⁶²

Writer Niccolo Tucci, a longtime friend of Sergio's, described her as being devoted to this man for the rest of her life. "After his death ... whenever she had to make a decision, she wrote him a letter. At times a sordid letter. It was nothing very

⁵⁷ Palazzetti, "Europe's First Woman Broadcaster Recalls Career 'Boost' From Mussolini."

⁵⁸ Sergio, "The Dream was Veiled in Blue," 101.

⁵⁹ Ryan, "Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America", 61.

⁶⁰ Sergio, "The Dream was Veiled in Blue," 137, 143

⁶¹ Sergio, "The Dream was Veiled in Blue," 146.

⁶² Lisa Sergio, "Chapter V Death and the Pain of It," Box 5 Folder 26, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1.

abnormal for her, but it was something very sad,” he was quoted as saying in the Ryan profile.⁶³ Sergio never remarried.

Shortly after her move to Rome, Sergio became the bibliographer for the magazine of the Association of Mediterranean Studies, combining interests in archaeology and writing.⁶⁴ While in this position, she said she wrote the first official English guidebook to Pompeii, which was used until after World War II.⁶⁵ She participated in archeological digs in Ostia, Herculaneum and Pompeii and worked with Romanist Eugenie Sellers Strong. Sergio remembered years later serving tea and cakes at Strong’s Sunday “at homes” where she met American notables such as Ezra Pound.⁶⁶ Identification cards from this period certified her membership in the Royal Institute Library of Archeology and Art History and showed she had free entrance to Royal Museum galleries, monuments and digs.⁶⁷

Sergio Becomes “The English Speaker”

In 1932, Italian dictator Benito Mussolini decided to begin fascist propaganda broadcasts over shortwave radio. Mussolini sought the advice of Marconi on whether the idea was feasible and if he knew anyone who spoke English well. Sergio claimed

⁶³ St. Mary’s College, “Commencement,” Commencement program, Box 13 Folder 20, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 4 June, 1966; Ryan, “Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America”, 61.

⁶⁴ Lisa Sergio to Gayle K. Yamada 17 September 1986, Box 9 Folder 34, Sergio papers

⁶⁵ Sergio, “Curriculum Vitae,” 3.

⁶⁶ Sergio, “Chapter V Death and the Pain of It,” 1.

⁶⁷ Identification cards, Box 13 Folder 30, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

that Marconi recommended her.⁶⁸ She wrote she met Mussolini shortly afterwards as she was organizing silver artifacts for an archaeological exhibit. They talked for a few minutes about her job and the other languages she spoke.⁶⁹

A few days after the encounter, Sergio wrote that she received a call from the press department of the Italian Foreign Office, and was asked to meet with Gaetano Polverelli, the head of Mussolini's press office from 1931 to 1933. Polverelli explained the concept for the foreign language news broadcasts and said that Marconi had suggested her for the job. He also questioned her politics, asking her if she was an ardent Fascist. "Ardent Fascist? Everybody is. Because I think he's done a marvelous job for Italy," Sergio said she replied.⁷⁰ In a 1941 interview she gave to the *Christian Science Monitor*, Sergio said that like other Italians, she was hopeful Mussolini would bring about a better economic and social situation in the country. "Like thousands of other young people in Italy, I got caught up in it," she said. "Fascism is essentially a movement of youth and youth is seldom aware of history and its lessons."⁷¹

Sergio wrote that she initially refused the job offer. She said she did not know anything about broadcasting or politics and had no plans to change careers. But Polverelli insisted that the new job would take only an hour or so a day, and that she wouldn't have to quit her archeological work. (Once she took the new position, it

⁶⁸ Lisa Sergio, "Chapter VI Unplanned Encounter with Mussolini," Box 5 Folder 26, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1.

⁶⁹ Ibid.; Sergio, "Gente translation," 6.

⁷⁰ Lisa Sergio, interview by unknown interviewer circa 1986. Tape 11, Box 16 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁷¹ Inez Whiteley Foster, "Mussolini Scorns But Dares Not Ignore Women, Says Lisa Sergio," *Christian Science Monitor*, 26 December 1941. Box 19 Folder 4, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

became quite obvious the workload was so heavy she had to quit her previous position.) Sergio was torn. “There was a regular battle developing in my mind: common sense urging me to accept, an indefinable feeling telling me to decline,”⁷² Sergio wrote. “I was flattered by the offer, awed by the nature of the job.”⁷³

Sergio wrote that she consulted with Marconi and one of her archeology colleagues, both of whom urged her to take the job. Much later in life she speculated on the possibility of conferring with an uncle over the position. According to Sergio her uncle, Don Giulio Rodino Di Miglione, was an anti-fascist living in Naples who in 1945 became a member of the caretaker government set up by the Allies. However, she was not close to her father’s family. “Had he then lived in Rome, or had I known my cousins, I would probably have consulted them and my life would have taken a different course,” she later wrote.⁷⁴ But in 1932, when Fascism was only 10 years old, it was still quite popular abroad and with the Italian people and to her it had “achieved more good things than bad” at the time.⁷⁵ Mussolini’s popularity was still rising and Sergio watched as social change came to the country.⁷⁶ When Polverelli again called for a meeting with her, and sent a police motorcycle with a sidecar to fetch her, Sergio found it hard to refuse the offer. She wrote:

The combination had been irresistible, of course: flattery, il Duce, Marconi, the police escort, two radio men waiting in the Press Chief’s office to discuss with me a few technical details of the program. To

⁷² Lisa Sergio, “It was a day so long ago,” Box 5 Folder 28, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 4.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

sum it up: A fascist invitation is a fascist command. You can't say no.⁷⁷

Italy had gotten a late start in broadcasting. The first Italian radio station did not open until 1924 and Mussolini did not attempt to fully control it until the late 1920s.⁷⁸ The first state agency governing broadcasting, Unione Radiofonica Italiana, was established in 1924 and in 1927 was replaced by Ente Italiano Audizioni Radiofoniche (EIAR). The government controlled EIAR's content through a "committee of vigilance" and later through a division in the Ministry of Popular Culture. By 1928, there were five transmitting stations located in Rome, Milan, Naples, Bolzano and Genoa. They transmitted 6,000 hours of programming, or about 17 hours of programming per day to 61,500 radio subscribers.⁷⁹ In 1934, Italy had 365,000 radios, or 8.6 radios per 1,000 people. This was among the lowest radio-to-population ratio in Europe, comparable to Spain (7.7), Lithuania (7.1), Poland (9.75). The shortwave broadcasts undertaken by Italy were aimed at the countries with some of the highest ratios of radio ownership: France (33.1), U.S. (147.9) and Great Britain (133.4).⁸⁰

In 1926, Mussolini had declared that public performances could not be given without prior permission of the government. This decree included radio and motion pictures, as well as opera, drama, concerts and ballets. This expanded the possibilities for Fascist propaganda, allowing it to dominate public recreation.⁸¹ Despite the late

⁷⁷ Ibid., 6.

⁷⁸ Lisa Sergio, *From Intervention to Empire: A Book of Fascist Dates*. Rome: Novissima, 1937. 92.

⁷⁹ Cannistraro, "The Organization of Totalitarian Culture: Cultural Policy and the Mass Media in Fascist Italy, 1922-1945", 175-176.

⁸⁰ A.R. Burrows, "World Radio Population over 176,000,000" *Broadcasting*, 15 April 1934, 13.

⁸¹ Emery, *National and International Systems of Broadcasting: Their History, Operation and Control*. 262.

start, by 1932 the nation's broadcasting system had acquired a reputable standing in Europe. In September of that year a new broadcasting center was opened in Rome.⁸² Italians at that time could boast of fourteen stations, a network of cables over 3,700 kilometers, and even two full symphony orchestras, each with eighty musicians, created especially for radio broadcasts. A Nottingham, England, newspaper marveled that "the Italian network is organised [sic] in such a way that the cable system makes it possible for any important event to be broadcast all over the country, no matter at what station it may originate."⁸³ Furthermore, the new Rome broadcasting house possessed thick walls and large, soundproof studios, "all of which give a sensation of deafness upon entering. There is no penetration of outside noises, and the sound of the 80-piece symphonic orchestra playing in the next room is entirely inaudible."⁸⁴

Yet, although it had advanced and had potential, radio was perhaps never as fully integrated into the regime's communication policies as other media. Scholars have noted that totalitarian governments "have been largely responsible for the initial growth of the mass media—particularly films and the radio," but that they also underrated the potential of radio as compared to the printed press. "Even after the Ethiopian War, when motion pictures began to assume an increasingly larger role in fascist cultural policies, the radio was still relegated to third place among the media of mass communication," wrote Philip V. Cannistraro, a scholar of Italian radio.⁸⁵ This may be in some way related to the amount of control the regime exerted over the

⁸² Sergio, *From Intervention to Empire: A Book of Fascist Dates*. 163.

⁸³ "Italy's Radio Progress," *The Nottingham News*, 23 January 1934. Box 19 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Cannistraro, "The Radio in Fascist Italy," 127, 153.

press versus radio. While it was relatively easy to close down oppositional newspapers, no one could stop the reach of short-wave programs (though it is thought that relatively few Italians listened to the short-wave broadcasts originating outside of Italy.)⁸⁶ The inability of foreign governments to regulate which short-wave broadcasts reached their citizens and listeners was a strategic advantage Mussolini was to take advantage of with his short-wave foreign language broadcasts.

Mussolini's idea for propaganda broadcasts was launched at the same time as *Radio Rurale*, a program intended to acquaint rural Italian citizens with fascist propaganda and policies.⁸⁷ By 1933, Italy was not only broadcasting fascist propaganda within the country, but also launching a widespread short-wave propaganda campaign intended to shape perceptions of fascism throughout Europe, the United States, South America and elsewhere. To some extent, this reflected what other national broadcasting systems were doing. In 1935 France began English and Spanish short-wave broadcasts to Australia, the United States and South America. Germany, too, expanded short-wave service to North, Central and South America, Africa, and Asia. But in 1935 Italy, according to *The Times* of London, "has gone much further than other countries in building up special foreign broadcasts. These are quite openly addressed to particular countries and are given in their languages."⁸⁸ The

⁸⁶ Daniel Waley, *British Public Opinion and the Abyssinian War 1935-6*. London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1975. 229.

⁸⁷ Cannistraro, "The Organization of Totalitarian Culture: Cultural Policy and the Mass Media in Fascist Italy, 1922-1945", 185-186.

⁸⁸ "Propaganda By Radio, Italian Activity Increasing," *The Times of London*, 21 September 1935. Box 19 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

bulletins, *The Times* wrote, contained items “selected according to the Italian point of view and aim at influencing foreign public opinion.”⁸⁹

So it was that in 1932 Sergio “quite reluctantly”⁹⁰ became one of the most well-known broadcasters when she began giving Italy’s foreign language propaganda broadcasts sponsored by the Office of Press and Propaganda. (In 1935 the office expanded to become a ministry and in 1937 was named the Ministry of Popular Culture.) Her hiring was announced in newspapers in England and the United States, which played up her American connections.⁹¹ She was issued an identification card that certified her as a professional journalist and a railroad trip booklet for journalists that entitled her to a 70 percent reduced fair.⁹² Sergio’s responsibilities included translating news items into French and English and broadcasting a 15-minute news program at 7 p.m. Mussolini’s goal for these newscasts was to explain the fascist regime and its policies to foreign countries such as England and America. Sergio was also given responsibility for hiring additional foreign-language broadcasters. And in 1935, Sergio devised a system of giving lessons in Italian at the end of the program, which listeners could study with materials provided free to those who wrote to Rome to request them. The broadcasts generated a stir in England and in Europe, and newspapers commented on the comments from “the English speaker” from Rome.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Sergio, “Chapter VI Unplanned Encounter with Mussolini,” 1.

⁹¹ For example: William Bird, “American Girl is 2RO Voice: Lisa Sergio Will Be Heard From Rome Soon,” *The (New York) Sun*, September 1932. Box 19 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁹² “Romance Loses Out, Sophisticated Topic Preferred by WQXR Listeners,” *New York Sun*, 27 May 1939. Box 19 Folder 4, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

Her “enunciation is perfect, and is a delight to listen to,” wrote *The Nottingham News*.⁹³ Similarly, *The Daily Telegraph of London* commented that, “so perfect are her accent and inflexions [sic] that only when she comes to place names does any suspicion arise that she is not English.”⁹⁴

At this time, 1932, Italy was planning a colonial conquest of Ethiopia while trying to minimize the likelihood of European interference. Though Ethiopia’s independence was probably not of great concern to Britain and France, that Ethiopia was a member of the League of Nations (founded to protect aggression against member nations) meant an invasion could not be ignored. Mussolini’s conquest would demonstrate the ineffectiveness of the League of Nations’ ability to enforce security. The League imposed limited sanctions against Italy that prohibited loans and imports and embargoed some war-related materials. The sanctions were ineffective, slow to work, and only partially supported by member nations (and not by the United States). Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in October, 1935, launching a full-scale modern war with artillery and air power. After seven months, and the fleeing of Emperor Haile Selassie, Mussolini declared Ethiopia to be part of Italy’s fascist empire.

It was in the context of debate surrounding the League of Nations and sanctions against Italy that the short-wave broadcasts were first heard. They caused such a stir that this was commented upon in *The New Yorker*’s “Paris Letter” in 1936. In her column Janet Flanner wrote that Parisians had taken note of the 7 p.m.

⁹³ “Italy’s Radio Progress.”

⁹⁴ “Italian Woman Announcer,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 October 1935. Box 19 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

broadcasts, which gave the news in five languages: Italian first, then Czech, English, French and German, noting even that in the last three cases, all of the announcers were women:

The monologues of The English Speaker, as she calls herself, have been of peculiar interest to the French, since they contain the worst cracks at the English and at sanctions, and since the Signora's Oxford accent is a reproof to Labour in itself ... With the intonation of a Duse, she has called the London *Times* a liar; she has described Ethiopians as "a bunch of black savage tribes uninterested either in progress or prosperity;" she has referred to Reuters, the news agency, as an emitter of "indescribable falsehoods."⁹⁵

The European and American response to the broadcasts was overwhelming, Sergio wrote in her unpublished autobiography. Referring to her nickname "the golden voice of Rome" she wrote: "The broadcasts were attracting more attention than anyone had hoped. They were factual and I tried to make them light and interesting. Few if any women were being heard on the European airwaves then and the Voice of Rome soon acquired the title of Golden."⁹⁶

Other propaganda efforts were being made to reach European publics. For instance, the Italian embassy in London received £14,600 to spend on propaganda activities, which included sending pamphlets to thousands of British households. Ambassador Dino Grandi reported to Mussolini that "the Italian case was getting a good hearing; many appreciative letters had been received and only one person had returned the literature sent him."⁹⁷ But news broadcasts had the ability to address news of the day more immediately than pamphlets. In addition, the broadcasts

⁹⁵ Janet (aka Genet) Flanner, "Paris Letter," *The New Yorker*, 28 October 1936. Box 19 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁹⁶ Sergio, "It was a day so long ago," 6.

⁹⁷ Waley, *British Public Opinion and the Abyssinian War 1935-6*. 117,119.

answered questions asked in some of the several thousands of letters pouring into the Italian government inquiring about fascism. Sergio recalled years later that a great deal of her time was spent answering such letters.⁹⁸ She noted that correspondents wanted to know if the success of the fascist government could be duplicated, if a corporate state was the answer to labor problems and unemployment, or if the single party system was the answer to weak parliamentary governments prone to collapse. Other questions she recalled included: Was government sponsored recreation and total control of the education system and teacher training the answer to crime and delinquency? Could government-controlled health programs stop the tuberculosis epidemics?⁹⁹ Most of the questions, however, were about the corporate state, she said in a radio interview much later in her life.¹⁰⁰

In appraising the effect of Sergio's broadcasts, *The New Yorker* wrote that "with the exception of the extreme Left press and public, the body of the French papers and Parisians are pro-Italian, on the fence about the League, and anti everything that looks like not sitting tight and promising England nothing."¹⁰¹ English newspapers, on the other hand, worried aloud about the propaganda tendencies of the broadcasts. "Being intended for direct English consumption, these broadcasts make an insidious rather than a direct attack on British policy," wrote *The Daily*

⁹⁸ Lisa Sergio, interviews by unknown interviewer circa 1986. Tapes 7, 8 side B, 10, Box 16 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁹⁹ Sergio, "It was a day so long ago," 7.

¹⁰⁰ *Desert Island Disks*.

¹⁰¹ Flanner, "Paris Letter."

Telegraph.¹⁰² *The Spectator* of London agonized about whether listeners might be fooled by a broadcaster whose perfect diction could “out-Oxford Oxford in affected impeccability.”¹⁰³ That she was reading a variety of extracts from European newspapers aided the guise, the paper wrote:

The broadcasts aim at weakening the public opinion which advocates the enforcement of sanctions. ... We have ourselves become implicated in the struggle by the mere fact of listening-in. The battle line has been extended to our very hearthrug. The combat is not one of rifle and machine gun, but rather the clash of ideas.¹⁰⁴

The Spectator also worried that Ethiopia had no similar means of educating the world about its position, a concern shared by L. Marsland Gander, a radio critic who regularly wrote for *The Daily Telegraph*. The BBC, wrote Gander, had tried to remain neutral in its selection of speakers, all the while refusing to include broadcasts from Addis Ababa in its program and even rejecting a proposal to send a correspondent to Ethiopia. The BBC, he wrote, wanted to avoid any appearance of propaganda programs on the network even though the short-wave Italian programs he described as “propaganda” could be received easily in London:

British newspapers hostile to Italy are denounced and the woman announcer always claims to be receiving many letters from English listeners sympathetic to Italy. These, she says, are a true indication of public opinion in Great Britain and not the effusions of newspaper

¹⁰² “B.B.C. Diction in Rome,” *The Daily Telegraph*. Circa 1935, Box 19 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰³ Stephen Clissold, “The War on the Air,” *The Spectator*, 29 November 1935, 806-807. Box 19 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

writers. To listen to these broadcasts one would imagine that the whole world is supporting Italy.¹⁰⁵

Noting that Germany, Russia, France and Spain were broadcasting similar programs, Gander wrote that “broadcasting seems more and more to be given over to national propaganda in the countries of Europe. ... Britain remains aloof.”¹⁰⁶ Italy, in the meantime, dramatically added other languages to the broadcasts, with Sergio hiring additional staff linguists (mostly women). The BBC did not begin foreign language broadcasts until 1938, when competition from Italy in reaching Arabic-speaking audiences forced the British House of Commons to see the need to provide news in order to counter totalitarian propaganda.¹⁰⁷

In her autobiography Sergio claimed a number of other notable experiences during this period of her life. She claimed to have played hostess to Mahatma Gandhi during his 1932 visit to Rome. She wrote that the language lessons at the end of her broadcasts became so popular that a London publisher offered to publish an Italian grammar book based on the on-air instruction. The government gave her permission to write the book which appeared in 1935.¹⁰⁸ But when she fled in 1937, the government then republished the book as a paperback and sold it at the Italian Pavilion at the New York World’s fair in 1940.¹⁰⁹ “Since they did not bother to erase or change the author’s name, they unwittingly gave me free publicity in lieu of

¹⁰⁵ L. Marsland Gander, “England Has an Ear to the Air,” *The New York Times*, 20 October 1935. Box 19 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Asa Briggs, *The BBC: The First Fifty Years*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985. 141-142.

¹⁰⁸ Lisa Sergio, *Shorter Italian, A Practical Grammar for Every Day Use*. London: Hirschfeld Brothers, 1935.

¹⁰⁹ Lisa Sergio, *A Short Italian Grammar*. Verona: A. Mondadori, 1937.

royalties,” she wrote.¹¹⁰ In addition, Sergio won a competition sponsored by the Ministry of Press and Propaganda for the best article on Italy published in magazines or newspapers outside of the country. Sergio’s article, titled “Ancient Rome Emerges From Ruins Under the Hand of Mussolini,” promoted Italian tourism and appeared in *The Washington Post* in 1935. The prize for winning the contest was 5,000 lire.¹¹¹ She also claimed to have attended Mussolini’s first meeting with Hitler in Venice in June, 1934.¹¹²

Her work as a radio announcer garnered so much attention that she did a number of broadcasts from Italy for American radio stations. This work included a description of Rome for the International DX’rs Alliance in which she described herself as “the English Speaker for the regular broadcasts from Italy;”¹¹³ a broadcast for NBC on Easter Sunday, 1935, describing the Coliseum;¹¹⁴ and the RCA Magic Key broadcast for NBC in 1936 that described Sergio as the most famous of all European announcers.¹¹⁵ “To the European broadcaster, America represents the

¹¹⁰ Ibid.; Sergio, *Shorter Italian, A Practical Grammar for Every Day Use*.

¹¹¹ Lisa Sergio, “Rome Emerges From Ruins Under the Hand of Mussolini,” *The Washington Post*, 20 October 1935, B13. Notices about Sergio winning the contest appeared in: *The New York Herald Tribune* (Paris) 20 June 1936; *The Daily Mail* (London) 20 June 1936; and *The Chicago Tribune* (Paris) 19 June 1936. Box 19 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹¹² Sergio, “Chapter VI Unplanned Encounter with Mussolini,” 1.

¹¹³ Lisa Sergio, “To the members of the International DX’rs Alliance,” 21 February 1936, 1. Radio address manuscript, Box 11 Folder 76, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹¹⁴ Lisa Sergio, “Fading Dell’Inno A Roma,” 1935. Box 11 Folder 73, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹¹⁵ *The Magic Key of RCA*

Paradise of Radio, and to get one's voice across the Ocean in a coast-coast pick-up is an experience which everyone yearns for and few ever get," Sergio wrote.¹¹⁶

Sources give conflicting dates on the exact year that Sergio began broadcasting in Italy. In a feature story that appeared in the *NBC Transmitter*, NBC's employee newsletter, shortly after her arrival in the United States, Sergio is described as "well-known in Europe as 'The Voice of 2RO' ... since July 1933."¹¹⁷ Also, a copy of Sergio's letter of resignation from the Ministry of Press and Propaganda, contained in her FBI report and signed by Sergio, states that she was hired by Polverelli to work for the Press Office in July, 1933.¹¹⁸ However, Sergio's resume states that she began broadcasting in 1932.¹¹⁹ She also stated in interviews that she began broadcasting in March, 1932,¹²⁰ the same date that appears in the notes for her autobiography.¹²¹ The strongest piece of evidence to support this date comes from an undated clipping from an American newspaper that is preserved in one of Sergio's scrapbooks. The clipping, "American Girl is 2RO Voice," in *The (New York) Sun*, reported:

When 2RO opens up again a few weeks hence—it is now undergoing repairs and improvements—Americans will again hear a familiar feminine voice making the announcements in English.¹²²

¹¹⁶ Lisa Sergio, "One day, when I was frantically busy with my own broadcasting jobs in Rome," Box 5 Folder 27, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 2.

¹¹⁷ "European Announcer Joins NBC As Guest" *NBC Transmitter*, 16 August 1937, 1, 3

¹¹⁸ Anonymous, *Rome, Italy Communication #450* (Rome: FBI, 1944), 4, Report contained in Lisa Sergio's FBI file

¹¹⁹ Sergio, "Curriculum Vitae," 1.

¹²⁰ Lisa Sergio, interviews by unknown interviewer circa 1986. Tapes 7, 8 side A, 10, 11, Box 16 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹²¹ Sergio, "Chapter VI Unplanned Encounter with Mussolini," 1.

¹²² Bird, "American Girl is 2RO Voice: Lisa Sergio Will Be Heard From Rome Soon."

According to *From Intervention to Empire: A Book of fascist Dates*, written by Sergio, a new Rome broadcasting center opened in November, 1932.¹²³ The *Sun* article also states that Sergio “got her job with the E.I.A.R., the Italian broadcasting company, a few months ago.” This indicated that Sergio began broadcasting not long before the 1932 opening of the refurbished studios.

Mussolini’s English Translator

Sergio also became the official English translator for radio broadcasts of Mussolini’s speeches. A listener in America would hear Mussolini speak, then a musical interlude while the translation was finished, followed by an English voice summarizing some parts of the speech and quoting others.¹²⁴ Translations of speeches in her papers confirm that she did this on at least two occasions, as do two commemorative scarves on which the speeches are printed.¹²⁵ On May 9, 1936, she translated Mussolini’s speech announcing that Ethiopia was officially under the sovereignty of Italy, and the title of Emperor of Ethiopia was assumed for the King of

¹²³ Sergio, *From Intervention to Empire: A Book of Fascist Dates*. 163.

¹²⁴ *Benito Mussolini* NBC radio broadcast of speech given by Benito Mussolini. Box 17 Folder 8, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1 November 1936.

¹²⁵ These scarves are in Box 16 Folder 11 of the Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. Sergio brought these scarves with her from Italy according to a 1941 letter to the FBI from a woman who sailed on the same oceanliner with Sergio. “Always admiration of Il Duce was loudly proclaimed, and especially by this Sergio, who also called attention to a sport handkerchief she was carrying, whereon was printed a speech made by Mussolini. She mentioned that she had other handkerchiefs with other Mussolini speeches printed on them.” J. Edgar Hoover to Effie Thixton Arthur 7 February 1941, Letter contained in Sergio FBI file.

Italy and his successors.¹²⁶ And on November 1, 1936, Sergio gave the translation and also a preamble to Mussolini's speech in which she described the crowds in the square and spoke about Italy's recent conquest of Ethiopia. Her comments in this preamble are illustrative of her role in Italy's foreign-language propaganda broadcasts:¹²⁷

The campaign in East Africa which secured a place in the sun for thousands of willing workmen, partly jobless through the world crisis and bans on immigration, only lasted seven months. But those seven months were long enough for every Italian to prove his mettle. Was there ever a minute's anxiety in any one of them? Never. Would they have reared before obstacles greater than mountains? Did their determination weaken before world coalition which sought to bar the way to victory? Never.¹²⁸

It was this speech in which Mussolini announced Italy's alignment with Germany, and for the rest of her life, Sergio would claim to be the person to first use the English word "axis," and even to have coined it. While translating the speech, Sergio wrote that she knew diplomatic circles and foreign reporters were intensely interested in what Mussolini said about recent meetings with Adolf Hitler, and the pact they suspected had been signed. Though she summarized some parts of the

¹²⁶ Lisa Sergio, "The Duce's Message for the Constitution of the Empire," Translation of speech by Benito Mussolini on 9 May 1936 from Rome. Box 11 Folder 75, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1936. A document in Italian carrying the stamp of the Ministry of Press and Propaganda ordering her to appear "for the transmission of radio news in the English language" and another document afterwards offering il Duce's congratulations and high praise to the ministry for the broadcast are in the Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Propaganda Service Director General to Lisa Sergio 9 March 1936, Box 11 Folder 75, Sergio papers; Assistant Secretary of State to Ministry of Press and Propaganda 10 March 1936, Box 11 Folder 75, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹²⁷ Lisa Sergio, "Speech Delivered by Signor Mussolini at Milan on Nov, 1st, 1936," Box 11 Folder 74, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1936, 3.

¹²⁸ Lisa Sergio, "This is station 2RO, Italy," 1 November 1936. Box 11 Folder 74, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1-2.

speech, Sergio translated one of Mussolini's lines verbatim: "This vertical line between Rome and Berlin, is not a diaphragm, it is an axis around which all European countries, prompted by a desire for peace may collaborate."¹²⁹ But as she came to this passage, she wrote that she hesitated over the Italian word *asse*. "I knew it was the kernel of the whole speech," she wrote. "I wondered quickly: 'Axis or Axle?' The Italian word goes for both. Then I said Axis. It stayed that way to become one of the most cursed words in our vocabulary."¹³⁰

At this point, Sergio was perhaps at the height of her Italian radio career. But as she watched Italy's invasion of Ethiopia and participated in the propaganda surrounding it, Sergio wrote that she came to disagree with and work against the regime. She began to become more conscious of her propaganda role, according to her autobiography:

The cheers topped their limit when Mussolini said: "England will not spill so much as a single drop of blood for those savages." British listeners noted with disappointment that as I gave the English text on the radio I remained totally passive translating that offensive phrase with my usual dispatch. ... I agreed with Mussolini as far as it concerned an assessment of England, but in my heart I rebelled against that word "savages" and the scorn with which Mussolini referred to the Ethiopians. For all this and much more it was precisely the invasion of Ethiopia which finally opened my eyes. ... Mussolini used airplanes and bombs to make his way to Addis Ababa. It was a war with no quarter given, uselessly cruel. I realized that Mussolini wanted to win and win quickly, but I could not understand his desire to overwhelm. Furthermore, I found myself fed up with his unbearable rhetoric. I simply could not stomach his endless diatribes on the "glorious return of the Roman eagle to Africa" and of the need to liberate Abyssinians from their age-old slavery. The stories of foreign

¹²⁹ Sergio, "Speech Delivered by Signor Mussolini at Milan on Nov, 1st, 1936," 3.

¹³⁰ Lisa Sergio, "There was a time when even the moon befriended Mussolini," Box 5 Folder 28, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 6.

journalists who returned to Rome from Abyssinian battlefields confirmed my suspicions and made it all increasingly unacceptable.¹³¹

Sergio wrote that she began to see that her radio broadcasts were not only being used to report items in the foreign press that were supportive of Italy, but also to spread outright lies. Mussolini had a way of inventing news to “irritate” listeners in England or the United States, Sergio commented. “They were sometimes an intentional misrepresentation of some event that had actually occurred, but more often they were made up in his own Machiavellian brain.”¹³² For example, one news item handed to her was a report of British troops poisoning wells in Afghanistan, so that shepherds had no place to water their merino sheep. Friends in the British embassy told her there was no truth to the item, so she omitted it from her newscast. “I did not use it and the very next day I was asked by my superiors why I had not used the item,” she said.¹³³ She told them she thought the items she had chosen were more newsworthy, and that she had been running out of time. On another occasion, Mussolini wrote a bulletin which claimed English soldiers serving in Egypt were found to be infected with bubonic plague and were infecting the civilian population. Sergio felt his intention was clear: to start malicious rumors in order to turn the Egyptians against the English.¹³⁴

Thus, Sergio wrote, she faced her “dilemma of 1936:” the choice between “obediently” broadcasting lies to justify the attack on Abyssinia, “and let my conscience be impaled on the horn of dishonesty,” or to use the relative autonomy she

¹³¹ Sergio, “Gente translation,” 16, 17.

¹³² Sergio, “There was a time when even the moon befriended Mussolini,” 4.

¹³³ Lisa Sergio, “Not long after I had begun my broadcasts,” Box 5 Folder 28, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1.

¹³⁴ Sergio, “Gente translation,” 9, 10.

enjoyed to change her scripts and perhaps be dismissed from her job with dishonor.¹³⁵

Ironically, Sergio claimed that it was German Ambassador Ulrich von Hassle, himself involved in undermining the German government, who influenced her decision. One night at a reception, after waltzing with her, he began to talk to her casually about “the dangers involved in allowing a war to start in Abyssinia and of the responsibility of those who believed in justice and peace, especially if they had a means of reaching the general public,” Sergio wrote.¹³⁶ (Von Hassle, the German ambassador to Italy from 1932 to 1938, was hanged in 1944 for his involvement in a conspiracy to overthrow Hitler.)

Since no one checked Sergio’s scripts before her broadcasts, she said that she was able to omit some items and edit others in such a way that the meaning was changed.¹³⁷ “It all seemed unjust and I tried to remedy the distortions I saw,” she said. “I began to skip a phrase or two, or to translate certain texts with such circumlocutions as to make them practically incomprehensible.”¹³⁸

Escape From Italy

The events leading to her escape out of Italy may have started as early as August 1, 1933, when Galeazzo Ciano became the head for the Office of Press and Propaganda. Ciano, born on March 18, 1903 in Livorno, was a foreign service officer who had served in consulates in South America and Asia and in the Italian legation of

¹³⁵ Sergio, “It was a day so long ago,” 9.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Sergio, “There was a time when even the moon befriended Mussolini,” 4.

¹³⁸ Sergio, “Gente translation,” 9, 10.

the Holy See. In 1930, he married Edda Mussolini, the Duce's oldest and most favored child. The couple moved to China to follow Ciano's foreign service appointments until Mussolini, missing his daughter, appointed Ciano to the Office of Press and Propaganda in Rome. Ciano became the undersecretary in 1934 and minister in 1935. His job was to see that "the tightly controlled Italian newspapers glorified Mussolini, sang the praises of the regime, denigrated hostile foreign governments and avoided any reports that might reflect badly on Italy."¹³⁹ He left the ministry at the beginning of the Ethiopian war in October, 1935, to become a bomber pilot and on June 9, 1936, at the age of 33, was named Mussolini's minister for foreign affairs.

There are two stories surrounding Sergio's leaving Italy—one that she recounted for interviewers throughout her life, and another told through her 300-page FBI file. Ciano figures prominently in both. In Sergio's version, Ciano finds out about her "sins of omission."¹⁴⁰ Sergio described the nature of her working relationship with him for the readers of the Italian magazine *Gente* in 1981:

He called on me to establish a sort of alliance with him. "I realize full well," he said, "that I am in the middle of a politically touchy situation. I am il Duce's son-in-law and many people think that I have taken advantage of these personal ties to further my career. The majority of my assistants are older than I am and carry many years of service on their backs. In addition I have reason to believe that many of your colleagues feel more closely tied to the monarchy than to the fascist regime. I need friends here. I must have your help." ... I replied that he could count on me and I have kept my word. I truly always tried to be a mediator between Ciano and my colleagues. When I heard their

¹³⁹ Ray Moseley, *Mussolini's Shadow: The Double Life of Count Galeazzo Ciano*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999. 16.

¹⁴⁰ Sergio, "Gente translation," 10.

complaints I forced myself to see the other side as well and always said a good word for “poor Ciano.”¹⁴¹

Several times Ciano caught her omitting certain items from her broadcasts. On the day after she omitted the item about Afghani wells, Ciano questioned her about it. Sergio wrote that he did not believe her explanation that she was running out of time. “I have the distinct impression that you have been taking many liberties with your job,” Ciano told her. “From now on, make sure you follow our instructions to the letter. I tell you this in your own interest. We possess means that are amply sufficient to take care of individuals like you.”¹⁴²

At some point amidst the suspicion about her broadcasts, Sergio claimed the police tapped her telephone and insisted she listen to the tape. On it, she called Ciano a “madman” and the war bulletins “absurd.”¹⁴³ The tape recorded conversations in which she sought information from friends at the British embassy and commented on the quirks of prominent fascist officials. The police let her off easy. After allowing her to listen to the tape, the officer said simply, “Would you care to do me a favor, Signorina Sergio? Try to be more prudent.”¹⁴⁴

Sergio claimed it was Mussolini himself who finally discovered her disloyalty in February, 1937, after asking an American journalist to give him English lessons. The woman, whom Sergio referred to as “Mary Ann,” agreed and also suggested that Mussolini listen to the English broadcasts, since he knew what the content of the broadcasts were. “Mary Ann” later told Sergio that Mussolini had called her after

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁴² Ibid., 10, 11.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 17, 18.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

listening to the broadcasts. “My English is worse than I feared. I don’t think I am up to following the translations of Miss Sergio. It seems to me that her text does not correspond to mine,” he said.¹⁴⁵ “Mary Ann” read over the translations and confirmed that Sergio had left items out of her broadcasts.

Sergio wrote that in April, 1937, she was told Mussolini intended to fire her and was ordered to sign a letter of resignation. She stated that she refused to do so, saying, “No, I’m not going to resign, because I don’t believe it is possible.”¹⁴⁶ When she refused to sign the resignation letter, she wrote that she was confronted by Ciano who told her, “If I were in il Duce’s place I would have had you shot a long time ago.” She said she retorted: “It will be you that ends up shot, not I. Remember that.”¹⁴⁷ It is unclear why she claimed that Ciano confronted her, since in 1937 he had already been made the minister of foreign affairs. Nevertheless, after the confrontation, Sergio claimed she was escorted out of the building, not to return.

In the weeks that followed, “my telephone was permanently out of order, the mail did not reach me and a man, posted outside my door night and day, shadowed me wherever I went,” Sergio wrote.¹⁴⁸ For three months she stayed in Rome, with little work, except for an assignment for an American syndicate to interview Guglielmo Marconi for a news story. In May, 1937, she interviewed him on the

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 12, 13.

¹⁴⁶ Lisa Sergio, interview by unknown interviewer circa 1986. Tape 7, Box 16 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁴⁷ Sergio, “Gente translation,” 20.

¹⁴⁸ Lisa Sergio, “Your Eyes Are Like Your Father’s,” Box 5 Folder 25, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 5.

subject of a death ray, which he had allegedly discovered and tested, for the Hearst syndicate.¹⁴⁹ The article was published in several U.S. newspapers.¹⁵⁰

Soon, she heard through friends that her case had come before the fascist Council of Discipline and that she was to be sent to a prison island for hard labor.¹⁵¹ According to Sergio, John Whittaker, the Rome bureau chief for the *New York Herald Tribune*, insisted on going to Marconi himself to develop a plan to get out of the country. Sergio said Marconi gave her a passport with a visa for the United States, a first-class round trip ticket on an ocean liner, \$500 in cash, and a letter of introduction to NBC head David Sarnoff. She left from Naples for the United States on June 27, 1937.¹⁵² The reservations were all made under Marconi's name. "The name was magic. Nobody troubled me and everything was done to make me comfortable."¹⁵³

The copy Sergio made of the recommendation letter that Marconi wrote to Sarnoff and a telegram he sent to Sergio during her voyage were preserved in one of the many scrapbooks Sergio kept.¹⁵⁴ According to a copy typed by Sergio, Marconi's recommendation letter read:

This is to introduce you to Miss Lisa Sergio, a very good friend of ours who for years has been doing excellent work in the realm of Radio Broadcasting here. Her name, and perhaps also her voice, may be

¹⁴⁹ Sergio, "Guglielmo Marconi: The Silent Man Who Made the Ether Speak," 4-5.

¹⁵⁰ For example: the *San Francisco Examiner* and the *New York American* published this story on 17 May, 1937. Box 19 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁵¹ Sergio, "Your Eyes Are Like Your Father's," 6.

¹⁵² Sergio, "Gente translation," 20, 21.

¹⁵³ Sergio, "Your Eyes Are Like Your Father's," 13-14.

¹⁵⁴ Guglielmo Marconi to Lisa Sergio 28 June 1937, Marconigram sent to Lisa Sergio aboard the Conte di Savoia en route to New York City. Box 19 Folder 12, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

already known to you, as she has organised [sic] and executed programmes [sic] in English, French and Italian for the Italian Broadcasting net-work, [sic] including the short-wave [sic] station 2RO.

Thousands of letters from English and other foreign listeners attest to the interest she aroused in her broadcasts. Her accent and elocution are simply perfect. She is ambitious, imaginative, and being half-American, has now chosen to go to the United States in the hope of making a radio career over there.

She has several ideas about broadcasting which she is anxious to submit to you. I am sure that her talent and experience make her very useful to any radio broadcasting organisation [sic] and sincerely hope that her effort will be crowned with success.

Anything you may do for her will be greatly appreciated by, yours very sincerely, G. Marconi.¹⁵⁵

Shortly after her July, 1937, arrival in the United States, an article appeared in *The New York Times* stating that Sergio would become a “guest announcer” on NBC.¹⁵⁶ She was reported to be the first woman to hold the spot and was eventually listed in NBC’s own files as their “woman announcer.”¹⁵⁷ She soon began lecturing on the importance of American democracy and on her thirty-third birthday on March 17, 1938, filed the appropriate papers to declare her intention to become an American citizen.¹⁵⁸ A year later she used her experience (and the personal connections she would develop later in New York City) to land a job at WQXR in 1939 doing news commentary. Her activities in the United States came to the attention of Italy’s Ministry of Popular Culture in 1939. A memo in Italian from the Propaganda Service

¹⁵⁵ Guglielmo Marconi to David Sarnoff 21 June, Copy of letter recommendation letter for Lisa Sergio. Box 19 Folder 12, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁵⁶ “Miss Sergio With ‘Fluent Phonetics’ Points Way for Women Announcers.”

¹⁵⁷ “A Guest of NBC Famous European Announcer to Broadcast Here” ; Dangerfield, “They Talk to the World” ; NBC, “Sergio, Lisa,” NBC radio personalities card catalog. Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division, Library of Congress, 1938.

¹⁵⁸ Anonymous, *Elisa Maria Alice Sergio, with aliases, Lisa Sergio, “The Golden Voice of Rome”* (New York City: FBI, 1942), 1, 11, Report contained in Sergio FBI file.

Director General to the ministry stated that Sergio was “carrying out an anti-Italian, anti-fascist campaign, saying vicious things, including that she was expelled from Italy for her ideas.”¹⁵⁹

Sergio was not happy to leave Italy, she said in an interview late in her life. “I was very sorry, really, to be leaving. On the other hand, I accepted it as inevitability. I mean, there wasn’t any choice. The thing to do was get out,” she said in an interview given in the 1980s.¹⁶⁰ Had she known Mussolini’s reign in Italy would last only a few more years, she said she would have risked prison to stay. In another interview, she called fleeing Italy one of the tragedies of her life.¹⁶¹ She said she believed that no one should ever leave their own country, and that dissenters should stay and run for office to change the things they disagree with:¹⁶²

You never leave your country. That is a mistake. It’s a fatal mistake to make. Once you’ve made it, you’ve made it and then you become very loyal to your new country. But when you look back you decide if you had known what was going to happen, I certainly would have chosen to go to, to be a prisoner on an island like all my cousins were, and then come out. But, it was not written to be that way and so I came

¹⁵⁹ It is unknown how a copy of this memo came into Sergio’s possession. Propaganda Service Director General to Minister of Popular Culture 12 November 1939, Memo, Box 4 Folder 24, Sergio Papers.

¹⁶⁰ Lisa Sergio, interview by unknown interviewer circa 1986. Tape 9, Box 16 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁶¹ Mary Ellen Donovan, “Il Duce’s Former Translator: Vocal Feminist and Christian,” 5 October 1979, 9. Box 14 Folder 19, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁶² Gay Levinson, “Interpreter Protested War: Linguist (sic) Switched Mussolini Scripts,” *Fort Lauderdale News*, 14 March 1972, 4C. Box 14 Folder 15, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

over here and found other ways, shall we say, of doing what I thought was right. Awakening people to the reality of what Fascism was.¹⁶³

FBI Accounts

Sergio's FBI file tells a different story about her departure from Italy. Though much of the file will be discussed in future chapters in regards to the Cold War, it must be noted that numerous interviews and investigations related to Sergio conducted by FBI agents were concerned with questions concerning her background. Such investigations were examples of Bureau efforts to investigate enemy aliens residing in the United States during World War II. Other investigations during the postwar era may have been intended to discredit journalists and others who did not agree with the Cold War government policy. In Sergio's case, bureau reports painted a picture of her past that was very different than the history she had recounted in her autobiographical notes and that appeared in the many news articles published about her during her lifetime.¹⁶⁴ Most notably, FBI reports claimed that Sergio did not lose her Rome announcing position because of her democratic ideas, but because she was

¹⁶³ Lisa Sergio, interview by unknown interviewer circa 1986. Tape 9, Box 16 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁶⁴ A few of these news stories include: "Lisa of the Golden Voice," Article appearing in *Newsweek*, 13 November 1944, Box 14 Folder 7, Sergio papers; "She Saw Duce Being Shot At," Article appearing in English-language newspaper of unknown title in Bombay, India, 1963, Box 14 Folder 12, Sergio papers; Bromley, "Lisa Sergio Sees Duce Dreaming of Comeback." ; Dangerfield, "They Talk to the World" ; Donovan, "Il Duce's Former Translator: Vocal Feminist and Christian." ; Hosley and Yamada, *Hard News*; Levinson, "Interpreter Protested War: Linguist (sic) Switched Mussolini Scripts." ; Mowrer, "Take Her Radio Word For It" ; Palazzetti, "Europe's First Woman Broadcaster Recalls Career 'Boost' From Mussolini." ; Sergio, "Lisa Sergio to Gayle K. Yamada, 1986"; Sergio, "Gente translation."; Renee Tweedle, "Woman Broadcaster Says: Mussolini Forced Her to Tell Lies," Newspaper article appearing in *The Waco (Texas) Times-Herald*, 9 February 1972, Box 14 Folder 15, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

too vocal about an affair she had with Ciano. Though this was never mentioned in Lisa Sergio's unpublished autobiography or her other papers, references to this alleged affair surfaces over and over again in FBI reports.

FBI investigations into Lisa Sergio's Italian past can be grouped into two categories: investigations occurring in the United States, principally in New York City, between 1940 and 1944, and investigations conducted in Italy in 1944 and 1945. Reports of the U.S. investigations into Sergio's past included a summary of letters written to the FBI about her, complaints of suspicious activities, interviews with various radio professionals in New York City who knew Sergio, and even a bureau check of the morgue of the *New York World Telegram* in order to summarize news clippings about Sergio. An informant who worked for the radio station WOV and had lived in Italy until 1939 told an FBI agent that Sergio "had a phenomenal career; that she was the first and the outstanding woman announcer in Italy," and had been known as *la voce d'oro*, or "the golden voice."¹⁶⁵ This informant said that Sergio had known high fascist leaders and was reputed to be Ciano's mistress. He told the FBI that there were two theories concerning Sergio's departure of Italy, that either she had personal and political differences with Fascist officials (which he acknowledged was the most popular explanation) or that the scandal of her affair with Ciano had caused such an affair that "to save their own reputations [officials] saw to it that (Sergio) left Italy."¹⁶⁶

Many FBI informants questioned Sergio's commitment to anti-fascism and to Democratic ideals. An informant at NBC, who had known Sergio since 1937 when

¹⁶⁵ Anonymous, *Elisa Maria Alice Sergio, with aliases, Lisa Sergio, "The Golden Voice of Rome"*, 9.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

she came to the United States, described Sergio in 1942 as “brilliant, ambitious, shrewd” and “an opportunist.”¹⁶⁷ Another informant said that Sergio “converted to Democratic ideas” only after her arrival in the U.S. when she launched a personal publicity campaign to convince Americans of her loyalties.¹⁶⁸ Still another informant told the FBI that Sergio’s conversion was genuine and praiseworthy.¹⁶⁹

A woman who claimed to have been a passenger on the same ocean liner as Sergio in 1937 wrote to the FBI in 1941 after reading a news clipping which stated Sergio was a political refugee. The woman wrote to J. Edgar Hoover, stating that Sergio had seemed to be pro-fascist on the trip. “Always admiration of Il Duce was loudly proclaimed, and especially by this Sergio, who also called attention to a sport handkerchief she was carrying, whereon was printed a speech made by Mussolini. She mentioned that she had other handkerchiefs with other Mussolini speeches printed on them,” she wrote.¹⁷⁰ (According to Sergio’s account, several prominent fascists were aboard this ship, traveling to America to deliver speeches in favor of fascism. If she did believe her life to be in danger, it is unlikely she would have spoken out against the regime or revealed that her trip was anything other than a vacation.)¹⁷¹

Still another informant wrote to the FBI after learning about a friend’s 1938 conversation with Sergio about fascism. “At that time (they) had a spirited battle

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 10.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 11.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 11-12.

¹⁷⁰ Effie Thixton Arthur to J. Edgar Hoover 24 January 1941, Letter contained in Sergio FBI file.

¹⁷¹ Lisa Sergio, interview by unknown interviewer circa 1986. Tape 9, Box 16 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

about fascism, which was warmly defended by Lisa Sergio.”¹⁷² Another FBI source had overheard Sergio say that “she would not have left Italy if she was a man, but being a woman she was unimportant and her citizenship was not a matter of importance.”¹⁷³ Still another was sure Sergio still worked for the Italian government, and would help the Italians in anyway possible, being sure that Sergio “is a young woman without morals and would go to any extreme to get information for Italy.”¹⁷⁴

The Richmond office of the FBI filed a report on an informant who was also concerned that Lisa Sergio was putting up a “pretense” that she was pro-American. This informant claimed she was the mistress of a P. Alfiera (probably a reference to Dino Alfieri, who was head of the Ministry of Popular Culture from 1935 to 1939) and that Alfiera had written an introduction letter to the Italian Consul General in New York City asking him to help Sergio get a radio position. This informant said Sergio had hoped to get a prominent position in the radio industry, then very publicly turned from pro-fascism to pro-Democratic views when she did not get the position she hoped for. “The informant stated that he believed this change of mind in Lisa Sergio is brought about for the purpose of obtaining positions and that it is his belief that at heart she is as true a fascist as there is in the United States.”¹⁷⁵ Still another letter writer claimed to have seen letters written by Sergio in Florence in which Sergio “belittled this country and all our ways.”¹⁷⁶ This informant said that Sergio had wanted to go to England instead of the United States, but that the English government

¹⁷² Anonymous, *Elisa Maria Alice Sergio, with aliases, Lisa Sergio, “The Golden Voice of Rome”*, 4

¹⁷³ Ibid., 7.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 3.

¹⁷⁵ Special Agent to Mr. Ladd, “re: The Grove Park Inn Mission” 25 April 1942, Memo contained in FBI file of Lisa Sergio.

¹⁷⁶ Anonymous, *Elisa Maria Alice Sergio, with aliases, Lisa Sergio, “The Golden Voice of Rome”*, 4

would not admit her because of her radio comments. The informant believed that “if, as the newspapers say, [Sergio] is anti-fascist it is a very recent conversion.”¹⁷⁷

The second wave of investigations into Sergio’s past was conducted in Rome in 1944 and 1945 when hundreds of records came into the possession of the Allied Armies. At the time of the investigation, the records for these ministries were under the control of the Psychological Warfare Branch (PWB) of the Allied Armies. The PWB took over the records of the Ministry of Popular Culture within a few days of the capture of Rome on June 4, 1944. The PWB set up the Italian Documents Section to take charge of the records under the supervision of Dante Gnudi and to work closely with both the Allied military authorities and the Italian government. After an initial survey of the plethora of records, officials in the Italian Documents Section broadened its mission to include screening the entire ministry’s files to show the activities of people who had worked for the fascist government. Under Gnudi, the Italian Documents Section compiled over 100 reports that were copied and sent to several locations in Washington and London.¹⁷⁸ The reports in Sergio’s FBI file indicates that it was Gnudi who produced Sergio’s personnel file for the FBI’s investigation.¹⁷⁹

These documents stated that Sergio began working for the Italian Ministry of Propaganda on July 1, 1933, and that she left her employment at the ministry on April 29, 1937.¹⁸⁰ Gnudi and other sources told investigators that Sergio had been a

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Howard McGaw Smyth, *Secrets of the Fascist Era: How Uncle Sam Obtained Some of the Top-Level Documents of Mussolini’s Period*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1975. 86-89.

¹⁷⁹ Anonymous, *Rome, Italy Communication #450*, 2.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

member of the fascist Journalist Syndicate, open only to confirmed fascists. Her personnel records also indicated that she had received frequent raises and commendations signed by Ciano. Investigators wrote that there was no evidence in her file of a quarrel with the Ministry of Popular Culture, and that the file indicated that Sergio “was considered a strong fascist and received the benefits of her espousal of the fascist cause by receiving frequent raises.”¹⁸¹ Investigators also noted that her resignation letter expressed devotion to the fascist cause:

It is with the maximum regret that I have come to the decision of resigning the duties to which I had the honor of being called by the Honorable Polverelli with the Press Office of the Head of the Government in July 1933. I have held this position up to this time, trying to fulfill the tasks which were entrusted to me with the best possible will and the greatest devotion. The reasons that urge me to take this step, which is indeed painful to me, are of a purely personal nature.

I hope that in accepting my resignation from the orders of this Ministry which I have served for four years—the best years of my life—Your Excellency will also accept the lively and sincere expressions of my unalterable devotion to the fascist Idea, to the person of Il Duce, whom I have had the very great honor of serving and whom I will always serve with the same fervor to my dying day, whatever be the road which the future has in store for me.¹⁸²

A man named Badalato, an employee of the Psychological Warfare Branch, told investigators that Sergio was rumored to be Ciano’s mistress and was a heavy drinker. Badalato told investigators that Sergio boasted too loudly of her affair one night at a social function and was fired shortly afterwards. The report does not indicate whether Badalato was relating a rumor, however, or something he personally

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² J. Edgar Hoover to Elmer Davis 23 November 1944, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file.

witnessed.¹⁸³ According to another informant, Sergio had many lovers at the Ministry and would boast of them when she had too many drinks at social receptions. This informant stated that after her dismissal, Sergio received money to travel to the United States not from Marconi but from Count Thaon De Revel, secretary of an organization named fascists Abroad. This informant also claimed that in the United States Sergio capitalized on her acquaintance with Ciano and Mussolini to such an extent that the Italian Embassy in Washington, D.C., protested to the State Department that the information she gave to the U.S. press was embarrassing to the fascist government.¹⁸⁴

A man who rented the penthouse above Sergio's apartment in Rome told investigators he thought Sergio was a cocaine user, based on her looks and behavior and that she was friendly with a German woman who was known to be a dope addict.¹⁸⁵ The renter of the apartment below Sergio's recalled that in her room she had both an autographed photograph of Marconi and Ciano, and that it was generally known that she was the *amante*, or lover, of Ciano.¹⁸⁶

Perhaps the most revealing interview in the Rome investigations was with an unnamed woman who worked at the Ministry of Popular Culture and who claimed to be on close terms with Sergio. This informant claimed that Sergio had many lovers and openly boasted about the fact, often giving names and dates and places, and was

¹⁸³ Anonymous, *Rome, Italy Communication #477* (Rome: FBI, 1944), 1, Report contained in the FBI file of Lisa Sergio.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 2.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. The inscribed Marconi photograph is still in existence in Box 14 Folder 41 of the Lisa Sergio papers at Georgetown University, Washington, D.C. The inscription, written in Italian, reads: "To Lisa Sergio, in admiration of her work of Italian propaganda. From Guglielmo Marconi, Rome, June 20 1936."

“unusually verbose when she had been drinking.”¹⁸⁷ Sergio was somewhat protected, however, since Ciano was the head of the ministry. However, in late 1935 Ciano became a bomber pilot in the Ethiopian war and in 1936 was made the minister for foreign affairs. When Ciano left, Dino Alfieri became head of the Ministry of Popular Culture. According to the informant, Alfieri took exception to Sergio’s behavior and dismissed her suddenly—one day in the Spring of 1937 at 6 p.m., an hour before her 7 p.m. broadcast.¹⁸⁸

According to this informant, a friend (unnamed in the report though it may have been John Whitaker, who was a Sicilian-born American in Rome as the representative of Hearst Newspapers) hired Sergio to interview notable Italians for various American and Italian newspapers. The informant claimed her first interview was with Marconi.¹⁸⁹ This informant claimed that this friend contacted Ciano to get his approval for the joint project he had undertaken with Sergio, but that Ciano said it would be preferable if a man wrote the articles, which ended the collaboration. It was then that Sergio received help from Marconi and De Revel in order to go to the United States. This informant told investigators that “she knows positively that the only reason the subject left Italy is because she could not secure employment there.”¹⁹⁰ Other informants also stated that was the reason Sergio left the country.¹⁹¹

Additionally, these reports state that Sergio never worked for the Italian secret police or any other branch of government besides the Italian Ministry of Popular

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Anonymous, *Rome, Italy--Army Rome File No. 105-23* (Rome: FBI, 1945), Report contained in the FBI file of Lisa Sergio; Anonymous, *Rome, Italy Communication #477*

Culture,¹⁹² nor did she engage in any espionage activity for the fascists.¹⁹³ She did, however, agree to be a confidential national defense informant for the FBI in 1944 and to provide information on prominent Italian officials,¹⁹⁴ and also cooperated in investigations into fascist activities in the New York City area.¹⁹⁵

Which History is Correct?

These competing narratives illuminate one of the most basic challenges of the historian: overcoming incomplete evidence.¹⁹⁶ The biggest discrepancy between the two narratives is the issue of whether Sergio left Italy because of a disdain for fascism, inability to find work, or alleged embarrassing infidelities.

Since Sergio did not explicitly address allegations of infidelities in the writings she left, it may be impossible to definitively say whether they did or did not happen. It was well known that Ciano had numerous affairs. Mussolini began receiving anonymous letters about Ciano's indiscretions around 1935.¹⁹⁷ Both Ciano and his wife Edda were known to have had many extra-marital indiscretions: Ciano took many lovers from the Italian aristocracy, Edda preferred younger, athletic men.¹⁹⁸ Though Ciano did not work at the ministry the entire time Sergio did—she worked there from 1932 to 1937, he from 1933 to 1936—it is known that their work brought them into frequent contact. For example, Sergio claimed to be in Venice

¹⁹² Anonymous, *Rome, Italy--Army Rome File No. 105-23*, 1

¹⁹³ Anonymous, *Rome, Italy Communication #477*, 4

¹⁹⁴ New York City SAC to FBI Director, "Lisa Sergio, Confidential National Defense Informant" 27 June 1944, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file.

¹⁹⁵ Anonymous, *Elisa Maria Alice Sergio, with aliases, Lisa Sergio, "The Golden Voice of Rome"*, 13

when Mussolini met Hitler. Managing the press for this event happened to be Ciano's first major assignment for Mussolini.¹⁹⁹

Though the only affair Sergio admits to having in her own writings is with "Morris," the man she claims to have married in the end, she may have had other romantic attachments. A series of letters from the famous actor Alessandro Moissi exists in the Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. in which Moissi addresses Sergio as "dearest, most beautiful, most lovable, best Lisa" and thanks her for her "touching friendship demonstrated to me in Rome, for all the hours that you sacrificed for me, thank you for your existence, for all the hopes that I place in the future and that will be fulfilled." He signed this letter "hugs from your Sandro."²⁰⁰ In another letter, apparently after a lapse of communication from Sergio, he begs:

Speak! Are you still alive? Do you still know about me? (My name is Alessandro M.) ... Do you love me a little bit? In which case, you could come to Milan for a while. I will be so happy to see you, I am always burning now and you, my good, would be an enormous help to me.²⁰¹

In one letter, he begs her "Come to London, to Carlsbad" and signs with "a kiss."²⁰² In another, he asks for a "meeting in a quiet place to finally make you understand that you need a purpose in life, a life that—I am convinced—you have in

¹⁹⁶ Startt and Sloan, *Historical Methods in Mass Communication*. 52.

¹⁹⁷ Moseley, *Mussolini's Shadow: The Double Life of Count Galeazzo Ciano*. 19.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 58.

¹⁹⁹ Santi Corvaja, *Hitler & Mussolini: The Secret Meetings*. New York: Enigma Books, 2001. 34.

²⁰⁰ Alessandro Moissi to Lisa Sergio 8 August 1933, Box 2 Folder 16, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

²⁰¹ Alessandro Moissi to Lisa Sergio 27 January 1934, Box 2 Folder 16, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

²⁰² Ibid.

you, a soul to uncover, that is, to reveal,” and asks if she still thinks of “our projects.”²⁰³ Though these letters do not definitively state whether or not Sergio and Moissi had a romantic liaison, they show the pair certainly had a personal relationship.

The closest Sergio came to addressing her relationship with Ciano is the 1981 interview she gave to the Italian magazine *Gente*. Since this magazine is written in Italian for an Italian audience, it may have been widely known among readers that Ciano had numerous affairs. According to Sergio’s translation of the article (which she had planned to use as the basis of a chapter in her autobiography) she took pains at the outset to define her relationship to Ciano, stating that he “called on me to establish a sort of alliance with him,” and that “I truly always tried to be a mediator between Ciano and my colleagues,” always putting in a “good word for ‘poor Ciano.’”²⁰⁴ Unfortunately, the diaries for which Ciano was famous (offering an inside look at the workings of the fascist government) were kept while he was minister of foreign affairs, after he served with the Ministry of Press and Propaganda, and do not address the time when he worked with Sergio.²⁰⁵

Though it is impossible to definitively state that she had an affair with Ciano, and possibly other men, the story does not seem unlikely. Also plausible is the testimony of the FBI informant who stated that Sergio only left Italy because she could not secure employment. Employment for a single woman supporting herself would have been a very real concern in light of the regime’s policies excluding

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Sergio, “Gente translation,” 13.

²⁰⁵ Galeazzo Ciano, *Diary 1937-1943*. New York: Enigma Books, 2002.

women from the workplace. Starting in 1928, the government put more and more restrictions on women working, culminating in the decree-law of September 5, 1938, that ordered government departments to ensure that female workers of government offices made up no more than ten percent of their total staff.²⁰⁶ By 1934, when Sergio was working for the Ministry of Popular Culture, departments in the government had been allowed to fix quotas for hiring women. According to the 1936 census, women generally made up 26 percent of department staffs, yet the September 5, 1938, decree law fixed a 10 percent quota.²⁰⁷ Italian women in this time faced increased job insecurity, and with no one to support her, Sergio is likely to have felt this keenly.

Additionally, such policies limiting the employment of women led to the development of an Italian stereotype of the sexy secretary. “To make ends meet some young women turned to the market of sexual favors. Public opinion alerted wives to the snares of the seductive secretary,” wrote De Grazia.²⁰⁸ She noted, however, that it was well known that the secretary was the one more likely to suffer. In a 1940 novel, *Sogni in grembiule nero*, or *Dreams in Black-Frock*, one secretary tells another about the “same old story,” a present, a salary increase, a kiss, a request for overtime. “We all know where it ends up. And it practically happens to everybody, believe me. All of my friends are in the same situation.”²⁰⁹

Such may have been the case with Sergio, though it is impossible to know. What may be more important, however, is asking what Sergio accomplished by

²⁰⁶ De Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*. 166, 193.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 194.

²⁰⁹ Quoted in De Grazia, 195.

polishing a personal narrative that cultivated an ardently anti-fascist image of herself, one that was apparently a surprise to Italian officials.²¹⁰ In arguing to historicize the experience of Italian women immigrants to Australia, scholar Roslyn Pesman urges researchers to be aware that “The story when it is told must begin in Italy, in the pre-migration experience of the women, in the Italies of time and place that they left ... the event of immigration itself as well as on departure and settlement.”²¹¹ She wrote that academics must constantly ask: “who is speaking, for whom, and from where?”²¹² Similarly, Shulamit Reinharz noted that feminist researchers must ask “who is speaking when women speak for themselves? ... Is it the voice of oppression, the voice of imitation, the authentic unsilenced self, or multiple voices?”²¹³

In Lisa Sergio’s case, we never hear her address allegations such as the Ciano affair, even though, according to one FBI informant, it was a well-known rumor surrounding her arrival in the United States. Instead, the voice that emerges insists repeatedly on her political differences with fascism and the personal sacrifice she made to oppose it. This history, after all, came not from private diaries but from notes for an autobiography manuscript and proposal. Though it is not known precisely when Sergio wrote this autobiography, it is likely that it was later in her life. Little is known of Sergio’s religious views as a young woman. Possibly she became more devout as she aged and more committed to traditional morality, at least in the public

²¹⁰ Propaganda Service Director General to Minister of Popular Culture, 12 November 1939.

²¹¹ Roslyn Pesman, “Italian Women and Work in Post-Second World War Australia” in *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives: Italian Workers of the World*, ed. Donna Gabaccia and Franca Iacovetta (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), 402-403.

²¹² Ibid.

²¹³ Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research*. 138, 139.

presentation of herself. This may be why one reason she never addressed such affairs or acknowledged the presence of their rumors.

In her autobiography, Sergio's voice is that of a larger-than-life figure. This voice reflects what another scholar, Fiora A. Bassanese, called the "willed construction of an exceptional personal identity, the convergency of biography and art" and the "tendency to self-exaltation."²¹⁴ Sergio's narratives pay particular attention to narrative arcs: It is Ciano, for instance, who discovers her mistakes; thus it is Ciano who must fire her. Her autobiography is at times melodramatic, the chapter on her escape included the story of a train running over a man and Sergio's pivotal role in saving his life despite her concerns about not being discovered as she fled the country.²¹⁵ Sergio completely ignored negative rumors surrounding her arrival in the United States, rumors which cast her in the role of a tainted woman, seductress and temptress. Instead she chose to portray herself as solely in love with one man and marrying him on his deathbed, yet never giving his full name, calling him only "Morris," a name that is decidedly un-Italian. The attention she paid to narrative story telling is so complete that she even inexplicably changed her own name in one autobiographical manuscript which chronicled her love affair, her childhood, and her first jobs with the *Italian Mail* and the Mediterranean Archeological Association.

Sergio's shaping of her personal history may very well have included rewriting an affair with a fascist official into a conflict with the regime. If she did not

²¹⁴ Fiora A. Bassanese, "Sibilla Aleramo: Writing a Personal Myth" in *Mothers of Invention: Women, Italian Fascism, and Culture*, ed. Robin Pickering-Iazzi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 137.

²¹⁵ Sergio, "Your Eyes Are Like Your Father's," 7-13.

actually leave Italy because of political differences, when did she start giving this account of her departure? It is impossible to know exactly. The original story of her coming to the U.S. first reported in the U.S. press was that she came “on vacation” and to make a study of U.S. broadcasting.²¹⁶ This may have been true, but it also made a reasonable cover story to obscure her real intentions for coming to the United States, whether they were because of political differences, her inability to find work or alleged infidelities.

Her own statements at the time cast doubt on any political differences she had with the regime. Sergio gave interviews to the press defending fascist practices, such as offering bonuses to women for having babies. Comments such as these were reported in the *New York World-Telegram*:

“I don’t know how to cope with all the talk I hear about Italy’s militarism and lack of freedom. The idea seems to have got around that one can’t sneeze in Rome without first asking permission.”

“Will you please tell me,” she demanded, “if you did not want a child, would you go ahead and have one simply because someone offered you a thousand lire? That isn’t what induces Italian women to have babies. They’d have them anyway.”²¹⁷

These statements reflected the widespread support that Mussolini’s regime first enjoyed internationally. She apparently regretted them as the United States came closer to entering World War II. Such quotes generated letters to the FBI from people who were suspicious of Sergio’s intentions in America. Nevertheless, Sergio frequently defended her homeland. In one of her first appearances on NBC after

²¹⁶ “A Guest of NBC Famous European Announcer to Broadcast Here” ; NBC, “Lisa Sergio to Announce Dell Concerts.”

²¹⁷ “Duce’s Lire for Babies ‘Superfluous’,” *New York World-Telegram*, 16 July 1937. Box 19, Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

arriving in the U.S., she talked of her honor at being Mussolini's translator: "That I, a woman, should be sent out to broadcast an event that turned out to be a landmark in our national history, is something that fills me with wonderment."²¹⁸

These statements were not out of character for Sergio, according to Niccolo Tucci, a friend and writer who knew Sergio throughout her life. "She was always extreme. So, all her mistakes were not made carefully with an eye to the possibility of being wrong," Tucci stated in an interview given after Sergio's death. "She realized it later. Sergio became anti-fascist in 1937, but not completely. When she left Italy she was confused."²¹⁹ Sergio herself wrote that she rarely acted according to her own common sense. "I have learned to wait for the 'unforeseen circumstances,' to notice signs of impending change and to take action when an inner urge prompts me to do so," she wrote, "even if common sense militates against it."²²⁰

After giving some seemingly pro-fascist interviews in the United States, during the World War II era Sergio started to recount disagreements with the regime for the press.²²¹ Through these interviews, Sergio actively rewrote her own personal history and made her own myth, recasting herself as a political refugee, an anti-fascist, and a champion of American ideals, creating an acceptable persona to Americans in a time of war. This echoes the information of one FBI informant, who noted that while at NBC Sergio began making anti-fascist speeches in order to keep

²¹⁸ *The Helen Traubel Program* Copy of Milton Cross's scripted interview of Lisa Sergio, Box 19 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 18 July 1937.

²¹⁹ Ryan, "Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America", 65.

²²⁰ Sergio, "Chapter II Where It All Began," 17.

²²¹ For example: Bromley, "Lisa Sergio Sees Duce Dreaming of Comeback." ; Dangerfield, "They Talk to the World" ; Mowrer, "Take Her Radio Word For It."

her job, and was “converted in the process,” doing “great work in speaking before the public, acquainting them with the faults of fascism and with the benefits of democracy.”²²² This voice remained in the following decades as Sergio continued to give newspaper interviews and subsequently documented her life in the notes for her autobiography—a product intended for public sale. Thus, what emerged was a voice and storyline intended for public consumption and a personal myth for her own survival.

At the center of Sergio’s telling of her life story is her reevaluation of the political regime that came of age as she did. She may have been anti-fascist when she left Italy, or she may have become anti-fascist after spending time in America. What is known is that it was necessary for her to renounce Mussolini and fascism in order to create a new U.S. life. A handwritten note in her papers suggests that whenever it took place, Sergio’s political conversion was authentic and heartfelt. “Human beings are not born knowing. They are endowed, from birth with the capacity to learn. They learn to walk, to talk,” she wrote. “We must also learn how to be free.”²²³

The First Woman Announcer in Europe?

²²² Anonymous, *Elisa Maria Alice Sergio, with aliases, Lisa Sergio, “The Golden Voice of Rome”*, 11

²²³ Lisa Sergio, List of colleges Sergio lectured at from 1966-1967. Box 10 Folder 5, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

In U.S. newspaper articles featuring Sergio later in her life, she was often referred to as the world's first female radio announcer.²²⁴ She referred to herself similarly: "I became Europe's first woman commentator and il Duce's interpreter for [England], the United States, and wherever else the English language was the official means of communication," she wrote in the notes for her autobiography.²²⁵ But if Sergio did completely rewrite her history, then how believable is her claim that she was the first female radio announcer in Europe? Was this true, or was it a hook she used to generate publicity and public notice?

Some historians question the value of making such a claim. (An over-reliance on chronicling "journalistic firsts," for example, can lead to a developmental view of history that explains past practices only in relation to the generally accepted standards of today.²²⁶) Nevertheless, it is important to address in this case since it is a fact that Sergio repeated often in interviews in U.S. media. The claim is difficult to verify. It is not easy to pin down the exact date that Sergio began broadcasting in Italy and it is tricky assessing whether other women in Europe were broadcasting at that time.

In her autobiographical writings, she claimed to have begun broadcasting in 1932. Yet, the resignation letter contained in her FBI file states that she began broadcasting in 1933. To explain the discrepancy, it is perhaps possible that Sergio

²²⁴ For example: Donovan, "Il Duce's Former Translator: Vocal Feminist and Christian." ; Hazel Geissler, "Early Women Broadcasters Reunite," *St. Petersburg (Fla.) Independent*, 5 March 1974, 3-B. Box 14 Folder 16, Sergio papers; Lisa Sergio, "Brains Have No Sex," *The New York Times*, 25 April 1943, section 2 page 9, 1. ; Lisa Sergio, "Columbia Broadcasting System, Columbia's Lecture Hall," 28 April 1941. Box 11 Folder 71, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

²²⁵ Sergio, "Chapter VI Unplanned Encounter with Mussolini," 1.

²²⁶ Startt and Sloan, *Historical Methods in Mass Communication*. 30.

began broadcasting in 1932 for EIAR, the Italian radio network, at the invitation of Polverelli, the head of the government's Press Office. She may have technically only become an employee of the Press Office in 1933 when Galeazzo Ciano was appointed to oversee it and subsequently brought radio and motion pictures more firmly under the office's control.

Even if this is so, the veracity of Sergio's claim to be the first woman broadcaster in Europe hinges on whether or not other women were broadcasting in 1932 and 1933. At least one clipping from Sergio's scrapbook seems to support her claim. The clip, labeled as being from *The Daily Mail* of London from September, 1933, is headlined, "First Woman B.B.C. Announcer To Be Heard on Monday" and announced that Mrs. Charles Borritt would become a BBC announcer "for the first time in the history of British radio."

The reason for this departure from precedent is due to the soft, dulcet tones of a woman, announcing the broadcasts from Rome, catching the imagination of thousands of listeners in Great Britain to the detriment of British programmes [sic]. Mr. Roger Eckersley, director of programmes [sic] at Broadcasting House, London, decided that what Rome could do Britain could do.²²⁷

Clippings in another collection, the Martin Codel Papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society in Madison, also seem to support Sergio's claim. The Codel Papers consist of clippings from various broadcast industry publications edited and published by Codel. The clippings of interest to this project, unfortunately, are undated and

²²⁷ "First Woman B.B.C. Announcer To Be Heard Monday," *The Daily Mail*, September 1933. Box 19 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

come from an unnumbered scrapbook; archivists estimate they date back to 1933.

Internal evidence from the clippings supports this date.

One clipping reported that the BBC decided, “after an experiment, not to include women on its regular announcing staff.” The clipping reported that a Mrs. Giles Borrett was taken off the air as an announcer, but would continue to appear as an artist. “The B.B.C. experience with women announcers has been much the same as that of Continental radio stations, nearly all of which have given them a trial only to withdraw them later. As in America there are practically no woman announcers left.”²²⁸

Another clipping from the Codel scrapbook reported that European radio tended to use women announcers more than American radio. The article also contained specific information about Italian international broadcasts:

When “EIYAR Radio Roma” was heard last year for the first time in America, in an international relay program from Rome’s new high-power station, the voice of greeting was that of Signora Boncompagna, a resonant and pleasing voice, to say the least. She was at one time chief announcer for Italy’s whole network of stations, but later women announcers were withdrawn in that country because, as the radio authorities opined, they detracted too much attention from the program and attracted too much to themselves with the result that their “mash mail” was greater than the “fan mail” the programs were supposed to draw.²²⁹

If this clipping is from 1933, as archivists suggest, then this would indicate that Italian international broadcasts were first heard in America in 1932, the year Sergio claimed to be hired as Italy’s English broadcaster. However, this article asserts

²²⁸ “Woman Announcers Banned in Britain.” Undated newspaper clipping from an unnumbered scrapbook. Martin Codel Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison.

²²⁹ “Women Announcers--Why Not?”; “Women Announcers? Voices Do Not Seem to Click.”

that a woman, Signora Boncompagna, was the broadcaster. If this is the case, then was Sergio really the first woman broadcaster in Italy, much less in the rest of Europe? It is arguable that the name “Boncompagna” is incorrect information, since so much other information contained in the Codel clippings is incorrect and seemingly unreliable. For example, while the *Daily Mail* reported that the BBC’s first female announcer’s name was Mrs. Charles Borritt, the Codel scrapbook clipping reported her name as Mrs. Giles Borrett. Also, the Codel scrapbook clipping referred to Rome’s EIAR. network as “EIYAR Radio Roma.”²³⁰

It is also useful to look again at *The (New York) Sun* clipping “American Girl is 2RO Voice” and its assertion that once the network’s new broadcasting house opened “next month,” that “Americans *will again* hear a familiar voice.” (emphasis added).²³¹ This indicates that Sergio was not heard on the air while the station was closed for repairs, and not fired as the Codel clipping indicates.

Even though the Codel clippings are filled with inaccuracies, they support the *Daily Mail*’s assertion that a Mrs. Borritt or Borrett was the first BBC announcer, and that she was hired after the start of English short-wave programs in Italy. The articles also show that in 1933 it became more common to hear women announcers on European broadcasting networks, despite an acknowledged prejudice against their voices. One of the Codel clippings asserted that women European announcers included Vera Siewert at Radio Luxembourg, who broadcast in English and German, and Francine Lemaitre at Radio Normandie. The article also reported that the official

²³⁰ “Women Announcers--Why Not?”; “Women Announcers? Voices Do Not Seem to Click.”

²³¹ Bird, “American Girl is 2RO Voice: Lisa Sergio Will Be Heard From Rome Soon.”

Austrian broadcasting system had conducted a survey of listeners and found that the majority were against women as announcers.²³²

Though claims of being the “first” European woman broadcaster are highly contestable and difficult to verify, evidence shows that in 1933 several women were employed as announcers, and that Lisa Sergio’s hiring in 1932 was perhaps influential in persuading other networks to employ women. If Lisa Sergio was not the first European woman to secure a prominent announcing position, then she was certainly one of the very early ones and very possibly the best known.

A New Life

Ironically, Sergio arrived in the United States aboard the *Conte di Savoia* in July, 1937, just before Independence Day. The exact date is unknown. In a 1942 letter, she stated she arrived on July 1.²³³ However, in her autobiographical writings, she stated she arrived on July 3, making Independence Day her first full day in the United States, a dramatic narrative detail that enhances her narrative quest for independence from a totalitarian regime.

Her arrival marked the beginning of Sergio’s second life—her life as an American. She would need a little more than luck to see her through. Marconi, the man who recommended her for a job at NBC, died on July 20, just two weeks after

²³² “Women Announcers--Why Not?”; “Women Announcers? Voices Do Not Seem to Click.”

²³³ Lisa Sergio to Peter J. Donohue 2 January 1942, Box 4 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

her arrival. As a native Italian, she was an enemy alien during World War II. She was a woman aspiring to do news analysis and commentary in a land where women's voices weren't seen as fit for news broadcasts. And after the war, she was blacklisted as a communist sympathizer. But at each point in navigating these and other difficulties, Sergio used her own construction of her personal history to further her career and secure her survival. "When I came to the United States," she wrote, "I brought my unusual assets with me. Number one was the fact that I was Mussolini's interpreter. None before had ever done this."²³⁴

²³⁴ Levinson, "Interpreter Protested War: Linquist (sic) Switched Mussolini Scripts."

Chapter 5: NBC's "Woman Announcer" (1937-1939)

"It was just what we Europeans had been taught to believe about America. Luck and opportunity were like fruit on trees, there for the picking!"

—*Lisa Sergio, date unknown*¹



FIGURE 4. NBC Publicity Photograph

Lisa Sergio began working for NBC in 1937 and was listed in the network's records as NBC's "woman announcer." Photo used with permission: Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Box 14 Folder 52.

¹ Lisa Sergio, "The Conte di Savoia docked at pier 57," Box 5 Folder 27, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1.



FIGURE 5. Lisa Sergio and Eleanor Roosevelt

This photo, though undated, was probably taken in the years immediately following World War II. Lisa Sergio first met Eleanor Roosevelt during an NBC broadcast. On several occasions, the pair shared the lecture platform. Sergio occasionally wrote to the First Lady about various social projects and Roosevelt mentioned Sergio in two "My Day" newspaper columns appearing in 1940 and 1942. Photo used with permission: Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Box 14 Folder 58.



FIGURE 6. Lisa Sergio with Helen Keller

On 24 February 1939, Helen Keller was a guest on “Let’s Talk It Over,” a program Sergio hosted for NBC. Photo used with permission: Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Box 14 Folder 58.



FIGURE 7. Ann Batchelder, Sergio's adoptive mother

It is unknown when this photo was taken. Photo used with permission: Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Box 14 Folder 31.



FIGURE 8. Ann Batchelder and Lisa Sergio

This picture is from a 1938 photo sitting for a *Ladies Home Journal* photographer. Sergio was mentioned in the magazine's "Journal About Town" column in May 1938. The column stated that Batchelder and Sergio met when they worked together on an NBC radio program. Photo used with permission: Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Box 14 Folder 31.

After Lisa Sergio went to see David Sarnoff at NBC's New York City offices following her arrival in the United States in July of 1937, she was given an NBC contract and engaged to start broadcasting after Labor Day. Dozens of newspapers across the country announced Sergio's arrival in the United States, stating that she was on an extended vacation to visit relatives and study American radio, as well as to be a guest announcer on NBC.² Newspapers mentioned that her aunt, Alice Fitzgerald lived in New York City and that her uncle, Charles Fitzgerald, lived in Baltimore.³ She was described in one paper as the "slim and attractive American girl whose English broadcasts from Rome over 2RO concerning the Ethiopian war stirred up an international tempest."⁴ She was referred to as "the most interesting voice we've run across recently,"⁵ and "one of the best announcers in the United States."⁶

Her Italian background was of interest to columnists. One marveled at the Italian broadcasting system, noting "Italy may have its Mussolini and its black shirts, but on one score Italian radio fans can laugh at Americans—they never have to listen

² Such as: "Behind the Mike," *Columbus Dispatch*, 18 July 1937. Box 19 Folder 2, Sergio papers; "Lisa Sergio of Italy is Added to NBC Staff as Guest Announcer," *Greenville Piedmont*, 21 July 1937. Box 19 Folder 2, Sergio papers; "Radio," *Macon News*, 19 July 1937. Box 19 Folder 2, Sergio papers; "Voice of 2RO Here as Guest, Will Announce," *New York Herald Tribune*, 18 July 1937. Box 19 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

³ "Round About in Social Whirl," *Baltimore American*, 8 May 1938. Box 19 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁴ "Gleanings," *Brooklyn Citizen*, 20 July 1937. Box 19 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁵ "Newcomer!" *Chicago American*, 21 October 1937. Box 19 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁶ Igor Cassini, "Petit Point," *Washington Times*, 11 March 1938. Box 19 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

to commercials.”⁷ This columnist also asked Sergio to comment on Italian programming: “The Italians want their grand opera morning, noon and night, she reports, and complete operas are aired three times a week—each lasting from three to five hours.”⁸ Another columnist, following her around during her 1937 Christmas shopping (her first U.S. Christmas) noted that “NBC’s woman announcer from Rome” was shopping with a friend for American gadgets to send to Italy. “They dipped into the household departments, scurried by gay pottery, passed up decorative thermos jugs, shining kitchen do-dads. ‘Ah!’ said Lisa. They stopped. She pounced on a table, strewn with glistening metal objects. ‘Here they are!’ she cried. Can openers!”⁹

Sergio was an intriguing persona for the press and no doubt positive publicity such as this allowed Sergio to establish herself at NBC. But, as this chapter shows, it was the people she met at NBC who became an important network of supporters indispensable in launching her career as a world affairs radio commentator and lecturer, and in defending herself from the anti-communist attacks that would dominate the postwar era.

On-the-Air at NBC

⁷ Lee Roy Manuel, “Turning the Dial,” *Ft. Worth Press*, 2 August 1937. Box 19 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *Pittsburgh Post*, 20 December 1937. Box 19 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

In her first years in the United States, the press was overwhelmingly preoccupied with Sergio's low voice, just as the European press had been when she first began broadcasting in Italy. Papers including the *New York Times* took note of her beautiful voice and wondered if "the gate to the microphone will open for other female announcers."¹⁰ Sergio was often interviewed for articles to advise women on how to use their voices, and she wrote a few herself.¹¹ Such articles told women that their voices were "the most important part of their personalities," and that "a good voice is an important asset in many occupations because so much business is transacted by telephone."¹² Sergio was often quoted in such articles since she was "considered to have one of the best radio speaking voices in the world."¹³ She advised women to cup their hands over their ears and practice reading aloud to first become conscious of how their voices sounded.¹⁴ Sergio told the press that she trained her voice by reading poetry out loud.¹⁵ "The first step in improving the expressiveness of your voice is wanting to, and noticing the quality in other people," she said. "Most people depend entirely on their words to convey their meaning ... Their words, they control; but it does not occur to them that their voices must be controlled and regulated, too."¹⁶

¹⁰ "Miss Sergio With 'Fluent Phonetics' Points Way for Women Announcers."

¹¹ Such as Lisa Sergio, "Hired For Sound," *Mademoiselle*, May 1943, 129, 195-197. Box 20, Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹² "U.S. Honey-Faced Women Too Often Vinegar-Voiced," *Springfield News*, 25 July 1939. Box 20, Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "Give Voice to Your Charm," *Reader's Digest*, May 1938. Article condensed and reprinted from *You* magazine, Spring 1938, Box 20, Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Sergio's on-air persona was often confused with that of another famous correspondent on the radio during this time, Dorothy Thompson.¹⁷ Other famous women on the air during this period included Mary Margaret McBride and Eleanor Roosevelt—neither of whom were noted for having a beautiful voice. McBride's voice was described as “high-pitched and fast,” “girlish,” and “gushy.”¹⁸ Mrs. Roosevelt's voice, though cultivated and articulate, also was said to be extremely high pitched.¹⁹ By contrast, Sergio's voice was deeper with deliberate modulation, pronunciation, and delivery. She sometimes attributed her deeper voice register to her Italian roots. When asked why women were more commonly heard on the air in Italy than in the United States, Sergio replied that it was because they spoke in a deeper register and that the audience was largely men listening in public places, unlike the United States where men's voices were preferred by a female audience listening in private homes.²⁰ When a *Sunday Times* reporter asked her about her smooth English, she replied that it was her habit of thinking in Italian that had such results. “All our words end in vowels, as you know; so when I pronounce an English word ending in a consonant I pause unconsciously for the final vowel which is not there, and so am able to go on to the next word more gently.”²¹

¹⁷ Sanger, *Rebel in Radio*. 86.

¹⁸ Susan Ware, *It's One O'Clock and Here Is Mary Margaret McBride*. New York: New York University Press, 2005. 47.

¹⁹ Beasley and Belgrade, “Eleanor Roosevelt: First Lady as Radio Pioneer,” 44.

²⁰ “The Editor's Foreword: New Field for Women,” *The Countrywoman*, May 1938, 2. Box 20, Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

²¹ Basil Maine, “Broadcasting: An Italian on English,” *Sunday Times*, 30 January 1938. Box 20, Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

After receiving a contract with NBC in 1937, she was listed in the company's records as "NBC's woman announcer,"²² and was named in *Harper's Bazaar*, *Broadcasting* and *The New York Times* as the first woman to hold the spot.²³ Between 1937 and 1940, Sergio appeared on a total of eighty six NBC programs according to NBC's own records housed at the Library of Congress. Her first appearance on NBC was on July 18, 1937, as a guest on "The Helen Traubel Program." She was interviewed by Milton Cross and described herself as Europe's first woman radio commentator, doing foreign-language broadcasting in Italy and translating Mussolini's speeches. Issues of gender were also discussed:

CROSS: How do you explain the fact that there are more woman announcers in Italy than in any other country?

SERGIO: Well, Italian women have low voices which carry well over the air, whereas the men generally speak too loud. Too, I happened to be handling the foreign programs, and when they developed so much that new personnel was needed, I was asked to provide it. Naturally I selected women because I did not like to train men or order them about.

CROSS: Ah, it must be the Latin in you, Miss Sergio. They like their men to be their masters—Right?

SERGIO: Maybe that's it. However, women are emotional and they will let their feelings get the best of them in spite of the fact that they are in front of a mike, whereas men, at times, think it is unmanly to let their feelings get the best of them. And the public does like the human touch, don't you think?

CROSS: There may be something in that. Although, from all I've heard about that translation job you did on Mussolini's speech at Milan, you had your feelings pretty well under control.

SERGIO: That, of course, was a wonderful experience. That I, a woman, should be sent out to broadcast an event that turned out to be a

²² NBC, "Sergio, Lisa."

²³ "A Guest of NBC Famous European Announcer to Broadcast Here"; "Miss Sergio With 'Fluent Phonetics' Points Way for Women Announcers."; Dangerfield, "They Talk to the World"

landmark in our national history, is something that fills me with wonderment.²⁴

Similar gender tensions—questions regarding women as announcers, women’s voices, and whether women were suited to radio work—characterized nearly every early interview given by Sergio during this period. Her gender, her work in radio, and her experience with Mussolini were woven together in each newspaper article.

²⁴ *The Helen Traubel Program*

Sergio's second appearance at NBC came on July 20, 1937, when Guglielmo Marconi unexpectedly died. Sergio, introduced as "Italy's most famous woman announcer, who counted Senator Marconi among her close personal friends," gave a brief portrait of Marconi and then narrated the memorial radio play, "Milestones with Marconi" that was broadcast on NBC Blue, one of the two networks owned by NBC at this time.²⁵ Afterwards, Sergio hosted music and concert programs, including broadcasts from the Metropolitan Opera, and was the voice of Elizabeth Arden on the Elizabeth Arden program. She also broadcast in Italian when NBC began shortwave broadcasts to Europe in 1937.²⁶

She appeared frequently on the interview program "Let's Talk It Over," where she interviewed political women such as Mary Agnes Hamilton, the British delegate to the League of Nations, described her own travels in Vermont, and introduced a discussion on women in public offices between First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt and *Washington Times-Herald* publisher Eleanor Medill Patterson.²⁷

²⁵ After the 1943 Supreme Court case *NBC v. U.S.* in which NBC challenged the power of the FCC and its rule barring a company from owning two networks, NBC was forced to sell off one of its networks. It chose to keep NBC Red and sell NBC Blue, which became the American Broadcasting Company (ABC) in 1945. "Milestones with Marconi--The Epic of Radio," Sergio's copy of radio play manuscript, Box 2 Folder 12, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1937; Welbourn Kelley, "Milestones with Marconi," Radio play manuscript, Box 2 Folder 12, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1937; NBC, "Sergio, Lisa," NBC radio personalities card catalog under heading "Government and Foreigners." Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division, Library of Congress., 1937; Lisa Sergio, "Broadcast By Lisa Sergio WMCA," 7 May 1941. Box 11 Folder 69, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

²⁶ "Know Your Company No. 12 International Program Division," *NBC Transmitter*, January 1938, 15. Vol. 4, No. 1. NBC employee newsletter. Library of American Broadcasting, University of Maryland, College Park; "NBC Expands Schedule of Shortwave Broadcasts" *Broadcasting*, 1 August 1937, 40

²⁷ *Let's Talk It Over* NBC radio broadcast, Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division, Library of Congress. RWA 2453 A3-4. 16 December 1937; *Let's Talk It Over with Lisa Sergio* Box 11 Folder 83, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections

Professional Circles

While working for NBC in New York City, Sergio made several important contacts who were either guests on her shows or colleagues at the station. In 1937 for NBC's "Let's Talk it Over," for example, Sergio interviewed Anne O'Hare McCormick, who that year had become the first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize and was the first woman invited to join *The New York Times* editorial board.²⁸ An undated letter from McCormick to Sergio asked her to "ring" the next time she was in town, "I have been hoping to see you all summer ... I long to talk to you *a deux* and hope that we can arrange to meet before we're both old and gray."²⁹

Sergio also knew radio commentator Lowell Thomas during this time—she may have lectured with him on one occasion and apparently consulted him about various organizations that wanted her to sit on their advisory boards. (In 1939 she asked him about the United States Flag Association. He knew nothing of it.) The two carried on a brief correspondence in the 1970s as well.³⁰ And though it is not clear

Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 13 January 1938; NBC, "Let's Talk It Over," NBC card catalog of sustaining radio programs. Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division, Library of Congress, 1935-1941; NBC, "Popular Classics," NBC card catalog of sustaining radio programs. Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division, Library of Congress, 1937-1939; NBC, "Sergio, Lisa."; NBC, "Sergio, Lisa."; NBC, "Sergio, Signorina Lisa," NBC radio artists card catalog. Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division, Library of Congress, 1936-1959; NBC, "Tales of Great Rivers," NBC card catalog of sustaining radio programs. Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division, Library of Congress, 1938.

²⁸ *Houston Post*, 27 September 1937. Newspaper clipping in Sergio scrapbook. Box 19 Folder 27, Sergio papers; Michael Biel, "Broadcast Announcing Styles of the 1920's," 16 March 1974.

²⁹ Anne O'Hare McCormick to Lisa Sergio Undated, Box 2 Folder 52, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

³⁰ Lowell Thomas to Lisa Sergio 12 March 1975, Box 2 Folder 34, Sergio papers; Lowell Thomas to Lisa Sergio 12 November 1974, Box 2 Folder 34, Sergio papers; Lowell Thomas to Lisa Sergio 24

how they met, Dutch author, historian and journalist Hendrik Willem Van Loon frequently visited and wrote to Sergio. He was also one of her guests later on WQXR³¹ and offered to be on her program whenever she asked, as he stated in a 1941 telegram: “Lisa Darling, Anytime you can’t do your little job tell me and I shall be glad to pinch hit and gratissima even if I have to take the milk train to do it. Love Hendrik Willem.”³²

Key contacts included women journalists Dorothy Thompson and Ann Batchelder, and First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Sergio met Mrs. Roosevelt at an NBC broadcast in July, 1937, very shortly after her arrival in the United States.³³ This broadcast, in which Van Loon interviewed Mrs. Roosevelt, was an unforgettable one for Sergio. The broadcast was a scripted interview, but Mrs. Roosevelt did not like the answers, and, according to Sergio’s account, began to mope. (Sergio’s account, however, does not say what Mrs. Roosevelt disagreed with.) Suddenly, page eight of the script was lost, the page that happened to have the passages with which Mrs. Roosevelt had taken issue. “Everybody was on the floor, and I remember so well looking over the place you could see nothing but behinds! Everybody was after something, looking for this piece of paper, and this piece of paper was nowhere to be

April 1939, Box 2 Folder 34, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

³¹ Hendrik Willem Van Loon to Lisa Sergio 14 April 1944, Box 2 Folder 41, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

³² Hendrik Willem Van Loon to Lisa Sergio 8 May 1941, Box 2 Folder 41, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

³³ Margaret Cuthbert to Elvina Scheider 22 July 1937, Telegram re: Lisa Sergio. Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.

found,” Sergio recalled.³⁴ Finally, Van Loon and NBC officials decided to skip that part of the interview and lengthen other parts in order to make up the time. After the interview was over and Mrs. Roosevelt had left, Van Loon got up. The entire time, Sergio said, he had been sitting on page eight. “I’ll never forget [NBC executive] Margaret Cuthbert’s face! ... ‘Hendrick’ she said, and he said ‘Yes, Margaret? Oh yes, I sat on it. I did not want her to broadcast what was here. ... and that was the only way to do, pretend it was lost.’”³⁵

Sergio was mentioned at least twice in Mrs. Roosevelt’s “My Day” column. On October 8, 1940, Sergio, Roosevelt, and *New York City PM* founder and owner Marshall Field (grandson of the Chicago department store entrepreneur) spoke to 650 delegates attending a convention of the organization of Business and Professional Women. In her column Roosevelt summarized Sergio’s speech, stating that Sergio “called America ‘the hope of the world’ and urged her audience to ‘sell America’ to all newcomers to these shores.”³⁶ Two years later, Roosevelt and Sergio spoke together in New York City to a crowd of young people on the U.S. attitude towards Axis propaganda. “I think the most effective speaker was Miss Lisa Sergio, because

³⁴ Lisa Sergio, interview by unknown interviewer circa 1986. Tape 6 Side 2, Box 16 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

³⁵ Taped interview of Lisa Sergio by unknown interviewer, circa 1986. Box 16, Folder 2, tape 6, side 2. Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

³⁶ Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day,” *New York Herald-Tribune*, 8 October 1940. Box 19 Folder 4, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

she had actually been a fascist and could speak from experience on the effect of propaganda on youth,” wrote Mrs. Roosevelt.³⁷

Letters preserved in the Sergio collection and the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library show that Sergio saw Mrs. Roosevelt on several occasions between 1945 and 1961, either for lunch, tea or simply when Sergio sought her advice on various projects.³⁸ After one such visit in 1945, in which Sergio was spearheading a book donation drive, Mrs. Roosevelt wrote letters on behalf of Sergio to Archibald MacLeish (who at that time was appointed assistant secretary of state for cultural and public affairs) and Sen. J. William Fulbright in an effort to donate books to Italian school children.³⁹

The celebrated journalist Dorothy Thompson is said to have taken Sergio under her wing and to have been one of her mentors.⁴⁰ Thompson very likely knew Sergio long before 1946, the year in which Thompson mentioned listening to Sergio’s radio program in her newspaper column.⁴¹ They lived near each other in Vermont in the 1950s when Sergio was described as a “godsend” for standing by Thompson

³⁷ Eleanor Roosevelt, “My Day,” *New York World-Telegram*, 30 May 1942. Box 2, Folder 30, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

³⁸ Eleanor Roosevelt to Archibald MacLeish 5 April 1945, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York; Eleanor Roosevelt to Lisa Sergio 10 December 1958, Box 2 Folder 30, Sergio papers; Eleanor Roosevelt to Lisa Sergio 28 January 1957, Box 2 Folder 30, Sergio papers; Eleanor Roosevelt to Lisa Sergio 2 February 1956, Box 2 Folder 30, Sergio papers; Eleanor Roosevelt to Lisa Sergio 8 March 1961, Box 2 Folder 30, Sergio papers; Eleanor Roosevelt to Lisa Sergio 15 June 1952, Box 2 Folder 30, Sergio papers; Lisa Sergio to Eleanor Roosevelt 10 June 1952, Eleanor Roosevelt Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.

³⁹ Roosevelt

⁴⁰ Kurth, *American Cassandra: The Life of Dorothy Thompson*. 438.

⁴¹ Dorothy Thompson, “Grouse for Breakfast,” *Boston Globe*, 28 January 1946. Box 21 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

during the illness and death of her third husband, Maxim Kopf.⁴² Sergio later claimed to have influenced Thompson to move to Washington, D.C., in the 1960s when she did, but said these plans were interrupted by Thompson's 1961 trip to visit her grandchildren in Lisbon where she suffered a fatal heart attack.⁴³

But it is probable that Sergio and Thompson had met much earlier. Niccolo Tucci, an Italian writer who came to New York City with his wife in 1938, said that he and Sergio knew several from the "Algonquin set," a group of some of the most celebrated writers of the 1920s and 1930s that met regularly at New York City's Algonquin Hotel. Members of the group that Sergio was said to have known included foreign correspondent Vincent Sheean, who was a friend of Thompson and may have initially introduced her to Sergio. Thompson and Sergio became fast friends and "kindred spirits," Tucci told *Virginia Country* magazine after Sergio's death.⁴⁴

Several letters from Sergio to Thompson survive in the Dorothy Thompson Papers at Syracuse University and point to their personal friendship. Sergio talked of politics and friends in her letters (such as when she told Thompson that "Nika" Tucci had won a Ford Foundation Grant.⁴⁵) Sergio also wrote about her conversations with "Benny," Thompson's daughter-in-law, who was having marital problems with Thompson's son Michael Lewis. "She loves you very very deeply and also knows

⁴² Kurth, *American Cassandra: The Life of Dorothy Thompson*. 452.

⁴³ Sergio, "Chapter XII From the Nation's Capital," 5.

⁴⁴ Ryan, "Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America", 64.

⁴⁵ According to the Ford Foundation's 1959 annual report, Tucci received one of the grants reserved for poets and fiction writers. Others to receive this type of grant during this year included: e.e. cummings, Katherine Anne Porter, Theodore Roethke and Flannery O'Connor. Ford Foundation, "Ford Foundation Annual Report 1959." <<http://www.fordfound.org/elibrary/documents/1959/169.cfm>> 169. Lisa Sergio to Dorothy Thompson 13 February 1959, Series I, Box 27, Folder "Sergio." Dorothy Thompson Papers, Syracuse University Library, Syracuse, N.Y.

how much you care about her,” Sergio wrote in one undated letter.⁴⁶ In another, Sergio wrote to Thompson: “You are the only piece of solid ground under her feet, but she does not want to make you feel that she is burdening you with her problem, although she needs your closeness. She is very hurt, more perhaps by his silence and apparent lack of care and concern for the children herself, than by the infidelity.”⁴⁷ Sergio wrote often to Thompson after Maxim Kopf died, sometimes even reliving her own personal loss: “...I am, myself, going through a spell of utter and hopeless yearning for the presense [sic] of someone who is not here, and my own pain despite the passage of years and years, has made me vividly conscious of what yours must be, still so fresh and new.”⁴⁸ The letters are most personal, however, when Sergio speaks candidly of Thompson’s influence in her life:

I have thought of you a million times and wished I had one hundredth part of whatever it is that makes you the writer and reporter that you are. I have also thought of you as the wonderful friend that you have been to me and I hope, dear Dorothy, that you realize how rich your friendship makes me feel in a sort of life that is compounded largely of a great sense of lonesomeness and lack of purpose.⁴⁹

In another letter, Sergio wrote that whenever she talked to Thompson, “I begin to feel as if I might amount to something useful, but the feeling dies down when I face myself alone again.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Lisa Sergio to Dorothy Thompson, “Monday Nov. 23rd Phila.” Series I, Box 27, Folder “Sergio.” Dorothy Thompson Papers, Syracuse University Library, Syracuse, N.Y.

⁴⁷ Lisa Sergio to Dorothy Thompson, “New York, Saturday 12th” Undated, Series I, Box 27, Folder “Sergio.” Dorothy Thompson Papers, Syracuse University Library, Syracuse, N.Y.

⁴⁸ Sergio, “Monday Nov. 23rd Phila.”

⁴⁹ Lisa Sergio to Dorothy Thompson 7 February 1958, Series I, Box 27, Folder “Sergio.” Dorothy Thompson Papers, Syracuse University Library, Syracuse, N.Y.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

It may have been Thompson who introduced Sergio to Ann Batchelder, beginning the most significant professional—and personal—relationship during this period of Sergio’s life,⁵¹ though according to the *Ladies Home Journal*, Batchelder met Sergio when they worked together on an NBC radio program.⁵² Regardless, the three moved in overlapping circles. Batchelder was an associate editor with *Ladies Home Journal*, the magazine that Thompson wrote a regular column for. Thompson was also a freelance radio commentator for NBC, where Sergio worked.

Sergio grew close to Batchelder, who was well known for her food columns and recipes and also for her book of poems, *East of Bridgewater*.⁵³ In 1938, the same year Sergio legally declared her intention to become a U.S. citizen, she also began living with Batchelder⁵⁴ and would continue to do so until Batchelder’s death in 1955.⁵⁵ Inexplicably, there are remarkably few writings about Batchelder in the Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. and only a few pictures. These pictures include a portrait of Batchelder, a picture of Batchelder and Sergio in their home (see Figure 16), and three pictures of Batchelder and Sergio sitting on a couch (see Figure 8), one of which was printed in the May, 1938, edition of the *Journal’s* “*Journal About Town*” column. According to the column, Batchelder and Sergio met while doing a radio

⁵¹ Ryan, “Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America”, 64.

⁵² “Journal About Town,” *Ladies Home Journal*, May 1938. Box 19 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁵³ Ann Batchelder, *East of Bridgewater*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Company Inc., 1943.

⁵⁴ Sergio to Donohue, 2 January 1942; Anonymous, *Elisa Maria Alice Sergio, with aliases, Lisa Sergio*, “*The Golden Voice of Rome*”, 12, 13

⁵⁵ Gayle K. Yamada to Lisa Sergio 12 September 1986, Box 9 Folder 34, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

show together at NBC.⁵⁶ Shortly afterwards, Batchelder gave Sergio a signed copy of the spiral bound “The Ann Batchelder Collection from the *Ladies Home Journal*,” a promotional book for the *Journal* which was a reprint of 15 of Batchelder’s food spreads. The inscription read: “For Lisa with love from the author of this book. Ann Batchelder. February, 1938.”⁵⁷ In the notes for her autobiography, Sergio wrote that Batchelder adopted her in 1941 to facilitate her application for citizenship (Sergio obtained her citizenship in 1944).⁵⁸ Much later in her life, Sergio told an interviewer that she and Batchelder apparently worried about the social gossip that might surround such a move:

We went into chambers because, you know, if you go into an open court, they say all kinds of things. A woman adopting another woman. My God! Nowadays, nobody gives a damn. People are gay and they say so frankly, but in those days it looked very bad, and so, [Batchelder] said “Well, I don’t want it to look bad. What can we do?” and I said “Let’s talk to the judge if you really want to do it.” And we talked to the judge and he was very nice about it and he said, “Well, I’ll tell you, the thing to do is to do it in chambers.” ... And so she legally adopted me.⁵⁹

The women perhaps had an interest in preserving their social reputation—Batchelder’s position with the *Ladies Home Journal* meant that women all across the country read her food columns every month. Mary Margaret McBride, herself a fan of Batchelder (and an even bigger fan of food) raved about her recipes on her program

⁵⁶ “Journal About Town.”

⁵⁷ Ann Batchelder, *The Ann Batchelder Collection*. New York City: Ladies Home Journal. Box 18 Folder 10, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1938.

⁵⁸ Lisa Sergio, “Chapter IX Another World, Another Life,” Box 5 Folder 26, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 2.

⁵⁹ Lisa Sergio, interview by unknown interviewer circa 1986. Tape 6 Side 2, Box 16 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

in 1955.⁶⁰ (McBride read her poem “Things I’ve never done,” and effusively summarized several of Batchelder’s recipes, including recipes for meringue, individual baked Alaskas, a spread made of mayonnaise and ground ham and peanuts, and a homemade peanut butter ice cream.) Such a reference implies that not only was Batchelder known among her own *Journal* subscribers, but also among the legions of McBride fans. Though few newspaper articles referred to the adoption, friend and *Peoria Star* publisher Sidney Baldwin described it in a newspaper column published about Batchelder after her death:

Another dramatic period in her life came when she adopted a woman, who was full grown, and too old to be a case of adoption in the usual sense. But Lisa Sergio, an Italian, once interpreter for Mussolini and an eminent lecturer on foreign affairs both personally and by radio, was to be classed as an enemy alien, and the adoption made her a member of this country. She was with Ann Batchelder when she died.⁶¹

Batchelder, whose given name was Anna Maria, was born on March 21, 1881 in Windsor, Vermont. Her mother was Julia E. Kennedy, and her father, a lawyer, was William Batchelder.⁶² During the interwar years, she had an interest in law, was active in the suffrage movement, and served as the chair of the publicity department for the Woodstock suffrage club and corresponding secretary of the Vermont State Equal Suffrage Association.⁶³ In 1950, when Bowling Green State University gave

⁶⁰ *The Mary Margaret McBride show* Radio broadcast. Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division, Library of Congress. RGA 0902 A1. 27 January 1955.

⁶¹ Sidney Baldwin, “In My Opinion,” *Peoria Star* 1955. Undated newspaper column published shortly after the death of Ann Batchelder, Box 1 Folder 4, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁶² Vermont, *Certificate of birth* (Certified copy of Ann Batchelder’s birth certificate. Box 1 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1951)

⁶³ Ann Batchelder to James Hartness 6 September 1917, Box 1 Folder 3, Sergio papers; Edward H Deavitt to Ann Batchelder 7 October 1919, Letter from the chairman of the board of examiners

Batchelder an honorary degree, she was recognized for being Vermont's first female lawyer, for her suffrage work, and for her "struggle to show American housewives how to ennoble the chore of cooking to the rank of a culinary art."⁶⁴ (She later donated a scholarship to the university in the amount of \$100 annually to an English or literature student.)⁶⁵ Before working for the *Journal*, according to Baldwin, Batchelder worked at *Pictorial Review*, taught at Smith College and ran a tea room at the Sophia Smith Homestead in Hatfield, Massachusetts.⁶⁶ She also worked as a food editor at the *Delineator* a woman's magazine, editor at the *Springfield (Vt.) Reporter*, and police reporter at the *Boston Herald* and *Boston Globe*.⁶⁷

Batchelder was remembered as having "a magical skill in writing about cooking," and being able to write "delectably about food" by *Journal* publishers Bruce Gould and Beatrice Blackmar Gould.⁶⁸ Batchelder worked for Alice Blinn, who was in charge of the *Journal's* Homemaking Department, which was housed on the top floor of the RKO building on Fiftieth Street and Sixth Avenue and featured several kitchens, washers and dryers, and other home appliances.⁶⁹ In an oral history

clearing Batchelder for law studies, Box 1 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁴ Ohio University News Bureau to Ann Batchelder 13 May 1950, Box 1 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁵ Frank J. Prout to Ann Batchelder 19 June 1950, Box 1 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁶ "Good Food, Good Sense," *Larchmont News*. Undated newspaper clipping, Box 13 Folder 33, Sergio papers; Baldwin, "In My Opinion."

⁶⁷ Toby Cannon, "Finds Women Must Choose Between a Career and Marriage," *The Burlington Free Press and Times*, 17 March 1939, 5. Box 13 Folder 33, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁸ Mary Bass Gibson, Oral history interview of Bruce and Beatrice Blackmar Gould. Columbia University Oral History Office, 1975, 249, 267.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 249, 276A.

interview, Bruce Gould remembered that Batchelder “was rather acerbic, but she loved people and had a pert way of communicating to them.”⁷⁰ Both of the Goulds remembered that she “had a lot of humor” and that she worked for the *Journal* until her death.⁷¹ “She made herself beloved by our readers,” said Beatrice Gould. “There was something very warm about her. She sent out messages of love with her recipes to our readers. She had a lot of humor and her copy was delightful.”⁷²

Though they remembered Batchelder fondly, the Goulds also immediately named “Annie” when asked about their most difficult problems in managing the magazine. Batchelder, they said, had a drinking problem. The Goulds pretended they did not know and worked around the issue, often depending on Alice Blinn to be their intermediary. “She would be a buffer. She saw that Annie didn’t embarrass us and didn’t embarrass herself, and kept happy,” said Bruce Gould.⁷³ Despite her drinking and other health problems, Batchelder kept turning in her *Ladies Home Journal* copy up until her 1955 death, even after she had fallen in her office and broken a hip that didn’t heal properly. She was in much pain, remembered Beatrice, and wasted away until she weighed perhaps 90 pounds.⁷⁴

In 1952, she was also diagnosed with cancer of the bone marrow and moved permanently to Woodstock, Vermont, where she died in 1955. “Despite the heartbreak of knowing that I would lose her, I found serenity in the beauty of her state

⁷⁰ Ibid., 267.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., 373.

⁷³ Ibid., 374.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

and in the unfrilled friendship of its people,” Sergio wrote.⁷⁵ “It will be hard to see the *Ladies Home Journal* without Ann Batchelder,” wrote Baldwin in her *Peoria Star* column after Batchelder’s death.⁷⁶

Though other women journalists, such as Dorothy Thompson, have left accounts of same-sex attractions in personal diaries, the exact nature of the Batchelder-Sergio relationship is not known because of the scarcity of materials that describe it.⁷⁷ Was it a mother/daughter relationship? A professional alliance? A homoerotic relationship of the kind that often characterized the professional lives of single women during the Victorian era?⁷⁸ Whatever the nature of the relationship, it did carry significant personal meaning for both women. In her autobiography notes, Sergio wrote, “through her I discovered belatedly what it can mean to have the understanding and affection of [a] mother.”⁷⁹ Perhaps the most personal written sentiment that survives is a small note written in an autograph book Sergio kept for her “Column of the Air” guests. In it, Batchelder wrote: “I loved being on your program Lisa just as I love being with you.”⁸⁰ And even friends noticed the effect the relationship had on Batchelder. In a personal letter to Sergio, Baldwin wrote, referring to Batchelder’s poetry, “I remember how pleased I was when you came into

⁷⁵ Lisa Sergio, “Chapter X Return to a Smoldering Europe,” Box 5 Folder 26, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1.

⁷⁶ Baldwin, “In My Opinion.”

⁷⁷ For information on Thompson’s same-sex attractions, see: Susan Ware, *Letter to the World*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998. 70.

⁷⁸ Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985. 158-162.

⁷⁹ Sergio, “Chapter IX Another World, Another Life,” 2.

⁸⁰ Lisa Sergio, “Autograph book,” Box 13 Folder 17, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1939-1942.

her life. The poems before that were tragic—the ones after it, much happier in spite of her personal health.”⁸¹

Desire to Become War Commentator

This chapter has shown that Sergio’s initial experience at NBC was important, if for no other reason than the people it brought Sergio into contact with. The position at NBC was professionally unsatisfying for Sergio, however. She said later that as she watched the war coalesce in Europe, she wanted to analyze the news and present her perspective on European politics.⁸² She thought the United States would soon be involved and believed listeners would benefit from her knowledge of the leading politicians: “The people who were playing leading roles were mostly known to me. I knew Mussolini well. I had come to know Hitler. I knew what they were thinking. I knew DeGaulle. I knew some of the English people.”⁸³ But she said NBC would not let her talk about politics. “NBC was not about to let a woman do news,” she told interviewers years later.⁸⁴ “I said to NBC that I would like to do news. And they were absolutely dead set against a woman doing news. Absolutely impossible.”⁸⁵

⁸¹ Sidney Baldwin to Lisa Sergio 22 September 1955, Box 1 Folder 4, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁸² Hosley and Yamada, *Hard News*. 35-36.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Emily L. Bull, “First Woman Broadcaster Visits Aiken,” *Aiken (S.C.) Standard*, 29 February 1972, 7. ; Levinson, “Interpreter Protested War: Linquist (sic) Switched Mussolini Scripts.”

⁸⁵

Chapter 6: The “Column of the Air” (1939-1945)

“Lisa Sergio filled her sustaining radio column with information mainly of interest to women.”

—*Encyclopedia of American Radio*, 2000¹

“I’ve never believed in the division between men and women; we don’t in Italy. ... I just didn’t think that there was any purpose in doing programs for women, because programs for women in those days meant kitchen pointers or ... ridiculous things.”

—*Lisa Sergio in Hard News: Women in Broadcast Journalism*, 1987²



FIGURE 9. Lisa Sergio Publicity Photo

This photo is typical of the publicity photos of Sergio that appeared with news and feature stories about her in the general press. This 1940s-era photo was found in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch photo collection at the Library of American Broadcasting, University of Maryland, College Park. Used with permission.³

¹ Sies, *Encyclopedia of American Radio, 1920-1960*. 126.

² Hosley and Yamada, *Hard News*. 35.

³ Michael Henry to Stacy Spaulding, 7 November 2005, Email to author.



FIGURE 10. Commuting to New York City

This photo shows Lisa Sergio in the 1940s waiting for a commuter train in Larchmont, New York, where she lived with Ann Batchelder. This photo, along with the photos in Figures 11 and 12, are intriguing since they are not the posed, smiling publicity photos or glamour shots of Sergio that are typical of this era. Instead, Sergio is intense and focused on her work rather than on the image before the camera's lens. Photo used with permission: Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Box 14 Folder 51.



FIGURE 11. WQXR News Ticker

Lisa Sergio began working for local New York City station WQXR in 1939. After Pearl Harbor, she began reading news bulletins for the station. Frequently, scraps of paper from the news ticker are stapled to and preserved with her news commentary scripts. Note the cigarette in Sergio's left hand. Sergio was a lifelong smoker. Photo used with permission: Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Box 14 Folder 51.



FIGURE 12. WQXR Mail

This photo shows Sergio at her WQXR desk. Not only was Sergio was known throughout her life as a smoker (she even smoked in the shower, gushed the magazine *Vogue*), she was also known for her habit of wearing only red, white or black—a habit *Vogue* interpreted as chic in the 1940s. Friends later in her life said Sergio was motivated by a desire to keep expenses in check by creating a wardrobe in which every piece matched. It is unknown why in this photo Sergio is wearing a ring on the third finger of her left hand, or if she was in the habit of doing so. A similar-looking ring appeared in other photos on Sergio's pinkie finger. Photo used with permission: Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Box 14 Folder 51.

Because she felt that NBC would not let her talk about politics, Lisa Sergio took a position as a news commentator for local New York City station WQXR from 1939 to 1946.⁴ She hosted “Lisa Sergio’s Column of the Air,” the commentary program she was best known for, according to her obituary.⁵ From 1944 to 1946, she also hosted a weekly program titled “One Woman’s Opinion” for NBC’s blue network (which became ABC in 1945).

Sergio’s work as a radio commentator has largely gone unnoticed. Of the three scholarly sources that mention her, only one referred to her work as a commentator.⁶ And only one reference work contains any mention of her program, “Column of the Air,” stating that it was a sustaining radio program filled “with information mainly of interest to women.”⁷ This claim that her program was a woman’s program is questionable in light of her professed desire to talk about European politics. Sergio claimed she never did any women’s programs because she “never believed in the division between men and women.”⁸

This chapter uses the surviving “Column of the Air” and “One Woman’s Opinion” scripts to assess Sergio’s status as a U.S. news broadcaster and commentator. After first describing Sergio’s U.S. broadcasting career at NBC and WQXR, this chapter analyzes her scripts for these shows and makes three points concerning the Lisa Sergio as commentator. First, Sergio never aimed her commentary specifically at men or women, something she was able to do because of

⁴ Bull, “First Woman Broadcaster Visits Aiken.” ; Levinson, “Interpreter Protested War: Linquist (sic) Switched Mussolini Scripts.”

⁵ “Lisa Sergio, Radio Commentator in Italy and New York, Dies at 84.”

⁶ This work is: Hosley and Yamada, *Hard News*. 33-36.

⁷ Sies, *Encyclopedia of American Radio, 1920-1960*. 126.

⁸ Hosley and Yamada, *Hard News*. 35.

WQXR's unusual programming philosophy. In opposition to the gendered view of the audience that dominated radio in the 1930s and 1940s, WQXR managers chose to view listeners in terms of culture and education. Second, Sergio began giving news summaries after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, underscoring that event's influence in setting aside gender norms. Third, Sergio's program was sponsored, not sustaining, providing evidence of the commercial acceptance and public approval she received as a commentator.

The "Column of the Air" at WQXR

Ann Batchelder used her influence to secure a position for Sergio at WQXR, a local New York City station, in 1939. In his personal journals preserved at Columbia University, station manager Elliott Sanger wrote that Batchelder visited him on February 8, 1939. "Discussed Lisa Sergio matter and will go ahead," Sanger wrote. The same day he presented the "matter" to station owner Jack Hogan and settled on a salary of \$150 per month. The next day, the diaries show that Sanger met with Sergio, who "promptly accepted" the station's offer. She auditioned for the program on March 4, and discussed sponsorships on March 6.⁹

WQXR's station programming guides show that Sergio began broadcasting her "Column of the Air" from 10 to 10:30 a.m. on Monday, April 3.¹⁰ The station experimented with giving her evening broadcast times as well in 1940, putting her in

⁹ Elliott M. Sanger, "Yearbook 1939," Box 5, Elliott Sanger Collection, Columbia University rare book and manuscript library, 8 February, 6 March, 8 March.

¹⁰ WQXR, *Radio Programs for April, 1939*. Box 3, Elliott Sanger Collection. Columbia University rare book and manuscript library, 3 April.

direct competition with other well-known news commentators.¹¹ In 1942, when commentator Quincy Howe left the station, Sergio took over his 7 to 7:15 p.m. slot first on a temporary basis and then permanently.¹² (*Variety* considered her schedule of two daily shows “unprecedented,” since “other commentators have carried on equally intense activities over limited periods when important news was breaking but few, if any, have attempted it regularly.”¹³)

She was associated with WQXR from 1939 until 1946, when the station dropped all commentary programs.¹⁴ It was during this time period, in this position, that Sergio became a well-known local news personality.¹⁵ After five years with WQXR, Sergio, considered one of America’s “top women commentators,” finally got her chance to talk about world affairs on NBC. She wrote and delivered news commentaries for the program “One Woman’s Opinion,” which was aired on NBC’s Blue network on Monday mornings from 1944 to 1946.¹⁶

¹¹ “Column of the Air Reviewed,” *Billboard*, 13 July 1940. Box 19 Folder 4, Sergio papers; “Faces to Know,” *Vogue*, 1 September 1940. Box 19 Folder 4, Sergio papers; “Lisa Sergio begins a new evening commentary series over WQXR tonight,” *New York Post*, 2 July 1940. Box 19 Folder 4, Sergio papers; “Lisa Sergio, whose column of the air becomes an evening program tonight,” *New York PM*, 2 July 1940. Box 19 Folder 4, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹² “Howe Quitting Radio for Government Job,” *New York PM*, 27 May 1942. Box 20 Folder 1, Sergio papers; “Lisa Sergio Shifting,” *Variety*, 23 September 1942. Box 20 Folder 1, Sergio papers; “Quincy Howe’s Q.T. Mission,” *Variety*, 27 May 1942. Box 20 Folder 1, Sergio papers; Unknown Author, *The Villager*, 11 June 1942. Box 20 Folder 1, Sergio papers; WQXR, *Programs for October*. Box 3, Elliott Sanger Collection, Columbia University rare book and manuscript library, 1942.

¹³ “Inside Stuff--Radio,” *Variety*, 24 June 1942, 30. Box 14 Folder 6, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁴ WQXR, *Programs, March 1946*. Box 3, Elliott Sanger Collection, Columbia University rare book and manuscript library.

¹⁵ Waller, *Radio: The Fifth Estate*. 130.

¹⁶ “Radio Ramblings,” *Chester Times*, 6 November 1944. Box 21 Folder 1, Sergio papers; Unknown Author, *Des Moines Look*, 12 June 1945. Box 21 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

When the entertainment industry newspaper *Variety* examined 30 popular radio commentators on the air in 1945, Sergio was the only woman listed along with the famous names of H.V. Kaltenborn, Quincy Howe, Walter Winchell and Edward R. Murrow. *Variety* called her an “ardent enemy of everything fascist” and “qualified to analyze Italian affairs and interpret European political intrigues.”¹⁷ She received similar assessments from other columnists. In 1941, syndicated columnist Charles Driscoll found her to be “intelligent and unaffected,” and “equally opposed to fascism and to communism,” and “a good American, though she’s been here only three years.”¹⁸

Regardless of whether she was an anti-fascist when she left Italy or became so later after arriving in America, her public image as an anti-fascist was not complete until the early 1940s. It was in this era that Sergio began to portray herself as passionately anti-fascist, even though in 1939 she was quoted as saying, “I do not like to talk about fascism on my WQXR radio program when I can help it. Over here, if you are not 100 percent against Mussolini, then people say you must be for him.”¹⁹ Yet in 1943, *Vogue* stated that she had been meeting with known anti-fascists in Italy before her exile.²⁰ Similarly, in 1944 *Newsweek* stated that Sergio began to “smell the rat in fascism” back in the mid 1930s.²¹ A 1943 *New York Herald Tribune* article claimed that its own newspaper correspondents gave Sergio “her political education,

¹⁷ “Variety’s Capsule Appraisal of Radio’s Know-It-Alls,” *Variety*, 25 July 1945, 26, 30.

¹⁸ Charles Driscoll, “Day By Day,” *Knoxville Journal*, 10 April 1941. Box 19 Folder 4, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁹ Candide, “Only Human,” *Daily Mirror*, 7 August 1939. Box 19 Folder 4, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

²⁰ Mowrer, “Take Her Radio Word For It”

²¹ “Lisa of the Golden Voice.”

by degrees.”²² This paper gave her strong anti-fascist credentials when it stated that “better than 99 percent of the writers and on [sic] international events, she understand what a threat Fascism, with its ramifications in every country, presents to the world today—and will present after the peace.”²³

Increase of Commentary During World War II

The need for an ardently anti-fascist public image may be explained in part by Sergio’s unique position as a female radio commentator in an era when the number of commentators was increasing dramatically, sparking fears over the power they were thought to wield over public opinion.

In 1938, when events in Europe took a turn for the worse, the public’s appetite for radio news increased was heightened. To meet the demand, CBS began its European radio round-ups in March 1938.²⁴ During the Munich crisis in September 1939, radio commentator H.V. Kaltenborn gave 102 broadcasts in the space of twenty days, sleeping and eating in CBS studios.²⁵ Local stations, too, changed their programming to broadcast the war situation. When Germany invaded Poland on Sept. 1, 1939, WQXR manager Elliott Sanger wrote in his diary that he “decided to stay on air all day to cover war developments.” His diary shows that WQXR “operated all

²² Bromley, “Lisa Sergio Sees Duce Dreaming of Comeback.”

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ William L. Shirer, *Berlin Diary*. New York: A. Knopf, 1941. 104-107. Cited in: Lawrence W. Lichty and Malachi C. Topping, *American Broadcasting: A Source Book on the History of Radio and Television*. New York: Hastings House, 1975. 352-354.

²⁵ David Clark, “H.V. Kaltenborn: The Dean of Commentators” (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin, 1965), 3.

day” for four days straight—Friday Sept. 1 through Monday Sept. 4—before going back to the regular schedule.²⁶ During the height of the war, the networks aired about twenty foreign broadcasts a day.²⁷ A study by the Office of Radio Research, headed by Paul Lazarsfeld, found that international news figured more prominently on the radio than in the newspapers, with radio broadcasting almost twice as many items on foreign news than appeared in newspapers.²⁸ In 1940, 12.3 percent of the networks’ evening hours was devoted to commentators, talks and news. By 1945, news and commentary filled 19.3 percent of the evening schedules.²⁹

The increased demand for news resulted in a period of advancement for women in U.S. radio. As men went off to war, women were hired to fill their vacant jobs. By 1944, there was one female announcer for every twelve men, causing one station manager to comment that “the female announcer has proved her worth and will continue to find her place in radio announcing and increasingly so as commentators.”³⁰

For the first time, the American public listened as world affairs—and a war—unfolded before them as they listened to the speeches of foreign dictators in their own living rooms. Lisa Sergio knew how persuasive these men could be, and how confusing the broadcasts could sound to the average listener. In a 1939 speech she compared Roosevelt’s fireside chats to the broadcasts of Mussolini addressing a swarming crowd beneath his balcony, broadcasts she had once attended and translated:

²⁶ Sanger, “Yearbook 1939,” 1-4 September.

²⁷ Barnouw, *The Golden Web*. 140.

²⁸ Lazarsfeld, *Radio and the Printed Page*. 211.

²⁹ *Radio Broadcasting Yearbook*, 1940-1947.

³⁰ Hosley and Yamada, *Hard News*. 57, 61.

The contrast between the technique of dictatorship and democracy is as marked as the contrast between the tone and substance of the speeches. The clamor of the cheering and shouting crowd is a powerful element for the dictator to bank on; and the volley of applause underlining each imperative sentence thrills and confuses the mind of the listener in his home. The “Fireside Chat” technique is based on the opposite effect: a background of complete silence merging with the silence in the listener’s room. The silence is conducive to reflection and thought.³¹

As news increased, so did the number of radio commentators who claimed to interpret it. Radio commentary had existed for years—H.V. Kaltenborn claimed the first such broadcast in 1922.³² But during World War II, radio commentary was practiced on a much larger scale, “bigger in almost every dimension.”³³ In 1931, there were six network news commentators. A study in Buffalo found that the five commentators people favored most in 1940 were Boake Carter, H.V. Kaltenborn, Lowell Thomas, Edwin C. Hill and Walter Winchell.³⁴ The number of commentators increased to 20 by the beginning of World War II.³⁵ By some estimates, there were over 600 network and local commentators in 1947, with fifty eight alone in the New York and New Jersey area.³⁶

But just as some feared the ways in which dictators used radio for propaganda purposes, so, too, did they fear commentators. “Radio has made it possible for the molders of opinion to speak to the most suggestible people—the great masses distributed in family units—and to make their appeals directly, personally and

³¹ Lisa Sergio, “Radio--The Conquest of Our Time” *A Town Hall Pamphlet*, 4 January 1939, 12.

³² Clark, “H.V. Kaltenborn: The Dean of Commentators”, 292.

³³ Robert R. Smith, “The Origins of Radio Network News Commentary,” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 9 (1965):113-122.

³⁴ Lazarsfeld, *Radio and the Printed Page*. 244.

³⁵ It is unclear if this source is referring to the start of World War II in Europe, or the start of American involvement in the war in 1941. Irving E. Fang, *Those Radio Commentators!* Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1977. 6.

³⁶ Chester, “Power of the Radio Commentator”, 334, 335.

repetitiously,” wrote *American Mercury*.³⁷ A number of books were published during this time specifically to provide background on the most famous commentators, one going so far as to lament the American public’s search for “ready-made opinions.”³⁸ Similarly, *Variety* worried that commentators “can do untold damage” unless they have an appropriate background in history, politics, economics and “an appreciation of the sociological import of the fateful decisions being made today.”³⁹ In 1945 the trade paper ran a two-page table outlining the education, experience, and qualifications of the many popular commentators.⁴⁰ It was in this table that Sergio—the only woman among twenty nine men—was listed as qualified to analyze the news, a fact she was apparently proud of since she recounted it to many interviewers later in her life.⁴¹

In 1940, the earliest year for which scripts survive from her “Column of the Air,” Lisa Sergio had two things in common with the most eminent radio commentators: She had lived in Europe and had had broadcasting experience. The most prominent commentators, such as H.V. Kaltenborn, Dorothy Thompson and Edward R. Murrow, had spent a large amount of time living overseas.⁴² Like Sergio, some of them had even met Hitler and Mussolini.⁴³ But none could match the five

³⁷ Ibid., 335.

³⁸ David Bulman, ed., *Molders of Opinion* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1945), vii.

³⁹ George Rosen, “Gabbers’ Dun & Bradstreet; Radio’s ‘Haves’ and ‘Have Nots’,” *Variety*, 25 July 1945, 27.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ For example: Hosley and Yamada, *Hard News*. 36. It is indeed surprising that newspaper woman Dorothy Thompson was not included—she was known for her weekly radio column and was included as the only woman in at least one book that analyzed popular commentators: Bulman, ed., *Molders of Opinion*.

⁴² David Holbrook Culbert, *News for Everyman: Radio and Foreign Affairs in Thirties America*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976. 204.

⁴³ Dorothy Thompson had met Hitler in 1931, H.V. Kaltenborn in 1932. See: Clark, “H.V. Kaltenborn: The Dean of Commentators”; Dorothy Thompson, *I Saw Hitler!* New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1932.

years she had spent broadcasting from inside Mussolini's fascist government. When she began broadcasting on WQXR in 1939, Sergio would have been one of only a handful of commentators with a significant amount of experience on radio, having spent seven years broadcasting in Italy and the United States. A survey conducted nine years later in 1949, concluded that only a few veterans possessed ten years experience or more in the field.⁴⁴ By that time, although her broadcast career was in decline, Sergio could boast of fifteen years of broadcast experience.

WQXR was a relatively young station when Sergio began working there in 1939. The station was started in 1929 as W2XR, a "visual broadcasting" station experimenting with early television technology. New Jersey native Jack Hogan began the station in order to experiment with technical innovation in signal transmissions. He later brought Sanger on board to run the radio station, which was licensed in 1936 as WQXR. The station billed itself as "the radio station for people who hate radio"⁴⁵ and "the High Fidelity Station,"⁴⁶ a source for high-quality classical music.

The station tried to appeal to intelligent, educated listeners. (This kind of listener included Sinclair Lewis, who wrote to the management in 1938 to say simply, "Dear Sirs: I listen to the Breakfast Symphony every morning."⁴⁷) Market research conducted between 1937 and 1944 showed that nearly sixty one percent of the station's audience came from higher income brackets, which comprised only 29.8 percent of the entire population. For example, the median income for Americans in

⁴⁴ Charles Elkind, "Qualifications of the Radio Commentator" (M.A., Stanford University, 1949), 58.

⁴⁵ David Hinckley, "Scientific Broadcasting," *New York Daily News*, 1 April 2004, <http://www.nydailynews.com/city_life/big_town/v-pfriendly/story/179243p-155809c.html>.

⁴⁶ Sanger, *Rebel in Radio*. 46.

⁴⁷ Sinclair Lewis to WQXR 2 June 1938, Box 1, Folder 1-1. Elliott Sanger Collection, Columbia University rare book and manuscript library.

1937 was \$1,814, but the median income of the WQXR audience was \$3,005.

Audience members were typically housewives, teachers and college professors, students, physicians, engineers, lawyers and business people.⁴⁸

The station's earliest news updates consisted of one daily five-minute broadcast provided by the Press Radio Bureau. (Because the station couldn't afford a ticker, a messenger had to be sent to fetch the script each afternoon.) Later, the *Christian Science Monitor* was invited to broadcast a daily radio report. The *Monitor* broadcasts were provided free of charge. The station also used news bulletins from *The New York Times* via facsimile transmissions, new technology Hogan had been experimenting with since 1929.⁴⁹ WQXR hired its first news commentator, journalist and foreign correspondent Percy Winner, at the end of 1936. Emmett MacAlarney, former city editor of the *New York Tribune*, joined the station in 1938. By 1940, the station had added Quincy Howe as news analyst and Sergio.⁵⁰ In his history of WQXR, Sanger praised Sergio, saying "her comments on the current scene, couched in her beautiful delivery, soon attracted a large audience."⁵¹

When *The New York Times* bought the station in 1944, WQXR continued to maintain its own newsroom and editors, rewriting Associated Press copy to provide news "every hour on the hour."⁵² In 1946, the news bulletins were no longer prepared at the station, but at the *Times* building by a radio staff hired by *The New York Times*

⁴⁸ WQXR, "Data on Radio Station WQXR Compiled July-1940," Box 2, Folder 2-4, Elliott Sanger Collection, Columbia University rare book and manuscript library, 1940.

⁴⁹ New York Times Company, "WQXR celebrates three notable anniversaries in 2004," News Release, 16 March, 2004.

⁵⁰ Sanger, *Rebel in Radio*. 83, 84-86. Howe's program grew so popular that he was later lured to CBS.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 86, 87.

⁵² WQXR, "WQXR's News Service," FCC/Clear Channel Hearings, Book I, Section 1, Part 13. Box 1, Folder 1-6, Elliott Sanger Collection, Columbia University rare book and manuscript library, 1946, 31.

using a wider selection of news services as well as copy provided by *Times* correspondents.⁵³ Commentary at the station was also cut, which marked the end of Sergio's tenure as a WQXR news commentator.

Not Women's News

Nearly 100 scripts from "Lisa Sergio's Column of the Air" and seventy eight scripts from "One Woman's Opinion" are in existence in the Lisa Sergio papers of Georgetown University.⁵⁴ Sergio's scripts show that she was overwhelmingly preoccupied with war news and political developments. The majority of her "Column of the Air" scripts (seventy percent) was obviously oriented toward these themes and was written for an un-gendered audience.

Sergio typically covered a broad range of material in each commentary depending on the news of the day. A commentary might sum up war news and connect it to fascism's spread to Argentina and Bolivia,⁵⁵ or to a condemnation of

⁵³ Ibid., 32.

⁵⁴ The "One Woman's Opinion" scripts were all broadcast between 1944 and 1946. Though the "Column of the Air" scripts range in dates from 1940 to 1945, most were written in either 1940 (48 scripts) or 1945 (35 scripts). Only seven scripts survive from broadcasts between 1941 and 1944. All of the scripts are typed, though it appears they were often created hastily since there are numerous punctuation and spelling errors. Many hand-written corrections and additions were made to the texts as well. In this paper, direct quotes from the scripts incorporated these hand-written edits in order to reconstruct, as far as possible, what Lisa Sergio probably said on the air. Misspellings and punctuation errors were corrected when it was clear that the meaning of the passage and the reconstruction of what was broadcast on the air was not in question and would not be altered.

⁵⁵ Lisa Sergio, "Lisa Sergio's Column of the Air WQXR New York 1/3/1943 7 PM," 3 January 1943. Box 11 Folder 79, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

neutral countries that traded with Axis powers.⁵⁶ Sergio also frequently discussed the political developments and intrigues that impacted the war or the chances for a lasting peace afterwards, such as the political preparations for the organizing conference of the United Nations in San Francisco in 1945.⁵⁷

Themes for her commentaries resonated with the goals of the federal government's Office of Facts and Figures (the office was combined with other federal agencies in 1942 to form the Office of War Information). The OFF saw "their mission as the larger fight against fascism in all its forms—not the narrow goal of defense in itself."⁵⁸ Sergio regularly spoke out against every appearance of fascism. For example, the subject of war trials frequently appeared in her commentaries in 1945; she believed that in order to stop fascism, war criminals must stand for their crimes⁵⁹ and that these trials should be public and without censorship.⁶⁰ In a particularly strong passage, she went so far as to call the trial of Philippe Pétain, the head of Vichy France, "the trial of international fascism" because of his cooperation with the Germans during the occupation of France:

⁵⁶ Lisa Sergio, "Lisa Sergio's Column of the Air WQXR January 25th 1945 7 PM," 25 January 1945. Box 11 Folder 80, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁷ For example: Lisa Sergio, "Lisa Sergio's Column of the Air April 30th 1945 7 PM," 30 April 1945. Box 11 Folder 81, Sergio papers; Lisa Sergio, "Lisa Sergio's Column of the Air QQXR (sic) March 12th 1945 7 PM," 12 March 1945. Box 11 Folder 80, Sergio papers; Lisa Sergio, "Lisa Sergio's Column of the Air WQXR April 16th 1945 10 AM," 16 April 1945. Box 11 Folder 81, Sergio papers; Lisa Sergio, "Lisa Sergio's Column of the Air WQXR March 19th 1945 10 AM," 19 March 1945. Box 11 Folder 80, Sergio papers; Lisa Sergio, "Lisa Sergio's Column of the Air WQXR March 30th 1945 10 AM," 30 March 1945. Box 11 Folder 80, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁸ Hilmes, *Radio Voices*. 244, 245.

⁵⁹ Lisa Sergio, "Lisa Sergio's Column of the Air April 19th 1945 7 PM," 19 April 1945. Box 11 Folder 81, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁰ Lisa Sergio, "Lisa Sergio's Column of the Air WQXR January 31st 1945 7 PM," 31 January 1945. Box 11 Folder 80, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

His was a key role in enabling Hitler to swing over to the Atlantic and block Europe from the outside world. Only after the fall of France did the carting off of slaves really begin. The charred bodies the Allied troops find can well be chartered to the account of Pétain.⁶¹

Unlike some commentators, Sergio rarely stated an opinion in first person. Some broadcasters of the era were shamelessly self-promoting, partisan, and in the case of Walter Winchell, sometimes hysterical, according to historian Susan Douglas. She has compared Winchell with another prominent commentator, Boake Carter, a “faux upper-class fop who did no reporting but who often voiced strong opinions” and whose commentaries were filled with more innuendo and misinformation than facts.⁶² In comparison, when *Variety* appraised Sergio, she was listed as giving no evident slant to the news.⁶³

Sergio’s scripts show that she tried to provide context and nuance to the news by offering historical, economic, political and social insights that were frequently rooted in her own experience living in fascist Italy. For example, she often spoke sympathetically of Italians and the conditions they had suffered during the war. During the Allied offensive in Italy during the spring of 1945, Sergio tried to clarify why the citizens of Bologna did not joyfully greet liberation troops by explaining the crop sabotage and brutal killings endured as the Germans retreated.⁶⁴ And while she was an ardent supporter of open military trials, Sergio sympathized with the mobs

⁶¹ Lisa Sergio, “Lisa Sergio’s Column of the Air WQXR April 24th 1945 7 PM,” 24 April 1945. Box 11 Folder 81, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁶² Douglas, *Listening In*. 171-173.

⁶³ “Variety’s Capsule Appraisal of Radio’s Know-It-Alls.”

⁶⁴ Lisa Sergio, “Lisa Sergio’s Column of the Air WQXR April 23rd 1945 10AM,” 23 April 1945. Box 11 Folder 81, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

responsible for executing her former employers—Benito Mussolini and Galeazzo

Ciano:

One can deplore the unruliness of the mass, but one must also weigh the brutality of which the mass has been the victim. One must not forget the conditions which have followed liberation for the masses, one must remember that whenever fascism has prevailed in the past years, violence has been the basic creed by which the masses have been made to live. It is absurd to imagine that if the mass can put its hands on one or more of the men whom they know to have been responsible for unleashing the horrors through the world has lived in the thirties and forties, they will restrainedly put in a phone call to the police and then, in orderly fashion attend the trial.⁶⁵

Sergio did address some topics—such as rationing—that were frequently referred to as women’s news. In the case of gas rationing, Sergio acknowledged that suburban housewives would experience the shortage of gas acutely. However she did not place the responsibility for following rationing solely on housewives, instead stating “rationing cannot be successful unless it receives the honest cooperation of every individual involved.”⁶⁶

Similarly, of the seventy eight surviving scripts of “One Woman’s Opinion” all of the topics concern “hard news” such as war news, the dawn of the atomic age, or postwar policy. The script for the first program, broadcast on October 30, 1944, clearly stated the program’s intent was to “stimulate and challenge the thinking of women and men throughout the nation on the major national and international

⁶⁵ Lisa Sergio, “Lisa Sergio’s Column of the Air WQXR April 30th 1945 10 AM,” 30 April 1945. Box 11 Folder 81, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁶ Lisa Sergio, “Lisa Sergio’s Column of the Air WQXR April 23rd 1942,” 23 April 1942. Box 11 Folder 79, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

questions of the day.”⁶⁷ The narrator’s script emphasized Sergio’s commitment to discuss war news: “Because of her international background, her contacts with leaders in diplomatic and political circles abroad, she has very definite ideas on what Americans can do to see that a real peace follows this war.”⁶⁸ In the last broadcast on April 22, 1946, Sergio stated that her purpose for the program was not just to broadcast her own opinion, but to bring facts to her listeners so that they could form their own educated opinions. “The need for knowledge, the need for an American public opinion aware of international problems, and ready to express itself forcefully is greater than ever before,” she said. “I hope you will look for opportunities to delve into foreign questions, I hope you will seek true facts about them, I hope you will form your own opinions about them and about the way in which our own country is approaching them.”⁶⁹

To say that she didn’t do women’s news should not imply that she never specifically addressed women. For example, in her November 6, 1944, broadcast of “One Woman’s Opinion,” she discussed women’s importance as voters during the first American election in which more women than men would be voting. “Tomorrow morning American women can tell themselves, that at this most crucial hour of the world’s history, their voice will be decisive in choosing the next President and the

⁶⁷ Lisa Sergio, “One Woman’s Opinion, October 30, 1944,” Script of radio show broadcast over WJZ and NBC Blue, 10:45 a.m., 30 October 1944. Box 11 Folder 84, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Lisa Sergio, “One Woman’s Opinion, April 22 1946,” Radio script, Box 12 Folder 7, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 22 April 1946. 8.

next Congress,” she said. “We cannot afford to minimize this responsibility or to take it lightly.”⁷⁰

But she also occasionally addressed her male audience, such as she did on June 4, 1945, when she specifically addressed veterans, suggesting the need for their influence in the professions of journalism, politics and diplomacy. “A broad mind, a broad attitude towards life and its problems are basic requisites in the reporting and writing profession,” she said. “Hundreds of thousands of young American men have acquired this broadness at the severe school of war. There is a place and need for their thinking in journalism.”⁷¹

Reviewers for *Billboard* magazine in 1939, 1940 and 1941 had mixed reactions to Sergio’s WQXR commentaries. Always her speaking voice was praised, but reviewers found fault with her dry analysis. A 1939 reviewer noted that the program was “intelligent and absorbing,” but wished for “a dash of [journalist] Dorothy Dunbar Bromley’s outspokenness or Dorothy Thompson’s analytical approach.”⁷² In 1940 when station management began to experiment with evening time slots for the program, *Billboard* noted that would put Sergio in competition with more well-established commentators, and that “to stay in the run,” Sergio needed more “spark.” This reviewer felt there was “something too cold in her treatment of background of current events. She presented no inside stuff nor dramatic copy.”⁷³

⁷⁰ Sergio, “One Woman’s Opinion, October 30, 1944,” 4.

⁷¹ Lisa Sergio, “One Woman’s, June 4 1945,” Radio transcript, Box 12 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 4 June 1945.

⁷² “Column of the Air Reviewed,” *Billboard*, 27 May 1939. Box 19 Folder 4, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁷³ “Column of the Air Reviewed.”

When she began filling in the evening timeslots for the vacationing Quincy Howe in 1941, reviewers seemed to better appreciate her style. *Billboard* wrote that she delivered “forthright news commentary, sans fireworks, over-emphasis, and alleged private sources. This treatment immediately lends her commentary a dignity lacking in some of the better-known—and more volatile comment programs.”⁷⁴

In light of Sergio’s obvious commitment to examining war and political news, the claim that her newscasts were filled with items of interest solely to women is unsubstantiated. Three more observations further illustrate this point. First, there is evidence that Sergio’s commentaries resonated with other notable foreign policy commentators at the time. Sergio was often compared to Dorothy Thompson, and was said to have had a somewhat similar on-air persona.⁷⁵ The themes of Sergio’s news commentary prior to December 1941, certainly resonated with the themes of Thompson’s newspaper commentary. Prior to U.S. involvement, Thompson and other notable female columnists—Freda Kirchwey and Anne O’Hare McCormick—believed that the United States would not be able to detach itself from the European conflict and that the German threat was both ideological and economic as well as military.⁷⁶ Similarly, in 1940 these themes appeared in Sergio’s commentaries. She felt the Nazis posed a very real threat to the very idea of a democratic, free Europe: “The Nazi fascist conception of a Europe unified by violence held forcibly together in servitude and functioning like a machine according to a certain economic schedule is

⁷⁴ “Lisa Sergio Reviewed,” *Billboard*, 19 July 1941. Box 19 Folder 4, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁵ Sanger, *Rebel in Radio*. 86, 87.

⁷⁶ Margaret A. Walsh, ““Brave Women and Fair Men”: Women Advocates of U.S. Intervention in World War II, 1939-1941” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Washington, 1996), 235.

more than just a plan today.”⁷⁷ She also felt that America would someday be involved in the struggle, writing that American youth should prepare to take on “the tremendous task of rebuilding the world.”⁷⁸

Sergio may have even patterned herself after the “dean” of commentators: H.V. Kaltenborn. Copies of “Overnight Service,” a daily publication that summarized important radio commentaries and programs, show that Sergio sometimes echoed Kaltenborn’s topics and sentiments in her own broadcasts. For example, on July 27, 1942, Kaltenborn declared that half of the country’s shipyards should be converted in order to manufacture cargo planes.⁷⁹ The following day Sergio echoed these themes, saying that the country should be less reliant on ships for transporting cargo and make more use of large cargo planes.⁸⁰ Again on September 3, the publication noted that Sergio “agreed with H.V. Kaltenborn’s broadcast of last night” on war production.⁸¹ Because only radio digests from portions of 1942 and 1943 are available for examination, it is impossible to tell whether Sergio regularly echoed Kaltenborn. But the surviving scripts certainly show that Sergio engaged in the same public debates that concerned other prominent commentators and did not see herself speaking to an audience composed solely of women concerned only with “women’s news.”

⁷⁷ Lisa Sergio, “Lisa Sergio’s Column of the Air WQXR October 22nd 1940,” 22 October 1940. Box 11 Folder 78, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁸ Lisa Sergio, “Lisa Sergio’s Column of the Air WQXR November 27th 1940,” 27 November 1940. Box 11 Folder 78, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁹ “Overnight Service: July 27, 1942,” A digest of news commentary and programs published daily during World War II., Hadley Collection, College Park, Md.

⁸⁰ Because the notation is only a summary of Sergio’s comments, it is unknown if she attributed the idea to Kaltenborn or not. “Overnight Service: July 28, 1942,” Hadley Collection, College Park, Md.

⁸¹ “Overnight Service: Sept. 3, 1942,” Hadley Collection, College Park, Md.

Second, a closer examination of Sergio's scripts that can be called "soft news" or "women's news" reveals that they were all broadcast before the bombing of Pearl Harbor. These topics account for about half of the scripts available before Pearl Harbor, however, these topics completely disappeared after the bombing. The "soft news" topics that appeared before Pearl Harbor included anniversaries (such as the first meeting of the Supreme Court, which Sergio contrasted with contemporary Nazi rule⁸²), the need for books for European soldiers,⁸³ local art shows,⁸⁴ several book and film reviews, and short biographies of "Americans to be proud of" (such as George Washington Carver or Civil War "petticoat general" Anna Ella Carroll⁸⁵). The same change in topic is evident in the autograph book Sergio kept for her "Column of the Air" guests. The autographs started in April, 1939, with those of Ann Batchelder, Lowell Thomas and Alice Fitzgerald. Other autographs included those of the cast of the show "Outward Bound," classical musicians, and an advocate for Spanish children. However, with the exception of one autograph, the signatures stop in December, 1941, indicating that this is when Sergio stopped hosting guests on the show and turned her attention to war news.⁸⁶

This underscores the impact the bombing had in setting aside gender tensions, allowing Sergio to devote herself full time to war news commentary. Perhaps even

⁸² Lisa Sergio, "Lisa Sergio's Column of the Air WQXR February 1st 1940," 1 February 1940. Box 11 Folder 78, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁸³ Lisa Sergio, "Lisa Sergio's Column of the Air WQXR February 29th 1940," 29 February 1940. Box 11 Folder 80, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁸⁴ Lisa Sergio, "Lisa Sergio's Column of the Air WQXR May 9th 1940 10 AM," 9 May 1940. Box 11 Folder 78, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁸⁵ Lisa Sergio, "Lisa Sergio's Column of the Air WQXR June 19th 1840 (sic)," 13 June 1940. Box 11 Folder 78, Sergio papers; Sergio, "Lisa Sergio's Column of the Air WQXR November 27th 1940."

⁸⁶ Sergio, "Autograph book."

more significant is that “soft news” themes appeared in only half the scripts surviving from the days before Pearl Harbor. This shows that Sergio exhibited a strong interest in political and war news from the beginning of her time at WQXR, leaving little room for the idea that Sergio ever devoted herself entirely to “women’s news.”

And third, a 1946 report by WQXR describing its programming content did not list Sergio in the section under women’s programs. The report, prepared for the Federal Communications Commission on the station’s activities, described the station’s three women’s programs: “Other People’s Business,” “The Run of the House,” and “What’s on your Mind?” conducted by broadcasters Alma Dettinger, Charlotte Adams, Iphigene Bettman and Alice Pentlarge. The station said it designed these programs “to appeal to listeners who have intellectual appreciation above those who are catered by the average ‘women’s program,’” and reported that they had attracted a substantial number of male listeners as well.⁸⁷ In this FCC report, Sergio’s program is described as “a program of news comment,” aired from 7 to 7:15 p.m.⁸⁸ Sergio was apparently supported in her focus on hard news not only by WQXR management, but by her listeners as early as 1939. Reported the *New York Sun*:

Sponsors of the numerous daytime serials must be barking up the wrong wave length, according to a survey made recently by Lisa Sergio, WQRX [sic] commentator. Miss Sergio asked her listeners for expressions of opinion regarding the type of material that would please them most. The first hundred replies show that music, art, international affairs and similar sophisticated topics are heavy favorites over the more prosaic subjects of home and family. As a matter of

⁸⁷ WQXR, “WQXR’s Service to Women,” FCC/Clear Channel Hearings, Book I, Section 1, Part 17. Box 1, Folder 1-6, Elliott Sanger Collection, Columbia University rare book and manuscript library, 1946, 37, 38.

⁸⁸ Ibid. FCC/Clear Channel Hearings, Book 6 of 6. Box 2, Folder 2-2, Elliott Sanger Collection, Columbia University rare book and manuscript library.

mathematical fact, the least popular topics were poetry and children, with romance trailing far in the rear.⁸⁹

So where did the association of Sergio with “women’s news” come from? It probably stemmed from the conventional wisdom of the time: that daytime programs were women’s programs. When Sergio began broadcasting at WQXR in 1939, she was heard Monday through Friday at 10 a.m. Because of the prevalence of daytime soap operas, network daytime schedules at this time had long been designated as “crude” as opposed to the more sophisticated nighttime schedules.⁹⁰ Because the program was broadcast during the daytime hours, it was sometimes described as news “for feminine consumption.”⁹¹

But if Sergio had been doing “women’s news,” she surely would not have been asked to occasionally fill in for Quincy Howe on the evening timeslots when he was on vacation, such as she did in 1940 and 1941.⁹² When she did so, she was seen as doing an “impressive job” substituting for Howe, taking “significant but lesser-known subjects” and talking on them “informatively and authoritatively” and with “distinction.”⁹³ “It was a fascinating discussion and one no other radio commentator has been heard to mention,” reported *Variety*.⁹⁴ In 1942 when Howe permanently left the station, Sergio took on his 7 p.m. timeslot.⁹⁵ And though she wrote separate commentaries for her 10 a.m. and 7 p.m. broadcasts, there does not seem to be a

⁸⁹ “Romance Loses Out, Sophisticated Topic Preferred by WQXR Listeners.”

⁹⁰ Hilmes, *Radio Voices*. 151.

⁹¹ “Column of the Air Reviewed.” ; “Faces to Know.”

⁹² Unknown Author, *Radio Daily*, 2 July 1941. Box 19 Folder 4, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁹³ *Variety*, 23 July 1941. Clipping preserved in Sergio scrapbook. Box 19 Folder 4, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Hosley and Yamada, *Hard News*. 36.

difference in the subjects that she dealt with. That is, she did not seem to address the news in different ways for a daytime and female audience versus a nighttime and male audience, though this went against the conventional wisdom of the time.

Sergio's apparent ability to go against these practices would not have been possible if it had not been for the unusual outlook of WQXR management. Founding vice-president Elliott Sanger wrote that WQXR aimed to make every program "educational, cultural, informative or interesting," and to "address all programs to people of intelligence and appreciation," never talking down to the audience.⁹⁶ This was unusual in the late 1930s and 40s, wrote Sanger. It was so odd that a *Harper's* article, commenting on the station's assumption that the radio audience was intelligent and cultured, stated that this belief would qualify station management "for a lunatic asylum in the minds of nearly all other radio company officials."⁹⁷

Like her employers, Sergio disregarded the pronouncements of radio officials. In a commentary published in *The New York Times* in 1943, Sergio wrote:

This is what the experts say: men don't like to have a woman tell them what's what; they want he-man stuff or nothing. Women, they continue, don't like to take it from another woman, for they also demand the stern voice of male authority when they learn the war news and the political issues that perplex and confuse this man-made world. ... And in all these years rarely, if ever, have I had reason to feel that being a woman was a handicap in this field. That is why I prefer not to believe the experts.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Sanger, *Rebel in Radio*. 20, 21.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹⁸ Sergio, "Brains Have No Sex," 2, 9. When this article appeared in the *New York Times* in 1943, Sergio was one of three women giving "comments" in the morning, and the only woman doing so in the evening. "The Week's Radio Programs," *The New York Times*, 25 April 1943, 10.

“Experts” of the 1940s may have included radio pioneer Judith Carey Waller, who thought it was an anomaly that women were interested in news during the war. Waller said that “it was not news for the sake of information which they sought, it was simply information which pertained to the activities and welfare of their own particular family and friends.”⁹⁹ But though she may have disparaged women’s interest in news, in her 1946 radio textbook written for NBC, Waller argued that women’s programs were more than just soap operas. Women’s programs covered a broad range of subjects including politics, household hints, social and economic issues, and “anything that’s pertinent to the home and community life of an American woman or which can help her to be a more interesting dinner-table companion for her family.”¹⁰⁰ It is important to note here that Waller felt that women’s programs, which could include news, should help women serve their family. Sergio, on the other hand, believed that women’s views could influence politics. She addressed women directly in her first broadcast of “One Woman’s Opinion,” over NBC:

Please do not let anybody tell you that ... your opinion is not important. The mere fact you are an American and probably the mother or the wife or the sister or the sweetheart of a man now fighting abroad on a fighting front makes your opinion extremely important. You must think of these problems. They are your problems, because your returning veteran will have no future ahead of him unless the fundamental issue of peace is solved and solved now. It all hinges on whether or not this country will take its responsibility for keeping the peace. And you, as an American have the power to decide.¹⁰¹

Sergio believed that women were capable of thinking about important issues and influencing the government to do what is right. She believed women were

⁹⁹ Waller, *Radio: The Fifth Estate*. 143, 144.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁰¹ Sergio, “One Woman’s Opinion, October 30, 1944,” 6.

responsible for peace and for the future. This image of women influencing politics is a compelling contrast to a woman interested in news only for use at the dinner table. The comparison illustrates Sergio's views concerning women and news. That Sergio never similarly addressed women in her surviving WQXR scripts can also be taken as evidence that her commentaries were aimed at a broad audience of both men and women. Sergio did not address her news to an audience of women, instead she addressed an audience of Americans.

Broadcasting News Summaries

In view of the prejudice against women giving the news, it is surprising then, to find Sergio was reading a selection of news in addition to broadcasting commentary. News scripts were stapled to twenty one of Sergio's commentary scripts. Six of the news scripts were attached to copy for Sergio's 10 a.m. broadcasts, fifteen are attached to copy for her 7 p.m. broadcast. Sometimes the scripts were typed; at other times they were simply a jumble of papers torn directly from news tickers. In all cases, the news broadcasts provided a summary of political developments and news from various war fronts. They were apparently read in the second half of Sergio's program, after her main news commentary and a break.

Since all of these news scripts are from 1945, it is not apparent that Sergio read the news in her 1940 broadcasts. And because few scripts from 1941 to 1944 exist, it is unknown just when Sergio added news broadcasts to her commentary program. But secondary sources suggest Sergio began broadcasting news shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. According to a dissertation on the history of WQXR, the station began airing seventeen news reports per day in December 1941. Five of these news reports, including a newscast to be given by Lisa Sergio at 10 a.m., were apparently added in that month.¹⁰² Other secondary sources support the idea of Sergio beginning to read the news after Pearl Harbor. Women were generally heard on news broadcasts in greater numbers after the United States entered the war in December 1941.¹⁰³ Judith Carey Waller noted in 1946 that women had been doing news

¹⁰² Evelyn Wellson Wendt, "A History of WQXR and WQXR FM: The Radio Stations of the New York Times" (Ed.D., Columbia University, 1962), 113, 115.

¹⁰³ Hosley and Yamada, *Hard News*. 27.

summaries for “some time,” specifically stating that Sergio was one of the best-known female news announcers.¹⁰⁴ This is evidence that gender norms in radio and news broadcasting were suspended immediately after Pearl Harbor and during the height of the war. This is reflected in the 1941 and 1942 Sanger diaries. The day after the Pearl Harbor attack, Sanger wrote that he “rearranged programs to cover war developments [and had] discussions on whether we should add news programs because of war.”¹⁰⁵

Sponsored, Not Sustaining

As pointed out previously, Sergio’s work has been remembered as a “sustaining radio column.” Sustaining programs have been defined as unsponsored programs.¹⁰⁶ A sustaining program was a program whose costs were “sustained” by the station until a sponsor could be found. Though they were also a means for demonstrating to the FCC that stations were providing local public service programming, sustaining programs were principally filler programs between sponsored times and often lacked commitment from the station.¹⁰⁷

Sergio’s program however appears to have had a sponsor—Botany Worsteds Mills. Scripts for advertising spots were attached to 12 of Sergio’s program scripts. Spots in 1940 offered free samples of soap and skin cream and advertised Botany coats, cleaning fluid for fabrics and Botany beauty aids. In 1945, the ads were for

¹⁰⁴ Waller, *Radio: The Fifth Estate*. 130.

¹⁰⁵ Elliott M. Sanger, “National Diary 1941,” Box 6, Elliott Sanger Collection. Columbia University rare book and manuscript library, 8 December.

¹⁰⁶ Barnouw, *The Golden Web*. 57.

¹⁰⁷ Donald G. Godfrey and Frederic A. Leigh, eds., *Historical Dictionary of American Radio* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998), 381, 382.

comfortable clothes for war workers, men's and women's suits and wrinkle-proof ties. These surviving scripts come from Sergio's 10 a.m. broadcasts. It is unknown if she read ads at her 7 p.m. broadcast.

Scripts for "One Woman's Opinion" show that the broadcast was sponsored by Botony Mills throughout its 1944-1946 run.¹⁰⁸ The pages of trade magazines and station reports offered additional evidence that Sergio's programs were sponsored. *Variety* reported in June, 1940, that Martinson's Coffee was sponsoring the Friday edition of the "Column of the Air," and that the program was sponsored on Mondays and Wednesdays by Fels-Naptha and Tuesdays and Thursdays by Botany Worsted Mills.¹⁰⁹ And in 1942, it was reported in *Variety* that Botony Mills and *Tomorrow Magazine* were sponsoring the program.¹¹⁰ Sanger's diaries also show that sponsorship was a part of the discussion on December 9, 1942, on whether to offer Sergio the evening timeslot. "Decided to put her at 7 p.m. if we can get Botony [Mills] and *Tomorrow* [Magazine] to switch and [keep] her there for sale otherwise."¹¹¹ In a 1946 station report prepared for the FCC, WQXR reported that Sergio's evening timeslot was being sponsored by Seely Shoulder Pads.¹¹²

Why would Sergio's program be listed as "sustaining" in a prominent broadcasting encyclopedia? This is perhaps because *Billboard* listed it as sustaining

¹⁰⁸ Sergio, "One Woman's Opinion, April 22 1946."; Sergio, "One Woman's Opinion, October 30, 1944," 1.

¹⁰⁹ "Lisa Sergio's Accounts," *Variety*, 26 June 1940. Box 19 Folder 4, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹¹⁰ "Lisa Sergio Shifting."

¹¹¹ Elliott M. Sanger, "Continental Diary 1942," Box 6, Elliott Sanger Collection, Columbia University rare book and manuscript library, 9 December.

¹¹² WQXR, FCC/Clear Channel Hearings, Book 6 of 6. Box 2, Folder 2-2, Elliott Sanger Collection, Columbia University rare book and manuscript library, 1946.

when reviewing the show in 1939, 1940 and 1941.¹¹³ Also, Sanger's diaries show that sponsorship did not come immediately when Sergio first began her commentaries in 1939. In his February 24, 1939, entry Sanger wrote: "Called on *You* magazine with Sergio. Don't think they have enough money. Will go ahead with a.m. program."¹¹⁴ A March 7 entry recorded that Sanger had a "visit from a Mr. Daker re: program on seeds. Trying to sell him Sergio a.m. for one week trial."¹¹⁵ Eight months later, Sanger wrote "conf[erence] with Sergio re: her program difficult to work out sponsorship idea."¹¹⁶

Though the program wasn't sponsored immediately, it is apparent that it was sponsored by a variety of advertisers beginning in 1940. This sponsorship is important for several reasons. It is evidence that her program must have conveyed some importance to the station management and the public. Sponsored programs, because they brought in money, were considered more important than sustaining programs. Also, sponsorship carried weight with the audience. When commentator Raymond Gram Swing began his broadcast career, he was told that sponsorship would be out of his reach. Later, after his program became sponsored, he was "puzzled to find that even his friends thought more of him now that he had his cigar sponsor. Marketplace acceptance seemed to raise his standing in their eyes."¹¹⁷

The issue of sponsorship versus sustaining program identified a central dilemma for broadcast management—to broadcast programs that made money or

¹¹³ "Column of the Air Reviewed." ; "Column of the Air Reviewed." ; "Lisa Sergio Reviewed."

¹¹⁴ Sanger, "Yearbook 1939," 24 February.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 7 March.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 14 November.

¹¹⁷ Barnouw, *The Golden Web*. 81.

those that served the public interest. Lisa Sergio and the management of WQXR apparently tried to occupy the space between these opposite stands. WQXR founders Jack Hogan and Elliott Sanger decided early on to depart from standard broadcast practice. At this time, advertising agencies typically created programs and controlled content, allowing networks only a token part in the review process.¹¹⁸ In order to operate WQXR “more like a newspaper or magazine,” the founders decided they would create programs that met their standards and then offer them to advertisers. “If we wanted a higher cultural level for our station, we could not allow outsiders to supply the material,” Sanger wrote in his biography of the station:

Therefore, we would ‘edit’ our station, supplying the program and strictly controlling the advertising. The sponsor would associate his product or service with the content of the station’s schedule. This basic rule meant that the sponsor would offer his advertising as he would to any well-run publication without control of the material in the adjacent columns of printed matter.¹¹⁹

News programs at this time were one of the most popular choices of programs to be funded by sponsors,¹²⁰ though many writers and journalists worried publicly about the extent the views of the sponsor affected the commentator’s presentation of news.¹²¹

Though Sergio and WQXR management may have had similar convictions, there were apparently several episodes of conflict. Sanger referred to Sergio as an “Italian and a woman,” and wrote that, “she and I had several scenes where we did

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 16.

¹¹⁹ Sanger, *Rebel in Radio*. 19.

¹²⁰ Waller, *Radio: The Fifth Estate*. 129.

¹²¹ See: Quincy Howe, “Policing the Commentator: A News Analysis” *The Atlantic Monthly*, November 1943, 46-49; Wecter, “Hearing is Believing,”

not see eye to eye, and that often led to an explosion on her part and sometimes on mine.”¹²² But, according to comments from friends, conflict was a characteristic typical of Sergio and perhaps was not indicative of serious disagreement with her employers. Tucci described Sergio as a loud fighter and a “loud woman.”¹²³ Isabelle Claridge Taylor, a friend, said Sergio frequently fought even with her friends. Taylor knew Sergio from her involvement with the International Federation of Business and Professional Women, of which Taylor served as treasurer.¹²⁴ “She was always either for something or against it. There was no question where she stood. We had lots of arguments,” Taylor said. “But that was the fun of knowing her, because you really could enjoy it.”¹²⁵

Despite any episodes of conflict with the station, Sergio’s position at WQXR clearly allowed her to bridge the divide between public service and commercialism. Sergio’s personal style of broadcasting shows that she was more attuned to the former than the latter. She was criticized early on by one radio columnist who complained she did not “reveal hot inside stuff” or speak with “drama and spark” like some commentators.¹²⁶ The critic complained that Sergio gave her audience many facts, but never a plainly stated opinion. In response, Sergio said she believed Americans had an important part to play in the coming war, and wanted her listeners to be prepared for it. In refuting the criticism in a 1940 broadcast, she outlined her goals as a

¹²² Sanger, *Rebel in Radio*. 86.

¹²³ Ryan, “Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America”, 63.

¹²⁴ “Business, Professional Women Elect Sally Butler as President,” *The New York Times*, 26 July 1947, 16.

¹²⁵ Ryan, “Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America”, 64.

¹²⁶ Lisa Sergio, “July 31st 1940,” 31 July 1940. Box 11 Folder 78, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

commentator, saying she was not in favor of someone handing down opinions “ready made.”

That is what I have tried to do. Give facts and background but not try to force my own opinion on listeners who must already be sufficiently fed with plenty of others, no doubt much more dramatic than mine would be. ... Someday this entire nation is going to be called ... to express an opinion, and it is always best to have one that springs from one's personal convictions.¹²⁷

Sergio's response to the criticism illuminates her personal style as a commentator, showing that she was not interested in being a showperson. Her reaction shows she was more interested in informing her audience, not entertaining them. This was also the philosophy of one of Sergio's WQXR colleagues.

Commentator Quincy Howe said that he decided to try broadcasting partly to “try to get the intelligent people to reach conclusions by the use of their brains.”¹²⁸ Thus, both Sergio and her colleagues at WQXR tried to occupy the space between pure commercialism (making money but providing no service to the public) and public interest programming (which frequently made no money).

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Fang, *Those Radio Commentators!* 330.

Chapter 7: Growing Postwar Conservatism (1944-1950)

“During the war years my life was threatened by fascists and communists alike: the fascists called me a communist, the communists attacked me for refusing to speak at their meetings.”

—Lisa Sergio, *date unknown*¹



FIGURE 13. Briefly a Commentator for WOV

Sergio is pictured here with (from left) Ralph N. Weil, WOV station manager, well-known commentator Quincy Howe, and Col. Harry Henshel, president of WOV. This picture was probably taken in 1947 when Sergio began giving commentaries for the station. Photo used with permission: Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Box 14 Folder 58.

From her first years as a radio commentator in the United States, Lisa Sergio was recognized with public awards for her radio work. In 1939 she was listed in *Radio Guide* as one of the top women commentators, along with notables such as

¹ Sergio, “Chapter IX Another World, Another Life,” 1-2.

Dorothy Thompson, Kate Smith, Mary Margaret McBride and Eleanor Roosevelt.² She was recognized locally in 1943 by the New Jersey Woman's Press Club and by the Women's National Radio Committee in 1944 and 1946 as one of the "continuing favorites on the list of feminine commentators."³ Sergio was listed in *Radio Daily's* 1945 annual poll of favorite woman commentators—a category that Dorothy Thompson "easily ran away with" but in which "Lisa Sergio, Mary Margaret McBride, Kate Smith, Adelaide Hawley and Hedda Hopper all lived up to their taken-for-granted popularity, running fairly close together."⁴

In 1947, she helped New York City station WOV win a Peabody award (in the category of public service by a regional radio station over 1,000 watts) with a commentary program she began on New York City station WOV.⁵ In 1948, the same program won second place for comment programs on stations of 5,000 to 20,000 watts in *Billboard's* first annual local program competition.⁶ But the most notable award she received during this time was in 1947 when the rank of Chevalier in the French National Order of the Legion of Honor was conferred on her for her defense

² Unknown Author, *Radio Guide*, 23 June 1939. Box 19 Folder 4, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

³ "Certificate of Merit from the New Jersey Woman's Press Club," 8 May 1943. Box 18 Folder 8 Sergio papers; "Honorable mention One Woman's Opinion," 15 May 1946. Box 18 Folder 8, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁴ Mildred O'Neill, "Women in Radio," *Radio Daily*, 10 January 1945. Box 21 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁵ "Peabody Radio Citations for New York Announced," *Radio Daily*, 31 December 1947. Box 20 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. *Broadcasting Telecasting Yearbook*. Washington, D.C.: Broadcasting Publications, Inc., 1947, 390.

⁶ "Lack of development makes commentary award sparse," *Billboard*, 29 May 1948, 15. Box 20 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

of France in her radio program. “Even in the darkest days of the war, it was no effort for me to believe that ‘France had only lost a battle,’” Sergio wrote to the French Ambassador to the United States, Henri Bonnet. “I am happy to have been able to cooperate, in my small way, in convincing others of this belief.”⁷

Yet, despite her success, the most prominent portion of Sergio’s broadcasting career was about to end. This chapter chronicles the end of Sergio’s tenure at WQXR and her brief work as a commentator for WOV, and her transition from broadcaster to world affairs lecturer. This transition was in part perhaps necessitated by growing anti-communist sentiments in the country and was a precursor to the virulent anti-communist investigations she would experience in the postwar era. The transition from radio commentator to podium lecturer was an important one for Sergio, since she would never again make a living principally as a radio broadcaster.

Fired From WQXR

In 1944, *The New York Times* purchased the Interstate Broadcasting Company, bringing WQXR under the control of the famed newspaper. In a letter to WQXR staff members, *Times* publisher Arthur Hays Sulzberger wrote to the staff, promising not to make changes in staff or program policies. “We believe we know

⁷ “The French Legion of Honor is Awarded,” *The New York Times*, 9 October 1947, 14. ; “Lisa Sergio Made Chevalier in French Legion of Honor,” *New Rochelle Standard-Star*, 7 August. Box 20 Folder 2, Sergio papers; “Miss Lisa Sergio becomes Legion of Honor Chevalier,” *Mamoroneck Times*, 6 August 1947. Box 20 Folder 2, Sergio papers; “NBC’s Chief of U.N. Staff is Award Legion of Honor,” *Radio Vision*, 8 November 1947. Box 20 Folder 2, Sergio papers; Henri Bonnet to Lisa Sergio 24 July 1947, Box 13 Folder 18, Sergio papers; Lisa Sergio to Henri Bonnet 3 August 1947, Box 13 Folder 18, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

how to publish a newspaper, and we respect the skill that you have displayed in building a radio station that has won the admiration of its listening audience,” Sulzberger wrote.⁸ At this time, the *Times* was under contract to provide news bulletins to station WMCA.⁹ But program changes and greater involvement of the newspaper in WQXR affairs were inevitable. Two years later, when the paper began providing its news content to WQXR,¹⁰ the station also replaced all commentators with forum discussions.¹¹ According to Sanger, the *Times* wanted to keep all editorializing off the air and limit it to the paper’s editorial pages.¹² *Variety* reported that the *Times* was, “taking its stand with those who believe that individual gabbers should not be entrusted with analysis of news or commentaries on the news.” Sergio was fired, along with commentators Algernon Black and Denis Plimmer.¹³

The small collection of Elliott Sanger’s papers sheds little light on Sergio’s firing. Sanger’s diaries show that Sergio was not happy about losing her job. On February 6, 1946, Sanger wrote “Sergio very angry,” and on February 7 he wrote that Sergio “refused to discuss matter with me” and “said we would hear from legal sources.”¹⁴ The station’s program guides show that Sergio’s morning broadcasts were discontinued as of January, 1946. Her evening programs disappeared in March,

⁸ Arthur Hays Sulzberger to WQXR Staff 2 February 1944, Box 1 Folder 1, Elliott Sanger Collection, Columbia University rare book and manuscript library.

⁹ Sanger, *Rebel in Radio*. 91, 97.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹¹ “Commentators Dropped,” *Newark News*, 6 February 1946. Box 21 Folder 2, Sergio papers; “WQXR to Discontinue Commentators April 5,” *Radio Daily*, 8 February 1946. Box 21 Folder 2, Sergio papers; Wendt, “A History of WQXR”, 18.

¹² Wendt, “A History of WQXR”, 136.

¹³ “WQXR Drops Gabbers; Sergio, Black Axed,” *Variety*, 6 February 1946. Box 21 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁴ Elliott M. Sanger, “National Diary 1946,” Box 6, Elliott Sanger Collection, Columbia University rare book and manuscript library, 6-7 February.

1946.¹⁵ On March 29, 1946, Sergio's last day at the station, Sanger wrote in his business diary, "lunch at Siovanni for Lisa S. with 9 present. Very pleasant and we gave her Tiffany pin." It was the end of the major portion of Sergio's U.S. career, although she was still a notable enough personality to be announced in the press as one of three commentators to fill in on Walter Winchell's ABC radio commentaries during his 1946 summer vacation.¹⁶

According to a dissertation on the history of WQXR, the *Times* policy of limiting commentary to the newspaper was implemented in response to the FCC's Mayflower Decision, which prohibited stations from editorializing and advocating. This decision, however, was issued by the FCC in 1941, long before Sergio's firing.¹⁷ Also, the decision was revised in 1949 in what became known as the Fairness Doctrine, yet WQXR did not change its practice. Scholar Nathan Godfried linked the firings of liberal commentators to an "emerging repressive political culture" and the 1945 hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). In the fall of 1945, just a few months before Sergio's morning program disappeared from WQXR's commentary lineup, the HUAC demanded the scripts of several "progressive" New York City commentators, intending to hold hearings on whether these commentators ever followed the communist party line. Though no such hearings were ever held, three of the commentators lost their jobs and two others had

¹⁵ WQXR, *Programs, January 1946*. Box 3, Elliott Sanger Collection, Columbia University rare book and manuscript library; WQXR, *Programs, March 1946*.

¹⁶ "Batting for Winchell," *New York City PM*, 27 May 1946. Box 21 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁷ Wendt, "A History of WQXR", 18-19.

their airtime limited.¹⁸ These commentators included William S. Gailmor, who was taken off the air immediately after his scripts were requested.¹⁹ HUAC committee chairman Rep. John S. Wood (D-Ga.) introduced a bill into Congress that, if it had passed, would have required stations to clearly label opinion programs with the commentator's name, place of birth, nationality and political leanings. In addition, when an advertisement was placed in *The New York Times* by the an anti-HUAC group calling itself the Citizens to Abolish the Wood-Rankin Committee, committee member Rep. J. Parnell Thomas (R-N.J.), rushed to New York to question the advertising agency and the *Times*' advertising department about the ad, a fact that could not have escaped the notice of the *Times* and WQXR management.²⁰

The HUAC interest in radio commentators seemed to be in establishing who was and wasn't American, wrote Robert K. Carr. The committee's first report, issued June 7, 1946, dealt with liberal radio commentators in an "incredibly prejudiced" way.²¹ The only evidence in the report that specific radio commentators were pro-Communist or pro-Russian was based on their criticisms of members of Congress, the State Department, presidential appointees, European governments and General Douglas MacArthur. The HUAC report read in part:

¹⁸ Nathan Godfried, "'Fellow Traveler of the Air': Rod Holmgren and Leftist Radio News Commentary in America's Cold War," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 24, no. 2 (2004):233-251, 246.

¹⁹ Cecil Holland, "Representatives ask abolition of 'Dies' committee," *Philadelphia Record*, 21 October 1945. Box 21 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

²⁰ Walter Goodman, *The Committee*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968. 174-175.

²¹ Report of the Committee on Un-American Activities, 7 June, 1946. quoted in Robert K. Carr, *The House Committee on Un-American Activities 1945-1950*. New York: Octagon Books, 1952. 323-324.

Many individual Members, and Congress as a whole, are slandered, maligned, and ridiculed by certain commentators in what appears to be a well-organized campaign to break the confidence of the American people in our elective system and representative form of government. Some of these loud-mouthed trouble makers can hardly speak English. America has given them refuge and they in return seek to destroy our constitutional form of government.²²

There is no indication in the Sanger papers that Sergio's firing was directly related to the HUAC's interest in radio commentators. The industry press, however, saw Sergio's firing as part of a larger backlash against progressive commentators in general. When she appeared in a new commentary program on New York station WOV in 1947, *Variety* wrote that she was coming back on the air "at a time when the so-called liberal commentators are doing a fast fadeout in radio."²³ One magazine claimed in April, 1946, that there were twenty five conservative radio commentators and fourteen liberals, but that six months later the number had dropped to two liberals and twenty four conservatives. The magazine wondered if "the recent election caused the trend. Maybe, as the left-wingers think, the radio industry really is turning conservative."²⁴ By some estimates, "liberal" commentators were carried over 155 stations to four million listeners, while "reactionaries" were being carried over 1,724 stations to over thirty one million listeners.²⁵ Liberal political commentators lost power and access to the airwaves as "conformity became the order of the day" and

²² Report of the Committee on Un-American Activities, 7 June, 1946. quoted in Carr, *The House Committee on Un-American Activities*, 323-324.

²³ "Lisa Sergio Back on Air, Pacted by WOV," *Variety*, 26 February 1947. Box 20 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

²⁴ "Radio drops more and a teacup tempest comes to a boil," 3 January 1947. Magazine clipping preserved in Sergio scrapbook, Box 20 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

²⁵ Godfried, "Fellow Traveler of the Air": Rod Holmgren and Leftist Radio News Commentary in America's Cold War," 236.

radio audiences grew tired of international crises. A strong bond forged between government, newspaper publishers and radio broadcasters during the war carried over into “virtually monolithic” support for the Cold War.²⁶

Some listeners, however, noticed the change in radio commentary and protested the growing conservatism in radio. When William Shirer lost his CBS commentator’s job in 1947, his friends opposed his dismissal, believing that he had been fired for “liberal/leftist sympathies.”²⁷ That same year, writer and Algonquin Roundtable member Dorothy Parker launched the “Save the Voice of Freedom Committee” out of concern that liberal commentators had been fired because of “the pressure of reactionary influences in radio.”²⁸

Critical Success of WOV Commentaries

Perhaps sensing the changing political climate, Sergio painted herself as a moderate when she began broadcasting for WOV, describing her ideology as “neither right nor left nor anywhere in particular, so long as the little fellow doesn’t get hurt.”²⁹ In her first program she described the need for radio commentators and discussed how their postwar roles differed from that of the war years, emphasizing

²⁶ Lynn D. Gordon, “Why Dorothy Thompson Lost Her Job: Political Columnists and the Press Wars of the 1930s and 1940s,” *History of Education Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1994):281-303, 302.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Seymour Peck, “New Group to Battle for Liberals in Radio,” *New York PM*, 3 March 1947. Box 20 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

²⁹ “Returns to Air Waves,” *Mamoronock Times*, 1 March 1947. Box 20 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

that radio “can meet the new requirement of interpreting the news of the day by background and fact.”³⁰ *Variety* reported that “it was an outspoken espousal of the freedom Miss Sergio has long advocated.”³¹ To help her launch the program, Sergio called on a number of notables to appear including Fiorello H. La Guardia, mayor of New York City from 1934 to 1945. LaGuardia read this statement on the program:

I am glad Lisa Sergio is back on the air. Miss Sergio has such a wealth of information and such a background as to enable her to intelligently construe foreign news, particularly in the international field. Women of our country are eager to get accurate information concerning international affairs. They are far more broadminded and in search of truth than the men folk. The women are less prejudiced. Incidentally, I am not limiting Miss Sergio’s audience to women. Men and students will do well to listen in. Miss Sergio is very easy to listen to. Too bad she is not on television, because she is not hard to look at either. You will find her talking straight from the shoulder, mincing no words. She will give you the facts and she will label her own interpretations. I am glad WOV is presenting this program, and I am glad she is not on the air the same time that I am because I would hate to miss her program.³²

At this time, it was still unusual for a woman to be a radio commentator, according to the *New York Post*. The only other women commentators on the air in December, 1948, were Toney Terry Hatfield on WMCA and former WQXR-commentator Estelle Sternberger on WLIB. “And there should be more,” noted the paper.³³ It was this that garnered a Peabody for WOV in 1947.³⁴ In addition to this

³⁰ “Lisa Sergio 15 mins Mon-Thur-Fri,” *Variety*, 5 March 1947. Box 20 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Fiorello H. LaGuardia 26 February 1947, Box 2 Folder 5, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

³³ Paul Denis, “Knickerbocker on Marx; New Lady Commentator; Met Previews on Mondays,” *New York Post*, 28 December 1948. Box 20 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

English-language commentary series, Sergio also did commentaries in Italian for WOV, which was known for its “Italian all day, jazz all night” format.³⁵ Sergio was the main broadcaster when the station covered the 1948 Republican and Democratic conventions in Philadelphia, envisioning the broadcasts as a “mass civics course” for its Italian-American audience.³⁶

Sergio appeared occasionally on other radio programs. In 1947 she hosted an NBC network broadcast from a Paris meeting of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women. “It was one of the best of that kind we have had,” wrote Margaret Cuthbert of NBC. “You handled it expertly from beginning to the end, introductions, your remarks, your timing and your close. It was a relief to feel such confidence in a woman emcee.”³⁷ In 1949 she participated with Eleanor Roosevelt and other women in an NBC discussion on human rights and in 1951 in a discussion of individual freedoms with Judge Sarah T. Hughes (the woman who would later swear Lyndon B. Johnson into office aboard Air Force One after the assassination of John F. Kennedy).³⁸

³⁴ “Peabody Radio Citations for New York Announced.”

³⁵ “News, Commentator Program Competition,” *Billboard*, 29 May 1948. Box 20 Folder 2, Sergio papers; Bill Jaker, Frank Sulek, and Peter Kanze, *The Airwaves of New York*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1998. 159.

³⁶ “Convention Coverage in Italian set by WOV as ‘mass civics course’,” *Variety*, 9 June 1948. Box 20 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

³⁷ Margaret Cuthbert was one of the most noted female executives at NBC and a pioneer of early radio. She was also one of those people who had a talent for motivating people. When Cuthbert called Edythe J. Meserand of WOR to ask her to head the organizing convention of American Women in Radio and Television, Meserand initially refused. “I said no, but nobody ever says no to Margaret Cuthbert and gets away with it and before I knew it, I was the convention director.” Edward Bliss, *Now the News*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991. p. 103-104; Margaret Cuthbert to Lisa Sergio 25 July 1947, Box 9 Folder 36, Sergio papers; Edythe J. Meserand, “Oral History Interview with Edythe J. Meserand,” Transcript, 31 August to 1 September 1977. Library of American Broadcasting, p. 90.

³⁸ *Freedom of the Individual* NBC radio broadcast. Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division, Library of Congress. 20 February 1951; *Human Rights--Cornerstone of Peace* NBC radio

There is no indication in the Sergio papers of how long her employment at WOV lasted or when it ended. But it did not last long and Sergio appeared only occasionally on the radio after that. By the 1950s Sergio had receded so much from broadcasting that she was ineligible to renew her membership for the year 1954 in the American Women in Radio and Television, Inc. professional association since she had not done any radio or TV work in 1953.³⁹ Thus, the last of phase of the most prominent portion of her radio career ended apparently in 1952, exactly 20 years after she began broadcasting in Italy.

Transition to World Affairs Lecturer

Sergio continued her interest in political commentary, but instead of speaking to radio audiences, she became primarily a lecturer. Sergio had begun lecturing shortly after she first arrived in the U.S. When Sergio joined NBC in 1937, she met Margaret Cuthbert, who was in charge of NBC's speakers' program department. Cuthbert sent Sergio to the New York State College of Home Economics at Cornell University in 1938 for what may have been one of her first lecture appointments.⁴⁰ Before she moved to Washington, D.C., Sergio had been managed by The Columbia Lecture Bureau, directed by Isabel Scott. In 1941 it was reported to be the third-

broadcast. Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division, Library of Congress. 19 February 1949.

³⁹ Betty Chapin to Lisa Sergio 28 June 1954, Box 3 Folder 6, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁰ Flora Rose to Lisa Sergio 1 March 1938, Box 19 Folder 12, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

largest lecture bureau and a division of Columbia Artists, Inc. Other speakers managed by the bureau included radio personalities and journalists such as Elmer Davis, Eric Sevareid, Margaret Bourke-White, William Shirer and the poet Carl Sandburg.⁴¹ She was also managed for a time by the Charles L. Pearson Lecture Management Bureau in New York City, according to a 1953 FBI report.⁴² Sergio spoke at women's clubs, colleges, churches and professional association meetings on topics such as "Do Your Own Thinking," and "Women Needed in Public Life to Preserve Our Spiritual Values."⁴³

According to Sergio's own writings, Dorothy Thompson may have been the greatest influence on Sergio's world outlook after her immigration to the United States. In a 1985 manuscript about Thompson, Sergio wrote that when she was working as a broadcaster in New York City, the famed newswoman would occasionally call for her after she had finished her evening commentary. "If she agreed with what I had broadcast she would say so at once, otherwise she merely invited me to stop in 'for a drink,'" Sergio recalled.⁴⁴ Sergio was occasionally called on to give Thompson feedback on her columns and claimed to have been the last one

⁴¹ "Isabel Scott's Job is Managing a Lecture Bureau and Its Artists," *Christian Science Monitor*, 14 February 1941. Box 19 Folder 4, Sergio papers; Sergio

⁴² New York SAC to FBI Director, "Lisa Sergio, SM-C" 5 March 1953, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file.

⁴³ "Women Needed in Public Life To Preserve Our Spiritual Values," *Greenfield Recorder-Gazette*, 24 September 1954. Box 23 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁴ Lisa Sergio, "Dorothy Thompson, The Blue-Eyed Tornado," Unpublished manuscript, Box 2 Folder 37, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1985, 8, 10.

to read the 1940 column in which Thompson abandoned Wendell Wilkie and threw her support behind Franklin Roosevelt before it went to press.⁴⁵

Of course, Sergio had begun positioning herself as a commentator on world affairs soon after her arrival in the United States. The fit was a natural one—the country was going to war with totalitarianism, a political movement Sergio had firsthand knowledge of. Women’s clubs, business associations, and radio listeners were keenly interested in the world crises. Sergio’s lecture topics during the war mirrored her radio commentaries on subjects such as warning business women against fifth column fascist activities, the Axis propaganda strategy, or the importance of American involvement in the coming war.⁴⁶

She also frequently spoke of her association with Mussolini, reminding American audiences that Mussolini’s public power would not have been so complete without the improvements he made in women’s lives—bringing running water into houses, providing schools and shoes and free camps for children. Though thought to have inferior social status and intelligence, women in Italy were never discounted as a political factor, she said. “Mussolini is aware of the necessity for winning women’s support for any venture,” she told the *Christian Science Monitor* in 1941. “I think Mussolini is the only man in history who ever appealed to women and said: ‘I cannot

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ “College Woman’s Club Told U.S. Must Beware of Fascist Propaganda,” *Westfield Leader*, 7 January 1949. Box 20 Folder 1, Sergio papers; “Commentator Warns Business Women Against 5th Column,” *Tarrytown News*, 30 April 1941. Box 19 Folder 4, Sergio papers; “Dr. Goebbels and His Suckers: Axis Strategy Depends on Our Disunity, Lisa Sergio Tells Clubwomen,” *Bergen Record*, 19 March 1942. Box 20 Folder 1, Sergio papers; “Hopes of All People Pinned on America, Says Miss Sergio,” *Passaic Herald-News*, 23 April 1942. Box 20 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

win a war without your help.”⁴⁷ Throughout the rest of her life Sergio would often draw parallels between political subjects of the day and Mussolini’s regime, evidence that her past deeply influenced all she wrote. In a manuscript for an unpublished book on public opinion, Sergio drew extensively on this experience to explain why democratic citizens should understand public opinion in order to prevent exploitation:

Contemporary dictatorships offer a rather frightening example of how people have lived in the illusion of wielding their power as voters long after they had lost it. ... Dictators actually need the support of public opinion and, far from suppressing it, stimulate the expression of it to peaks of vehemence rarely seen in free societies. ... It is a dangerous fallacy to believe that mass regimentation is achieved exclusively through the use of violence and force. ... Mass regimentation is achieved by methods which are painless and even pleasing to the vast majority, because they are carefully planned to exploit both negative and positive denominators common to the greatest number of people.⁴⁸

She also occasionally discussed social issues such as race, but always linked these issues to the war effort, such as she did in 1942: “Every time an American thinks or speaks of any one of his fellow citizens as belonging to a racial, religious or national minority, he is slapping democracy in the face, in behalf of Hitler.”⁴⁹ Quite often in these speeches, Sergio was uncomfortably blunt in her assessment of the American public:

You Americans don’t like to think things through. You like to have your thoughts digested for you. You are losing the habit of free thought by reading papers whose political slant you favor, reading authors and listening to commentators because you like them and

⁴⁷ Foster, “Mussolini Scorns But Dares Not Ignore Women, Says Lisa Sergio.”

⁴⁸ Lisa Sergio, “The Power of Public Sentiment,” Undated, unpublished book manuscript, Box 6 Folder 29, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 2-3, 4, 5.

⁴⁹ Lisa Sergio, “The People Belong,” Box 11 Folder 41, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1942, 1.

ignoring those who hold opposing views. That is the self-chosen road to the destruction of the freedom of thought.⁵⁰

Thinking things through was a common theme in Sergio's lectures. She often said that in a democracy each citizen bore the responsibility of self-education. In an unpublished manuscript for a book on public opinion, Sergio wrote that democratic citizens must develop the thinking process, since it was "ultimately the only complete safeguard against the shaping of public sentiment through the use of mass mechanisms."⁵¹ She insisted that citizens who understood and analyzed domestic and international affairs could have an impact that would be "evident much more quickly than when we take pen in hand and write to our congressman."⁵²

Because she was adept at discerning the chief political concerns of the day, relating it to her past experiences, and tailoring her comments to address her audience, it can be difficult to assess Sergio's speaking style or beliefs through her speech manuscripts. Fortunately, out of the many lectures Sergio gave in her lifetime, one series of eight lectures are preserved in 427 pages of typed transcripts. These 1946 lectures on foreign policy in the atomic age were sponsored by the New York-based John L. Elliott Institute's Society for Ethical Culture. They show Sergio's ability to speak extemporaneously and personably to her audience. The transcripts also show that she drew on events of the day to make broader points. As in her radio broadcasts, she rarely stated a point forthrightly, choosing instead to explain the

⁵⁰ "Americans Losing Freedom of Thought Lisa Sergio Tells 650 at Peace Forum," *Mamoronneck Times*, 11 September 1943. Box 20 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁵¹ Sergio, "The Power of Public Sentiment," 2-3, 4, 5.

⁵² Lisa Sergio, "Can the people shape foreign policy?" 29 March speech for the John L. Elliott Institute Society for Ethical Culture, Box 10 Folder 21, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1946, 21.

background circumstances and explore theories and explanations in order to encourage listeners to analyze situations for themselves.

The typed transcriptions also illuminate Sergio's worldview. For example, she frequently used the common postwar phrase "one world," and felt the United States was not isolated from world affairs. "It is obvious that anything that happens anywhere else in the world affects our domestic policy," she told her audience. "We have got to change our mental habits. We have got to think of the world as we see it on the globe."⁵³ She also saw a strong connection between economics, U.S. foreign policy, and the foreign policy of other nations.⁵⁴ "If we want one world, let's begin to make it one world at home," she said. It will not be one America until all of the people in every state in this union can look to their representatives in the Senate and in the House and say, 'Yes, he speaks for me. He is the servant of the people, and he is serving the cause of the people.'⁵⁵

She said the U.S. was not only obligated to follow moral principles in foreign policy, but also that the U.S. was the only country in the postwar era with the economy and world standing that allowed it the luxury of moral principles.⁵⁶ "We are the only nation that at present has fewer economic interests at stake than any other; whose security is less threatened, and who, therefore, are in the blessed position of

⁵³ Lisa Sergio, "Our Domestic Stake in International Order," 8 February speech for the John L. Elliott Institute Society for Ethical Culture. Box 10 Folder 14, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1946, 3, 22.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁵⁵ Lisa Sergio, "Can We Create One World?" 1 March speech for the John L. Elliott Institute Society for Ethical Culture. Box 10 Folder 17, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1946, 32.

⁵⁶ Sergio, "Our Domestic Stake in International Order," 26.

being able to afford quite comfortably to live by moral principles,” she said.⁵⁷ She said the United Nations had a moral obligation to recognize human rights and that wealthier nations enjoyed economic luxuries at the expense of underprivileged citizens:

The day in which it is admitted that all human beings, no matter where they were born, are equal and have the right, at least, to progress and evolve to the point where they may have the same benefits which the more civilized nations enjoy, the day in which that is recognized, remember, the whole economic system by which we live collapses automatically.⁵⁸

She also believed in opportunity for those who had been excluded from government and political affairs because of race, gender or economics. She was appalled, for example, that many of those who served in the U.S. diplomatic corps represented only the elite of the U.S. population. She advocated higher diplomatic salaries, better university scholarships, and better university curriculums in the area of diplomacy and foreign policy so that poorer Americans could become diplomats. “It will influence our policy towards the world on the basis of the material interests represented by the son of that oil man or that steel man...rather than on the sound, impartial understanding of one mind to another,” she stated. “I merely say we have the wrong men in there, because the right ones are too poor to get there.”⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Lisa Sergio, “Economic Interests vs. Moral Principles,” 8 March speech for the John L. Elliott Institute Society for Ethical Culture. Box 10 Folder 18, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1946, 49.

⁵⁸ Lisa Sergio, “Human Rights in a World Organization,” 22 March speech for the John L. Elliott Institute Society for Ethical Culture. Box 10 Folder 20, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1946, 20.

⁵⁹ Lisa Sergio, “Mistakes in Wartime Foreign Policy,” 15 February speech for the John L. Elliott Institute Society for Ethical Culture. Box 10 Folder 15, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1946, 39-41.

Sergio also insisted that women should play a larger role in governing the country in the postwar era. In 1946, Sergio charged, the U.S. was the only country that had no women among its diplomatic corps.⁶⁰ She believed that women were particularly suited to dealing with humanitarian, social and moral concerns. “But in all the offices of the UNO, [United Nations Organization] the offices that are going to deal with social problems, with problems of human rights, there should be women along with the men. And there are not,” she said. This was a mistake, she believed, since “in each country the women are going to have a tremendous influence in their respective parliaments in approving or disapproving of legislation that will implement the decisions of the UNO. That is a very important new factor to take into account—the women.”⁶¹

Growing Anti-Communism

This chapter has focused on Sergio’s transition from radio commentator to world affairs lecturer in an increasingly conservative and anti-communist political environment. These political forces would directly effect Sergio—she was the target of numerous anti-communist investigations and the victim of blacklisting, which will be described in chapter eight. Thus, it is also appropriate to discuss in this chapter the responses Sergio made to anti-communism from the lecture podium.

⁶⁰ Sergio, “Our Domestic Stake in International Order,” 43.

⁶¹ Lisa Sergio, “New Factors in International Relations,” 22 February speech for the John L. Elliott Institute Society for Ethical Culture. Box 10 Folder 16, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1946, 19.

Sergio's transition to becoming principally a lecturer was facilitated by her international background and outlook. This gave her immediate credibility in any discussion of politics, but it also provided her opponents a basis for which to challenge her. In one 1945 episode, a high school teacher speaking to the Larchmont, N.Y. chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution, referred to Sergio and said, "Americans whose ancestry goes far back have a better right to advise than those who have recently become citizens of the United States."⁶² This man, William Fulcher, claimed that his ancestry went back to the 1600s and that he had more right to comment on national affairs than Sergio, who had only been a resident for a few years. Fulcher told the group the members should "stop being kicked around."⁶³

Fulcher's comments appalled the League of Women Voters, who protested his remarks.⁶⁴ In response, Fulcher claimed that he was misunderstood, that he was speaking only of Sergio's opinion regarding public schools, and that he was a product of them and in a better position to speak on them than Sergio.⁶⁵ When his actions were examined by the local school board, he said that the newspapers misinterpreted his remarks and that "whatever the reporter's motives were in presenting the impression she did in her story, the resulting events are a perfect example of the

⁶² "Lisa Sergio Berated by Fulcher," *Larchmont Times*, 6 December 1945. Box 21 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ "Larchmont Women Voters Protest 'Uncalled For' Attack by Fulcher on Lisa Sergio," *Larchmont Times*, 6 December 1945. Box 21 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁵ "Fulcher Replies to His Critics," *Mamoronneck Times*, 8 December 1945. Box 21 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

emotions running rampant.”⁶⁶ *Variety* reported that New York radio commentators were shocked by the episode, and that “There has been some talk of organizing a radio program to blast the ideas, although some argued Fulcher isn’t important enough to be a good target.”⁶⁷

Perhaps in response to episodes like these—and the postwar anti-communist attacks and black listing Sergio defended herself against—Sergio developed a knack of speaking in the accepted political vernacular of her times and tailoring her comments to her audiences in such a way that it was difficult to disagree with her. Sergio had a particular ability to discern and explicate the political themes of the day, and her lectures often resonated with them. Her comments regarding communism are evidence of this.

Sergio spoke openly of communism in the 1940s, though by the 1950s, after she was blacklisted, she became more guarded in what she said while still employing the political rhetoric of the day. For example, in a 1947 speech she stated, “If fascism were to come to this country, there is no doubt that it would ride in upon the same steed that carried it into Italy, Germany and other countries where it became established. The Horse of Fear, fear of communism.”⁶⁸ In a 1946 speech, Sergio discussed the Roman Catholic Church’s declaration of opposition to communism in a newly atomic age. “We are today in a place on the road to, supposedly, peace.

⁶⁶ “Fulcher Calls Times Story False,” *Mamoronneck Times*, 19 December 1945, 1, 3, 1. Box 21 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁷ “Sergio Hit By ‘Mayflower’ Gag,” *Variety*, 26 December 1945. Box 21 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁸ Lisa Sergio, “If fascism were to come,” Box 11 Folder 13, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1947.

However, we might be on the threshold of something called a crusade. And we have to watch it,” she said in a speech at the John L. Elliott Institute in New York. “If we are on the verge of that, we would have on both sides of this fence powers that in the name of religion and of everything else that is involved of an ideological character are quite capable of using atomic bombs.”⁶⁹ She also connected the west’s anti-communist stance to the growing economic power of the Soviet Union and its encroachment on established trade practices:

It just is not a question of ideology, it is a question of a power—an economic, a political, a material, a tangible world power called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which is expanding and which is stepping into their precious pathways of world trade and world power which for many, many decades Britain had become accustomed to thinking were her private property.⁷⁰

However, when she lectured on communism after she had been blacklisted, Sergio tailored her talk to each audience. This was good rhetorical technique, but it also had the effect of allowing Sergio to deploy the political idioms prevalent at the time to have the effect of both justifying her role as speaker and her audience’s role as soldiers in the fight against communism. In a 1954 Portland speech in which she addressed over 1,000 elementary- and secondary-school teachers, Sergio told them “their profession was in the front line of the battle to hold the line against further progress of the Red dictatorship.”⁷¹ She warned that Russia was repeating the Italian and German patterns of educating students to accept dictatorship and said that the

⁶⁹ Sergio, “Can We Create One World?” 10.

⁷⁰ Sergio, “Economic Interests vs. Moral Principles,” 4.

⁷¹ “Ex-Mussolini Aide Tells Of Red Dangers,” *Portland Evening Express*, 29 October 1954. Box 23 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

American answer had to begin with teachers.”⁷² In a 1955 speech to a New England conference of recreation directors, Sergio stated that those living behind the Iron Curtain were being indoctrinated in the use of their leisure time. “The recreation leaders above all others have a spectacular role in the world picture,” she said.⁷³ “Theirs is the responsibility in showing what to do in [the] non-working time of people.”⁷⁴ Also, in a 1954 speech to a gathering of seven Business and Professional Women’s Clubs in Tulsa, Sergio said that the fight against communism depended on industrial markets, production and consumption. “Russia today controls nearly all the available new consumer markets in the world,” she said, advocating that the West find new markets in undeveloped, non-communist countries.⁷⁵

Such a response is a testament to Sergio’s speaking skills. She explicated the contemporary political themes in a way that was directly of interest to her audience. But it was perhaps also evidence of the toll anti-communism had taken on her personally and the great personal risk she felt would accompany an appearance on her behalf of anything other than outright anti-communist sentiments.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ “Lisa Sergio Tells of Reds’ Recreation,” *Valley News*, 13 May 1955. Box 23 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ “C-C Speaker Lists Ways to Block Russia,” *Tulsa Tribune*, 21 October 1954. Box 23 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

Chapter 8: Anti-Communist Investigations (1944-1960)

“...I refused to believe that such undemocratic practices as ‘guilt by association’ or the leveling of unverified charges against individuals behind their backs could ever be accepted in our country. Apparently we have lost much of our sense of justice and these practices are accepted more widely than is good for us...”

—Ann Batchelder, 1950¹

**Speaker in Mt. Lebanon Admits
She Joined Red-Front Groups**

**Not Member Now,
Miss Sergio Tells
Reporter**

(Continued From Page 1.)

In the cold, the newspapermen heard a burst of applause for Miss Sergio and women started to leave the meeting. Most of them said the speech was “wonderful” and “very inspiring.” Some said:

“There was nothing Communist about it. She talked against Communism.”

But a few said they were not impressed and that Miss Sergio was “very clever in putting over her ideas.”

For example she was quoted as saying:

“Communism’s appeal to the people is a success because of the confusing way we fight it.”

But she didn’t tell the women how she would fight it. And she didn’t tell how the U. S. should fight it. But she did leave the housewives with the idea that the way our country is handling the Communist problem is all wrong.

Then she made an indirect attack on Senator Joseph R. McCarthy without mentioning his name. She said, according to women who took notes on her speech:

QUIZ SESSION . . . Sun-Telegraph Reporter J. James Moore questions Lisa Sergio after she addressed members of the Mt. Lebanon Woman’s Club yesterday. Asked Moore: “Are you a fellow traveler?” She said: “No. When a thing is a thing, when does it stop being a thing?”

Sun-Telegraph Photo by Morris Berman.



¹ Ann Batchelder to Charles H. Gilbert 28 January 1950, Box 4 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

FIGURE 14. Quiz Session on Red-Front Groups

This 1954 *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph* clipping, preserved in one of Lisa Sergio's scrapbooks, illuminates Sergio's experience during the postwar era. The photo cutline reads: "*Sun-Telegraph* Reporter J. James Moore questions Lisa Sergio after she addressed members of the Mt. Lebanon Woman's Club yesterday. Asked Moore: 'Are you a fellow traveler?' She said: 'No. When a thing is a thing, when does it stop being a thing?'" Image used with permission: Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Box 23 Folder 3.



FIGURE 15. In A Rush

In this picture from the same newspaper, Sergio looks more as if she is standing and talking. Nevertheless, the photo cut line claims that the "mink-clad" Sergio "rushes from the auto which brought her to the Mt. Lebanon Woman's Club" to speak. Image used with permission: Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Box 23 Folder 3.



FIGURE 16. Lisa Sergio and Ann Batchelder

Sergio is pictured here with Batchelder, in what is probably their accommodations in Vermont. This picture was probably taken in the late 1940s or very early 1950s, given Batchelder's much frailer appearance as compared to her 1938 picture with Sergio (see figure 8). Photo used with permission: Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Box 14 Folder 51.

As a naturalized U.S. citizen, Lisa Sergio was the subject of immense suspicion. She was accused of being anti-American, a fascist, and a communist, and she was blacklisted during the period of American history associated with McCarthyism and the Cold War.

Using Sergio's FBI file, as well as letters and newspaper clippings preserved in the Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. this chapter addresses those accusations. It first examines the details surrounding the loss of her position at WQXR and Sergio's positioning of herself as a world affairs commentator, then studies the various investigations conducted by the FBI and the American Legion and Sergio's listing in *Red Channels*.

In doing so, this chapter sheds light on the connection between these public and private investigations and blacklists.

From New York City Radio to Rural Vermont

One sign that Sergio had made the transition from radio commentator to respected world affairs commentator was that she was invited to teach at Columbia University in the early 1950s. She taught two classes in sociology titled “Public Opinion, Its Roots and Development” for Columbia University’s School of General Studies during the 1951-52 and 1952-53 school years, for which she was paid \$400 per course.² (Interestingly, state law required her to take an oath to support the federal and state constitutions, an oath demanded of all instructors and professors.)³

But in 1953, she resigned from teaching the course because of Ann Batchelder’s ill health—Batchelder had been diagnosed with bone marrow cancer. In her resignation letter, Sergio stated that she could not leave Batchelder in Vermont, where they had moved, for weekly commutes to New York City because “of a form of neuritis originating in a badly set fracture, which has been excruciatingly painful.”⁴ Sergio asked that her reason for resigning be kept confidential, “since my adopted mother is still doing her writing for the *Journal* from here and the fact that she is not

² Louis M. Hacker to Lisa Sergio 12 September 1951, Box 10 Folder 29, Sergio papers; Louis M. Hacker to Lisa Sergio 9 May 1952, Box 10 Folder 29, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

³ Richard Herpers to Lisa Sergio Undated, Box 10 Folder 29, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁴ Lisa Sergio to Louis M. Hacker 9 January 1953, Box 10 Folder 29, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

too well and not actually at her desk is not known to her enormous audience throughout the country.”⁵

In Woodstock, Vermont, Batchelder was confined to a wheelchair and needed constant care. Despite this, Batchelder and Sergio were among a circle of artists and writers who flocked around Dorothy Thompson, remembered Tucci after Sergio’s death.⁶ Sergio had written that although she knew Thompson in the late 1930s and 1940s, their association had been mostly a professional one. It was in Vermont, when Sergio and Batchelder lived only 12 miles from Thompson’s Twin Farms, that their friendship grew more personal. “I discovered a different Dorothy whose unchanged brilliancy and depth of mind was softened in and in some way made more perceptive by a slow but ineluctable expansion of the human person over the professional one,” Sergio wrote.⁷

From 1955 to 1958, with decreased employment prospects, Sergio edited *Worldaround Press*, a news service that Dorothy Thompson launched in conjunction with the United Nations and the Society of Friends.⁸ Among the board members were Eleanor Roosevelt, writer Dorothy Canfield Fisher and radio commentator Quincy Howe. It is unknown what Sergio was paid for this activity. In 1956 the publication had a budget of \$20,000 and almost 500 subscribers, but by 1958 the staff had been reduced to only Sergio and a secretary. *Worldaround Press* closed out the year with

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ryan, “Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America”, 66.

⁷ Sergio, “Dorothy Thompson, The Blue-Eyed Tornado,” 12.

⁸ Ryan, “Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America”, 66; Sergio, “Curriculum Vitae,” 2.

an \$800 deficit.⁹ From 1947 to 1960 Sergio also held the voluntary position of editor for *Widening Horizons*, the official publication of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women, of which Sergio was a longtime member.¹⁰ (The organization, formed in 1930 and now called Business and Professional Women International, was founded by business women with the philosophy of lobbying on behalf of women and helping women achieve economic independence.)¹¹

It was a far cry from where she'd been at the start of World War II, when Tucci remembered that "her articles for magazines and newspapers were reaching all the right people and quite a few of the worst."¹² The retreat to Vermont, he thought, was necessary to escape threats on her life from what he believed were "Fifth Column goons and hit-makers."¹³ There may be some truth to this assertion. Newspaper articles show that as early as 1941 Sergio was one of six people allegedly on a fascist hit-list in which one person was killed: Chicago Italian-language newspaper editor John Arena.¹⁴ Tucci stated that Sergio's sometimes-rash political statements also forced her exile to Vermont. In 1940, when Hitler's army invaded Russia, Tucci claimed that Sergio "spoke of Stalin on the air as a hero besieged."¹⁵ Tucci believed that Sergio toned down her broadcasts after the onset of the war on the advice of Dorothy Thompson. He said: "she was always extreme. So, all her mistakes were not

⁹ Sergio

¹⁰ Sergio, "Curriculum Vitae," 3.

¹¹ Business and Professional Women International, "Our Philosophy." < <http://www.bpwintl.com/start.htm> > 26 October 2005.

¹² Ryan, "Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America", 65.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "Marked to Die, She'll Still Fight," *New York Journal-American*, 19 April 1941. Box 19 Folder 4, Sergio papers; "Slain Editor Expected Death at Hands of Axis Spies, Reporter Reveals," *Salt Lake City Tribune*, 19 April 1941. Box 19 Folder 4, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁵ Ryan, "Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America", 65.

made carefully with an eye to the possibility of being wrong. She realized it later.”¹⁶ Though as early as 1937 she stated she had been an enemy of communism,¹⁷ any comments she made in favor of Stalin or Mussolini may have haunted her later as she grew more visible during the war and national politics became more obsessed with fighting alleged communist influences.

Perhaps being occasionally mentioned in the communist newspaper *Daily Worker* didn’t help Sergio’s cause, either. When she was fired from WQXR, the newspaper mourned the widespread loss of liberal radio commentators, blaming the conservative tendencies of big business. “The Big Business fascist ring has been getting rid of dangerous truth tellers like Raymond Gram Swing, Johannes Steel, Lisa Sergio, William S. Gailmor, Cecil Brown, John Vandercook, and the others.”¹⁸ She was mentioned again in April, 1947, when columnist *Daily Worker* Mike Gold wrote: “Our trade union movement, collective bargaining, free speech, farmer’s cooperatives, William Shirer and Lisa Sergio, the foreign language press of our immigrants, all these and more are being attacked as obstacles [sic] on the road to Moscow.”¹⁹ Though the quote would seem to have anti-communist implications, the mere fact that it appeared in the *Daily Worker* was enough to convict Sergio. She was blacklisted in 1950. The principle agent in that affair, a book called *Red Channels*, dug up many citations of Sergio in the *Daily Worker* that reinforced, for a time, the

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ “Duce’s Lire for Babies ‘Superfluous’.”

¹⁸ Mike Gold, “Movie-Radio Pathology is Another Fascist Attack on Our Democracy,” *Daily Worker*. Box 20 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁹ Mike Gold, “Art and Science Can Grow Only Where There is Freedom, Hope,” *Daily Worker*, 6 April 1947. Box 20 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

public image of Sergio as a communist sympathizer. This chapter chronicles Sergio's blacklisting, and the connections between various allegations of Sergio as a communist, including those of *Red Channels*, the American Legion, and the FBI.

Wartime FBI Investigations

When the House Special Committee to Investigate Un-American Activities was formed in 1938, it was the first time that Congress had dedicated itself to investigating subversive activities on a full-time basis.²⁰ Congress had investigated such activities sporadically in 1919, 1923, 1930, and 1934. But the formation of the Dies committee in 1938, named for chairman Martin Dies (D-Texas), marked a change in anti-communist politics from small attacks proponents of "conservative anti-New Deal politics" favored only by a few to "a rallying point for crusading ex-communists, right-wing interest groups and the conservative press."²¹ In 1945 the House Committee on Un-American Activities became a permanent standing committee and from 1950 to 1954 committee politics, with the support of the FBI, matured into the brand of McCarthyism that was widely criticized.

The Bureau of Investigation (which became the FBI in 1936) had investigated alleged subversives in 1919 following the formation of a General Intelligence Division, headed by J. Edgar Hoover. Within 30 months of its formation, agents held files on 450,000 people.²² This surveillance targeted ethnic and religious minorities.

²⁰ Kenneth O'Reilly, *Hoover and the un-Americans: The FBI, HUAC, and the Red Menace*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983. 13.

²¹ Ibid., 36, 74.

²² Ibid., 17.

Those who “challenged the conservative political order in any way were somehow unpatriotic or ‘un-American.’”²³ This era marked the beginning of modern political surveillance, historian David Williams has argued. Abuses of investigative powers were not punished or even investigated, Williams wrote. Also, it was during this time the bureau developed a fear of bad publicity that would be “important, if not central” in internal FBI policies.²⁴

In 1934, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt asked Hoover (by then director of the Bureau) to investigate the Nazi movement in America; two years later Roosevelt asked Hoover to gather intelligence generally about subversive activities, including fascism and communism. This gave Hoover the chance to “legitimize domestic intelligence operations.”²⁵ Later, with a presidential mandate to investigate those who disagreed with the White House’s foreign and military policies, the FBI often investigated well-known personalities, thereby “underscoring that a principal motivation for FBI officials was less to safeguard the national security than to contain dissent and to discredit those seeking to broaden the parameters of political debate,”²⁶ one scholar wrote.

Notably, prominent women and journalists were among some of the first Americans whose loyalty was questioned. For example, during hearings in 1919, a former agent for the Bureau of Investigation (which became known as the FBI in 1935) specifically mentioned the names of *Nation* editor Oswald Garrison Villard and

²³ David Williams, “The Bureau of Investigation and Its Critics, 1919-1921: The Origins of Federal Political Surveillance,” *The Journal of American History* 68, no. 3 (1981):560-579, 577.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 578.

²⁵ O’Reilly, *Hoover and the un-Americans*. 21, 22.

²⁶ Athan Theoharis, “The FBI and the American Legion Contact Program, 1940-1966,” *Political Science Quarterly* 100, no. 2 (1985):271-286, 272.

social workers Jane Addams and Lillian D. Wald.²⁷ Journalists and women remained popular targets of FBI investigations. Though he noted there was a paucity of scholarly analysis of the anti-communist attacks on women, historian Landon R. Y. Storrs has concluded that disloyalty investigations “silenced or discredited women who had become important advocates of left-liberal social policies.”²⁸ Historian Athan Theoharis has documented the FBI investigation of columnist Inga Arvad, noting that it “was unique in its vindictiveness ... (and) conformed with a more general pattern of FBI monitoring of those journalists who either criticize the Roosevelt Administration’s foreign policy or the FBI’s competence.”²⁹ FBI agents used illegal techniques in collecting information on Arvad because of her personal beliefs, her employment by the isolationist anti-New Deal *Washington Times-Herald*, and her lifestyle, which agents considered immoral. (Arvad was having affairs with a number of men, including then Navy ensign John F. Kennedy, himself of interest to agents because of the isolationist views of his father, the former ambassador to Great Britain.) Similarly, Stephen J. Farnsworth has documented the FBI investigations of *New York Times* journalist Edgar Snow during the 1940s and 50s. Farnsworth concluded that the FBI reports were inaccurate and incomplete, and that the government “created a misleading portrait” of Snow. This was done in part by using his associations with liberal groups to claim “guilt by association.”³⁰ Though agency investigations of photographer Margaret Bourke-White did not succeed in tarnishing

²⁷ O’Reilly, *Hoover and the un-Americans*. 14.

²⁸ Landon R.Y. Storrs, “Red Scare Politics and the Suppression of Popular Front Feminism: The Loyalty Investigation of Mary Dublin Keyserling,” *The Journal of American History* (2003):491-524, 496.

²⁹ Athan Theoharis, “The FBI, the Roosevelt Administration, and the ‘Subversive’ Press,” *Journalism History* 19, no. 1 (1993):3-11.

³⁰ Stephen J. Farnsworth, “Seeing Red: The FBI and Edgar Snow,” *Journalism History* 28, no. 3 (2002):137-145.

her career or reputation, the FBI still kept files on her and indiscriminately passed on slanderous details about her past, illustrating that “it was easy to become a victim of government vigilantism, and very difficult to have a damaging profile redressed.”³¹

An examination of the types of documents contained in Sergio’s FBI file sheds light on why she was of such interest to the FBI.³² First, Sergio was of interest to suspicious listeners who wrote to Hoover to urge that the FBI investigate her. Second, Sergio’s fascist background was of interest to Hoover, who repeatedly insisted that agents investigate her, even after agents reported that they found nothing suspicious in her activities. And finally, though agents seemed to see Sergio as a potential informant, Hoover’s letters indicated that he was interested in pursuing investigations at least in part to provide information to other branches of government, warning them about her.

In the minds of many of her listeners, Sergio’s status as an Italian, a former fascist and prominent broadcaster cast an aura of suspicion around her. This is evident from the number of letters written by audience members to the FBI, many specifically addressed to J. Edgar Hoover. Some came from people who had been to Italy or had previously met Sergio. For example, one writer reported overhearing “fascisti” in

³¹ Robert E. Snyder, “Margaret Bourke-White and the Communist Witch Hunt,” *Journal of American Studies* 19, no. 1 (1985):5-25, 24.

³² In formatting the citations to documents contained in Lisa Sergio’s FBI file, I faced several challenges. First, since names are often redacted in FBI files for privacy and security concerns, I had a number of letters written by or to people whose names I didn’t have. Hence, there are many “unknown” citizens, FBI agents, and others who are cited as recipients or authors of the letters I’ve examined. I’ve only used the term anonymous when it was clear the writer of the letter did not give their name. Second, if it was clear in either the text of the letter or in subsequent communications who one of the “unknowns” where, I identified that person in the original citation as well. (For example, Effie Thixton Arthur’s name was redacted in one document, but not in a subsequent communication. I’ve identified her in my citations to both documents.)

Florence stating that Sergio was a fascist government spy.³³ Other letters came from listeners who were angered by Sergio's WQXR radio commentaries. Writing anonymously, "A Citizen" wrote that a particular broadcast "was nothing short of treason."³⁴ After a trip to New York City during which he heard one of Sergio's broadcasts, another writer with knowledge of Sergio's "voluminous" FBI file wrote that he believed she was "indulging in subtle pro-German propaganda and that the gist of her remarks appeared to be that only a few of the Germans were bad and were responsible for the present war."³⁵ One listener wrote a lengthy letter to Sergio (and forwarded a copy to the FBI as well) stating that Sergio's broadcasts had "sinister implications," because of the questions she had raised regarding the motives of U.S. allies.³⁶

Often, these letters praised her at the same time they expressed distrust. A writer who attended one of Sergio's lectures admired her speaking ability and intellect, but expressed views that her Italian heritage and criticisms of the war made the audience distrust her:

...she not only criticized Churchill's actions on the Greek situation and the English sanctions during the Abessinian [sic] War, which I consider quite unwarranted and moreover coming from a naturalized Italien, [sic] most harmful to the unity of the Allied cause. I had intended meeting her after the talk, but decided I could not under the circumstances. Many in the audience felt the same way as I did, which mostly consisted of very old ladies.³⁷

³³ Anonymous to G. (sic) Edgar Hoover 22 June 1940, Letter contained in Sergio FBI file. No reference to any such broadcasts have been found in my examination of the collection of Lisa Sergio's papers housed at Georgetown University.

³⁴ Anonymous to FBI 5 April 1943, Letter contained in FBI file of Lisa Sergio.

³⁵ Anonymous to FBI 19 March 1945, Letter contained in Sergio FBI file.

³⁶ E.E. Conroy to J. Edgar Hoover, "Elisa Maria Alice Sergio Internal Security-I" 16 April 1943, Memo contained in FBI file of Lisa Sergio.

³⁷ Anonymous to Hoover, 11 February 1945.

The FBI also received phone calls from citizens who were suspicious of Sergio.³⁸ Letters about her written to other branches of the government were forwarded to the FBI.³⁹ One such letter complained of Sergio's "pro-German" comments, which "instead of bolstering up the courage of our people, [were] very discouraging to any mother who had a son at the front."⁴⁰

These and other letters were responsible for bringing Sergio to Hoover's attention and launching a series of investigations of her prior to and during U.S. involvement in World War II. The earliest documents in Sergio's FBI file were a report of a phone call to the Baltimore FBI office in June, 1940,⁴¹ and two letters sent to Hoover in June, 1940, and January, 1941.⁴² In the second letter, a woman named Effie Thixton Arthur wrote that she had met Sergio on her 1937 voyage from Italy to New York, where, "always an admiration of Il Duce was loudly proclaimed, and especially by this Sergio, who also called attention to a sport handkerchief she was carrying, whereon was printed a speech by Mussolini."⁴³ After writing to acknowledge his receipt of the letter,⁴⁴ Hoover wrote to the field office requesting agents to investigate Sergio in February, 1941. He told them to determine whether she "should be considered for custodial detention in the event of a national emergency."⁴⁵

³⁸ E.E. Conroy to J. Edgar Hoover 19 May 1944, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file; R.B. Hood to J. Edgar Hoover 24 April 1944, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file; R.B. Hood to J. Edgar Hoover 30 September 1942, Memo contained in FBI file of Lisa Sergio; H.B. Judell, Special Agent to FBI 12 June 1940, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file.

³⁹ J.T. Bissell to J. Edgar Hoover 7 April 1943, Memo contained in FBI file of Lisa Sergio.

⁴⁰ Albert Saxe to Henry L. Stimson 31 March 1943, Letter contained in FBI file of Lisa Sergio.

⁴¹ Judell to FBI, 12 June 1940.

⁴² Anonymous to Hoover, 22 June 1940; Arthur to Hoover, 24 January 1941; Judell to FBI, 12 June 1940.

⁴³ Arthur to Hoover, 24 January 1941.

⁴⁴ Hoover to Arthur, 7 February 1941.

⁴⁵ J. Edgar Hoover to NY Special Agent in Charge 19 February 1941, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file.

This was Hoover's first request that Sergio be investigated, but certainly not his last. The ensuing letters between Hoover and the New York special agent in charge are revealing. Hoover wrote repeatedly to agents asking for updates on Sergio's case when agents seemed to drag their feet in providing information. In March when agents interviewed Arthur, she said she couldn't elaborate, that her information "was mainly based on a 'woman's intuition,' but that she did not believe she could withhold such information, in view of the conditions abroad at the present time."⁴⁶ The agents wrote as much to Hoover, without recommending any follow up inquiries. In July, Hoover wrote again to request the "exact status" of the case.⁴⁷ Agents wrote back that Sergio's case had been referred to the New York City Police Department.⁴⁸ Three months later, in October, 1941, when Hoover wrote to agents requesting "prompt attention" to the case,⁴⁹ they responded that it would be "inadvisable" to ask the police department to rush its investigation since it "has other matters of equal importance and many of more importance."⁵⁰ Hoover wrote again in January, 1942, requesting "early investigative attention"⁵¹ after another letter from a Sergio listener was received, prompting a request from the chief of the Special Defense Unit of the Department of Justice for an investigation into Sergio's activities.⁵²

⁴⁶ T.J. Donegan to J. Edgar Hoover 27 March 1941, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file.

⁴⁷ Hoover to Connelley, 3 July 1941.

⁴⁸ Donegan to Hoover, 18 July 1941.

⁴⁹ Hoover to Foxworth, 7 October 1941.

⁵⁰ P.E. Foxworth to J. Edgar Hoover 23 October 1941, Letter contained in Sergio FBI file.

⁵¹ J. Edgar Hoover to New York City Special Agent in Charge 8 January 1942, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file.

⁵² Anonymous to Keith Kane 17 December 1941. Letter contained in FBI file of Lisa Sergio; Lawrence M.C. Smith to J. Edgar Hoover 23 December 1941, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file.

FBI agents finally interviewed Sergio and filed a report on January 12, 1942, nearly one year after Hoover first requested an investigation.⁵³ The tone of the report, however, shows that agents failed to understand Hoover's interest in Sergio as a possible subversive. The report details a lunch encounter between Sergio and an Italian naval attaché whose name she stated she could not remember. The attaché proposed espionage: He wanted her to obtain information of interest to the Italian government from two of her cousins serving in the U.S. navy. Sergio later told the FBI agent she "reacted very coldly" to the proposition and never heard from him again.⁵⁴ Instead of recommending further investigation into Sergio and her activities, however, the agent recommended investigating naval attachés working at the Italian embassy. Three months later, this investigation was abandoned since embassy workers are entitled to diplomatic immunity. At this time, agents at the New York field office stated they considered the file closed.⁵⁵

Hoover perhaps was unlikely to consider the case closed himself, since, on this same day agents made this recommendation, Hoover also received a memo from the forerunner of the CIA. On, April 29, 1942, the office of the Coordinator of Information (the forerunner of the Office of Strategic Services, which was the predecessor of the CIA) sent Hoover a secret memo concerning Sergio's fascist connections. The most damaging part of the memo (which was the only document released by the CIA in response to a November, 2003 request) asserted that Sergio left Italy with the consent of Fascist officials and maintained contact with fascists

⁵³ W.K. Harvey, *Unknown subject; Lisa Sergio, Informant* (New York City: FBI, 1942), 1, Report contained in Sergio FBI file, NY File No. 65-8759.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁵ P.E. Foxworth to J. Edgar Hoover 29 April 1942, Memo contained in FBI file of Lisa Sergio.

after her arrival in New York. The memo stated that the office of the Coordinator of Information had obtained an Italian edition of Sergio's book, *From Intervention to Empire, a Book of Fascist Dates* that was inscribed in Sergio's handwriting to "Comm. Gaetano Vecchiotti *con sincera amicizia* (with sincere friendship) Lisa Sergio New York 1938." (Vecchiotti was the Italian Consul General.) The memo concludes that "it is clear that Miss Sergio's antecedents and present activities should be carefully watched."⁵⁶

Hoover initiated another round of investigation requests a month later on May 30, 1942. First, he forwarded a memo reporting a confidential informant's assertions that Sergio's "pro-American views (were) for the purpose of obtaining her present position," and that "at heart she is as true a fascist as there is in the United States."⁵⁷ Hoover wrote to New York agents again on June 13 and August 29 noting that no report had been filed on Sergio or her activities.⁵⁸ When agents finally filed a 13-page report in August, they again recommended closing the case, this time with the authorization of an assistant U.S. attorney.⁵⁹ Six months later Hoover, however, again wrote to the New York field office requesting an agent familiar with fascist activities in New York be assigned to the case. Hoover stated that Sergio was of "particular interest" and requested "preferred attention" to the investigation.⁶⁰

From this point on, the New York field office made more regular reports on Sergio; one agent even forwarded a set of eight books on fascist culture, economics,

⁵⁶ William A. Kimbel to J. Edgar Hoover 29 April 1942, Memo from the office of the Coordinator of Information re: Lisa Sergio. Obtained from the CIA in response to a November, 2003, FOIA request.

⁵⁷ Special Agent to Ladd, 25 April 1942.

⁵⁸ J. Edgar Hoover to NY Special Agent in Charge 29 August 1942, Memo contained in FBI file of Lisa Sergio.

⁵⁹ Anonymous, *Elisa Maria Alice Sergio, with aliases, Lisa Sergio, "The Golden Voice of Rome"*, 13

⁶⁰ J. Edgar Hoover to New York Special Agent in Charge 19 February 1943, Memo contained in FBI file of Lisa Sergio.

and politics that Sergio had given him for the Bureau's use. It was at this time that agents suggested keeping Sergio on a list of contacts with special knowledge of international affairs.⁶¹ Though agents again recommended closing their inquiries, subsequent letters about her from citizens required that additional investigations be done. Ensuing requests from Hoover also required additional investigations, such as when Hoover requested agents to get her radio scripts from March 1 to April 15, 1943, for analysis by the Justice Department's war division.⁶²

Once agents were cooperative in providing information on Sergio, Hoover regularly forwarded their reports to other branches of government. He sent information on Sergio to an assistant attorney general, who was considering using her to testify in a case against the National Fascist Party of Italy.⁶³ Hoover forwarded two letters from disgruntled listeners and other background information to the chairman of the FCC and to Elmer Davis, the director of the Office of War Information.⁶⁴ OWI Assistant Director James Allen responded by reminding Hoover that the office was not "empowered to regulate the employment of broadcasters by radio stations nor can it interfere in the programs put on by radio stations."⁶⁵ After Hoover sent additional information about Sergio obtained in Italy, Davis himself responded by writing that Sergio "has never been employed in any capacity with the Office of War Information

⁶¹ E.E. Conroy to J. Edgar Hoover 19 March 1943, Memo contained in FBI file of Lisa Sergio.

⁶² Hoover to NY Special Agent in Charge, 3 May 1943.

⁶³ J. Edgar Hoover to Wendell Berge, "Memorandum for Assistant Attorney General Wendell Berge" 3 May 1943, Memo contained in FBI file of Lisa Sergio.

⁶⁴ J. Edgar Hoover to Elmer Davis, "Elisa Maria Alice Sergio, aka Lisa Sergio" 30 April 1943, Memo contained in FBI file of Lisa Sergio.

⁶⁵ James Allen to J. Edgar Hoover 15 May 1943, Letter contained in Sergio FBI file.

and, in the unlikely case that she should ask for such employment, we will not engage her.”⁶⁶

As discussed in chapter four, the FBI initiated an extensive investigation of Sergio’s Italian background once the Psychological Warfare Branch of the Allied Armies came into possession of the personnel records of Italy’s Ministry of Popular Culture in June, 1944. Copies of the records, as well as information from interviews conducted in Italy, were sent to an assistant secretary of state, the director of naval intelligence, the assistant chief of staff of the War Department, and two assistant attorneys general.⁶⁷ Hoover forwarded this same information to the special agent in charge in New York, requesting that should any information regarding Sergio be uncovered, “it is my desire that you immediately advise the Bureau.”⁶⁸

The HUAC and Red Channels

FBI investigations of Sergio, for the most part, were not made public. The investigations conducted by FBI agents, for example, did not themselves generate headlines. The FBI, however, had been known to provide information to groups that did use the information publicly. The most visible episodes of the Sergio investigations involved the Dies Committee in the late 1940s and the publication of *Red Channels* in 1950.

⁶⁶ Elmer Davis to J. Edgar Hoover 6 December 1944, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file.

⁶⁷ J. Edgar Hoover to Tom C. Clark 23 November 1944, Memo contained in FBI file of Lisa Sergio.

⁶⁸ J. Edgar Hoover to New York Special Agent in Charge, “Elisa Maria Alice Sergio, also known as Lisa Sergio Internal Security-I New York file 100-5460” 24 November 1944, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file.

Sergio's name had been in the headlines connected to the House Un-American Activities Committee as early as 1945, when she was one of six "progressive" radio commentators whose scripts were requested by the committee for examination. Other commentators whose scripts were called for were Johannes Steel, who Rep. John Rankin (D-Miss.) said could "expect an investigation" because of his views, and William S. Gailmor, a New York City news commentator, who was taken off the air after his scripts were requested.⁶⁹ In 1948, the committee made headlines again by linking Sergio and Eleanor Roosevelt to the American Committee for the Protection of Foreign-Born. According to the HUAC, this organization "was founded by the Communist Party in order to exploit racial divisions in the U.S. for its own revolutionary purposes."⁷⁰

It had been noticed by the popular press that Sergio had authored the book *From Intervention to Empire*, a 252-page timeline of important dates in fascist history. It was published in 1937, the year Sergio fled from Italy. In a 1944 column in the anti-Communist magazine *New Leader*, Murray Everett pointed out that this book was in the New York Public Library and that he believed it was "a glorification of the Italian poison-gas venture into Ethiopia."⁷¹ He quoted her dedication to "the memory of all the Black Shirts who, within Italy and abroad, have written in their blood the glorious dates of the fascist era"⁷² and noted that she was then a commentator on

⁶⁹ Holland, "Representatives ask abolition of 'Dies' committee."

⁷⁰ Howard Rushmore, "Mrs. FDR Named as Sponsor of Red Front Group Aiding Tito," *Boston Evening American*, 17 January 1948. Box 20 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁷¹ Murray Everett, "Inside and Out," *New Leader*, 6 May 1944. Box 22 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁷² Ibid.

WQXR. “Miss Sergio is entitled to consideration for having seen the error of her fascist ways,” Everett wrote, “but to skip from one totalitarian line to favorable praise of another is a horse of a different color.”⁷³ The book was again mentioned in the *New Leader* in March, 1946, her last month as a WQXR commentator. The *New Leader* ran a lengthy profile naming Sergio as a fellow traveler in an article that was headlined “ALERT!” and “Fellow-Traveler by Air: Lisa Sergio.”⁷⁴ The profile was one of a series which had also featured commentator Johannes Steel with the intent of showing how fellow travelers “admire totalitarianism,” and “carefully avoid the risk of party membership” so that they can “hold open the way to retreat.”⁷⁵

Members of the House of Representatives received similar inquiries on whether or not Sergio was a communist, much like the letters Hoover received. For example, in March, 1949, Frederick S. Benson of the American Lumbermen’s Mutual Casualty Company of Illinois wrote to Rep. Walter H. Judd (R-Minn.) to ask if Sergio was a communist. Judd, after soliciting information from the HUAC (most likely information that was provided by the FBI), forwarded the information on to Benson, who apparently circulated it widely. The information Judd forwarded to Benson is not in the Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. but letters between Judd and Sergio’s lawyer are preserved. After Sergio’s lawyer contacted Judd about his information, Judd, apparently convinced the HUAC information was incorrect, replied, “I may have done her an injustice in drawing conclusions from the information I had at hand. On

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Norbert Muhlen, “Fellow-Traveler by Air: Lisa Sergio,” *New Leader*, 16 March 1944, 5, 21. Box 21 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 5.

this ground I offer her a sincere apology.”⁷⁶ Judd was gracious enough to retract the information in a letter to Benson:

I have full confidence in my colleagues serving on that committee, and in the accuracy of the information which I transmitted from them to you. But Miss Sergio feels, and has strongly represented to me, that I may have wronged her in my letter of transmittal, and upon giving the matter careful consideration I am obliged to acknowledge such a possibility. ... I ask your cooperation in circulating this retraction in the same fashion and as widely—within reasonable limits—as you circulated the contents of my letter.⁷⁷

The most public linking of Sergio as a communist sympathizer came with the publication of *Red Channels* in 1950. *Red Channels*, a “report to the broadcasting industry” on communist infiltration of radio and television,⁷⁸ was published by a company that called itself American Business Consultants. This group operated an anti-subversive intelligence service that provided information to its clients. The service, conceived of by former FBI agents Theodore Kirkpatrick, John Keenan and Kenneth Bierly, filed and indexed information on communists and subversive organizations. To do this, the service collected bound volumes of the *New York Times* and the *Daily Worker*, copies of letterheads, pamphlets, books, and hearing transcripts. Such transcripts included the HUAC hearings, even though these transcripts were suppressed because of an “indiscriminate use of names.”⁷⁹

The organization began publishing the newsletter *Counterattack* in 1947. Subtitled “Facts to Combat Communism,” *Counterattack* routinely published the

⁷⁶ Walter H. Judd to Raymond E Burdick 20 June 1949, Box 4 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Consultants, *Red Channels*. 1.

⁷⁹ Merle Miller, *The Judges and the Judged*. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1952. 81-82.

names of alleged communist front organizations and features on what to do about communism. Very occasionally, *Counterattack* praised individuals or companies who carried out its suggestions. According to a study of the newsletter sponsored by the American Civil Liberties Union and published in 1952, more than 360 people and 165 organizations were cited in the newsletter's first 182 issues.⁸⁰

American Business Consultants, which from time to time issued special reports for its subscribers, published its largest report, *Red Channels*, on June 22, 1950. This was the same year Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were arrested for spying for the Soviet Union and three days before South Korea was invaded by the communist-controlled North Korean Army. In *Red Channels* a total of 151 actors, actresses, writers, producers, executives, commentators and other radio and television workers were listed, along with specific citations linking them to subversive organizations. The purpose of the report was to prevent alleged communist domination of broadcasting, identify communists and fellow travelers in the industry, and to reduce the income available to the Communist party through dues and donations to its affiliated organizations which used well-known industry personalities to raise funds.

According to the ACLU-sponsored investigation into *Red Channels*, the book's listings were misleading. Twenty organizations listed as subversive had been defunct for over 10 years. The report did not make any attempt to distinguish the depth of involvement a listed individual had with an organization. Nor did *Red Channels* attempt to investigate the current viewpoints of any of the men or women it cited to find out whether their views had changed in the course of time or if they had disassociated themselves with certain organizations. Also, many *Red Channels*

⁸⁰ Ibid., 63, 64, 66.

citations were merely newspaper reports of speeches given before so-called subversive organizations, asserted as conclusive evidence of a person's sympathies.⁸¹

An era of institutionalized blacklisting followed the publication of *Red Channels*, with executives consulting the report in all hiring decisions. Merely being named in *Red Channels* or *Counterattack* was "brutally damaging," according to *The Nation*, since the publishers routinely launched campaigns to force advertisers to ban people on its blacklist. "It is intolerable that American citizens should be forced to go ... to the offices of *Counterattack* to plead their innocence and to petition for mercy as if they were before some awesome legal tribunal," wrote *The Nation*.⁸² American Business Consultants, noted the magazine, was a private "clearance" service that had sold subscriptions for its services to twelve sponsors and agencies. The service also benefited from the existence of federal programs such as President Truman's federal employee loyalty-review program, and with the blacklisting practices of the House, the Attorney General, and private groups such as the American Legion and Catholic War Veterans.

In *Red Channels*, Sergio was identified as a radio commentator, author and lecturer. Citing letterheads, HUAC reports and various *Daily Worker* articles, *Red Channels* listed nine organizations that she was associated with.⁸³ In October of 1950, four months after the publication of *Red Channels*, an FBI informant who claimed to be a friend of Sergio's, stated that Sergio had admitted the connections in *Red Channels*, but said that she did not know they were considered communist front

⁸¹ Ibid., 100-104.

⁸² "Salute to Sponsor," *The Nation*, 1 December 1951, 463, 464. Box 4 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁸³ Consultants, *Red Channels*. 131-132.

organizations. This informant, an employee of the firm that had Sergio's lecture contract, told FBI agents that Sergio sought the help of New York City councilman Stanley Isaacs, who advised her to write letters of resignations to all of the organizations.⁸⁴ Sergio defended herself against the *Red Channel* citations in several documents, including letters to the American Legion. The *Red Channel* citations and Sergio's replies to the accusations against her follow.

The Joint-Anti Fascist League. Through articles appearing in the *Daily Worker*, Sergio was cited as a sympathizer to this organization because she spoke at League rallies in 1945 and 1947, and also sponsored the League's 1947 campaign to help exiled refugees of the Spanish Republican government. In a letter to the American Legion preserved in Sergio's FBI file, Sergio claimed to have been one of the original supporters of the league and to have raised money for medical aid. As a national sponsor, she was joined by others such as Vincent Sheean and William L. Shirer. She claimed her last contact with the committee was in 1947 and that she was never aware of any communist activities.⁸⁵ Sergio wrote a formal letter in 1949 withdrawing from the council, a copy of which is preserved in her FBI file.⁸⁶

Action Committee to Free Spain Now. Again, through a *Daily Worker* article, Sergio was linked to this committee because she spoke at an organizational dinner in May, 1946.

Scientific and Cultural Conference for World Peace. *Red Channels* linked Sergio to the 1949 conference, even though its own citation (of a *New York Sun* article) specifically noted that she withdrew from the conference. Sergio claimed that she agreed to be a sponsor of the conference after receiving a letter from Sarah Blanding, Vassar College president, but withdrew when she heard about the program and backers of the conference.⁸⁷ (Blanding also withdrew from the conference.) Sergio's withdrawal from the conference was widely

⁸⁴ Edward Scheidt to J. Edgar Hoover 30 October 1950, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file.

⁸⁵ Lisa Sergio to Jack Preble 10 November 1949, Letter attached to FBI report contained in Lisa Sergio's FBI file.

⁸⁶ Lisa Sergio to National Council of American-Soviet Friendship 9 November, Letter contained in Sergio FBI file. This letter of resignation is contained in Lisa Sergio's FBI report. According to the letter, duplicate copies were sent to the American Committee for the Protection of the Foreign Born, the Joint-Anti Fascist League and the Civil Rights Congress.

⁸⁷ Lisa Sergio, "Statement by Lisa Sergio," Box 4 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1951.

publicized, but her initial association with it was still evidence of her alleged sympathies.⁸⁸ “I must emphatically point out that it is entirely unfair to list me as a sponsor,” she wrote in a letter to the American Legion. “I withdrew because, when the program of the conference began to take shape, I learned that it was under control of persons whose political views I did not share and therefore I did not wish to have any part in the resolutions they might pass or the statements they might issue.”⁸⁹

American Committee for the Protection of Foreign Born. This organization, founded in 1933, specialized in the legal defense of foreign-born Americans against government attempts to denaturalize and deport them. The organization was closely allied with the Communist party, and provided legal services for many communists and left-wing labor leaders, especially in the 1940s and 1950s when mainstream civil liberty organizations would not provide such services to communists. Citing a report by the HUAC, *Red Channels* listed Sergio as a sponsor and attendee at a 1943 dinner. Sergio admitted to having made yearly \$10 contributions until 1947. She said she believed the purpose of the committee was “to unify Americans of foreign birth behind our war effort.”⁹⁰ Sergio wrote a formal letter in 1949 withdrawing from it, a copy of which is preserved in her FBI file.⁹¹

National Council of American-Soviet Friendship. This group, formed in 1942, was one of a succession of numerous groups to promote positive Soviet-American interaction and peace. This national council, along with local organizations in Los Angeles, San Francisco and Chicago, are the only Soviet friendship groups to survive from World War II to today. When it was formed, the council enjoyed a broad base of support from business and government leaders. The group promoted cultural exchange between the U.S. and Russia and tried to counteract negative propaganda about Russia. After the war, however, the government began to oppose the council. It was investigated by the HUAC in 1946 and listed on the attorney general’s list of subversive organizations in 1947. In 1954, it was declared to be a communist front organization by the Subversive Activities Control Board. Citing a report by the HUAC, *Red Channels* listed Sergio as a sponsor of the council’s committee of women. According to Sergio, other sponsors included suffragist Carrie Chapman Catt and writer Dorothy Canfield Fisher. In a letter to the American Legion, Sergio said her own

⁸⁸ Charles Grutzner, “Police Lift All Restrictions on Culture Meeting Pickets,” *The New York Times*, 25 March 1949, 1.

⁸⁹ Sergio to Preble, 10 November 1949, 3.

⁹⁰ Sergio to Preble, 10 November 1949, 2.

⁹¹ Sergio to National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, 9 November 1949.

involvement was limited to attending a few public functions during World War II and addressing a Brooklyn rally in 1945.⁹² Sergio wrote a formal letter in 1949 withdrawing from the council, a copy of which is preserved in her FBI file.⁹³

National Committee to Combat Anti-Semitism. Citing a report by the HUAC, *Red Channels* cited Sergio as a sponsor of this committee. There is no evidence in the Sergio papers that she was ever connected to this organization, and she does not address this committee in her *Red Channels* defense memo.

American Slav Congress. This organization, formed first in 1938 and then revived in 1941, was intended to mobilize support for the war effort and the American-Soviet alliance among workers in key defense industries. Communist party members were the heart of the organization, though they represented a minority among the group's officials, the majority of whom were of Slavic origin. Again citing a report by the HUAC, *Red Channels* listed Sergio as a sponsor of this organization and an attendee of a 1947 dinner in honor of Sen. Claude Pepper (D-Fla.) Sergio claimed to have been a member of the American Committee for Yugoslav Relief, established in 1945 under the War Control Board to raise relief funds for Yugoslavia. She attended money raising functions, one of which drew Eleanor Roosevelt as the main speaker. In a letter to the American Legion, Sergio stated that the committee had notified its sponsors that it was disbanding long before *Red Channels* was published in 1950.⁹⁴ It is not known if there was a relationship between the American Committee for Yugoslav Relief, of which Sergio admits to working with, and the American Slav Congress. The American Slav Congress appeared in 1948 on the attorney general's blacklist and was disbanded by 1951 with the deportation and resignations of its officials.

National Citizens Political Action Committee. Citing an "official invitation," Sergio was listed in *Red Channels* as the vice-chairman of the women's division campaign committee in 1946. In late 1946, this organization, active in the progressive movement, merged with the Independent Citizens Committee of the Arts and the Sciences and Professions. Sergio does not mention either of these committees in the memo she wrote defending herself against the *Red Channels* citations.⁹⁵

National Congress on Civil Rights. This organization existed from 1946 to 1956 and specialized in providing civil rights defenses for

⁹² Sergio to Preble, 10 November 1949, 1.

⁹³ Sergio to National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, 9 November 1949.

⁹⁴ Sergio to Preble, 10 November 1949, 2.

⁹⁵ Sergio, "Statement by Lisa Sergio."

legal cases involving communists or racial equality. The Congress was the main organization fighting the HUAC. Sergio was listed in *Red Channels* as a supporter of this organization. In a letter to the American Legion, Sergio stated that she could find no trace of communication from this organization in her files, and that she never attended any functions or supported it financially.⁹⁶ Nevertheless, she wrote a formal letter in 1949 withdrawing from the council, a copy of which is preserved in her FBI file.⁹⁷

In a 1951 affidavit, Sergio addressed her citations in *Red Channels*, stating that during World War II she gave her name to numerous organizations that advocated worthy causes and often spoke on behalf of those causes alongside other notable speakers whose loyalties were not questioned. “Any connection on my part with any such organization was at best remote,” she stated in the three-page statement written to rebut the allegations.⁹⁸ “If on having my suspicions aroused as to its loyalty, I did not formally withdraw, the omission was simply because my connection had been so very remote and temporary that I believed it had long since expired.”⁹⁹ She also wrote:

I am not in sympathy with the Communist movement, either domestic or foreign. I oppose totalitarianism of all kinds. I believe that the present government of Russia is an absolute dictatorship and wholly undemocratic. ... As a result of my experience, I have learned carefully to check the purpose and backers of any organization, new or old, before lending it my name or support, in order to make certain that such organization and its sponsors are not advocating principles or action subversive to the Government and best interests of the United States.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ Sergio to Preble, 10 November 1949, 2.

⁹⁷ Sergio to National Council of American-Soviet Friendship, 9 November 1949.

⁹⁸ This statement does not indicate for whom it was prepared for and may have been kept on file by her lecture bureau to send to groups that expressed doubt about her associations. Sergio, “Statement by Lisa Sergio.”

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

Postwar FBI Investigations

Though wartime FBI investigations focused on Sergio as a fascist, postwar investigations of Sergio revolved around her alleged communist sympathies. These allegations first surfaced in a June, 1944, letter to Hoover from the New York field office's special agent in charge. Coincidentally, this was when Sergio's citizenship request was delayed. The purpose of this letter was to inform the FBI that Sergio would be considered a "confidential national defense informant" and used as a source on Italian fascist activities. But, because, according to the report, "some sources indicate she has the reputation of being a Leftist," agents were not to contact her in regard to communist activities.¹⁰¹

These references to Sergio as a communist are unsubstantiated in the agents' reports. The first reference to "sources" is vague; it is mentioned only in passing and the sources are not identified. Also, though the report claimed letterheads of communist front organizations featured Sergio's name, there is no indication as to what information was actually contained in the field office's files or what organizations were being referred to. Hoover's letter in reply is informative in regards to his attitude toward Sergio. In a paragraph in which he examines information available in Sergio's file, he refers to her "communist sympathies."¹⁰² This was the first use of the word in Sergio's FBI file.

¹⁰¹ SAC, "Lisa Sergio, Confidential National Defense Informant"

¹⁰² J. Edgar Hoover to New York Special Agent in Charge, "Lisa Sergio, Confidential National Defense Informant" 31 July 1944, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file. It is notable that in this letter Hoover stated that information regarding communist infiltration of Italian groups and the Italian government was of utmost importance to the FBI. However, he advised against listing Sergio as an informant. Believing Sergio's pro-American attitude to be "motivated purely by ulterior motives and particularly for the purpose of obtaining and holding a position within the United States," Hoover states that Sergio appears to be an "opportunist" and her information "partisan." However he did not forbid agents from using any information they obtained from her.

In fact, an internal FBI memo in 1948 (two years before the publication of *Red Channels*) specifically stated that her FBI file “fails to indicate she has ever been a communist, a fellow-traveler, or in favor of communist policies.”¹⁰³ This memo was written in response to an anonymous person who had forwarded a press release to Hoover that stated Sergio had been appointed public affairs editor of *Tomorrow* magazine. A note handwritten on the release said, “To J. Edgar Hoover! Isn’t she RED?”¹⁰⁴

Nevertheless, the allegations persisted and Sergio’s alleged communist ties were cemented in August, 1950, when former managing editor of the *Daily Worker*, Louis F. Budenz, told FBI agents that Lisa Sergio was one of 400 “concealed communists” that he claimed he knew. He stated that he was informed in 1944 that she had “agreed to follow the Communist Party line and to become an adherent of the Communist Party” and that he had referred to her as a “communist radio commentator.”¹⁰⁵ After Budenz named Sergio to FBI agents, Hoover again requested agents to reopen investigations of Sergio and to make a report.¹⁰⁶

Budenz renounced communism in 1945 and converted to Catholicism a month before joining the economics faculty at the University of Notre Dame and later Fordham University. He became an anti-communist crusader whose “charges were vigorously denied by everyone he ever accused,” and whose accusations never led to any criminal convictions.¹⁰⁷ In six years at the height of his anti-communist crusade,

¹⁰³ 9 June 1948, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ New York SAC to FBI Director 8 August 1950, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file.

¹⁰⁶ FBI Director to New York Special Agent in Charge, “Lisa Sergio Security Matter-C Bureau file 65-18966” 17 October 1950, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file.

Budenz earned \$70,000, a fact that hurt his public credibility.¹⁰⁸ In one publicized speech Budenz publicly named Sergio as a communist. The *Daily Times* of Mamaroneck, New York, wrote of the speech Budenz gave in White Plains in 1949:

Because of libel laws it is difficult to expose fully the Americans serving in party branches, Mr. Budenz said. "Is it not time for Americans to ask those who sign communist front lists what right they have to do this?" the speaker asked. Mr. Budenz named many persons, some prominent, as signers of such lists. He also expressed surprise that not more people noted that Lisa Sergio, who spoke recently to teachers in White Plains, is a member of communist front organizations.¹⁰⁹

The newspaper quoted a statement released by New York City attorney Ray Burdick on Sergio's behalf. The statement called Budenz "surprisingly uninformed" and claimed Sergio "like many others, learned some time ago that there are many organizations that appear on their face to be patriotic groups, but which are in fact controlled by communist elements and has long since wholly disassociated herself from all such groups."¹¹⁰ Association with these organizations, which comprised the majority of the citations against Sergio in the 1950 publication *Red Channels*, was the subject of the public accusations made against Sergio.

Her FBI file gives no evidence that she was a communist beyond hearsay related to agents by informants. Nevertheless in 1951, after the publication of *Red Channels*, FBI agents recommended that Sergio be included in the Bureau's security

¹⁰⁷ Robert F. Levey, "Anti-Communist Louis Budenz Dies," *The Washington Post*, 29 April 1972, B10.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ "Red Link Denied By Lisa Sergio," *The Daily Times*, 4 October 1949. Box 22 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

index card file. The security index card file was based on the FBI's Custodial Detention Index set up in 1939 after the outbreak of World War II. The card file listed foreign aliens who would be arrested should the U.S. enter the war. When the Attorney General ordered the custodial detention program to cease in 1943 because of an inherently unreliable classification system, Hoover (in strictest secrecy) ordered that the custodial detention card file become known as the security index.

On the internal memo requesting Sergio's inclusion in the card file, an "X" is placed next to "communist."¹¹¹ The accompanying 46-page report relies on the citations made against Sergio in *Red Channels*, stating that she withdrew from some of the organizations she was connected with in November, 1949.¹¹² According to the report, the organizations Sergio was connected with were designated as communist organizations by the attorney general in Executive Order 9835. The report, by far the most detailed in Sergio's FBI file, elaborates on Sergio's connections with these organizations by reporting interviews with more than 58 informants, quoting from newspaper articles about her and examining organizational letterheads. The report also contained photocopies of Sergio's communications with the American Legion on her connections to and subsequent resignations from the organizations.¹¹³

Though she refuted all of the connections, the sum of the allegations meant that the FBI would continue to monitor and investigate her. She was guilty by association. Thus, Sergio was the subject of a Bureau "security index card" and

¹¹¹ New York SAC to FBI Director 3 February 1951, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file.

¹¹² Anonymous, *Changed: Lisa Sergio, Security Matter-C* (New York: FBI, 1951), 5-6, Report contained in FBI file of Lisa Sergio, NY File No. 100-3350.

¹¹³ Though Sergio was involved in some of the organizations, several of the connections were unfair. For example, *Red Channels* listed her as being connected to the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace, a conference from which she publicly withdrew from. In the case of the Civil Rights Congress, Sergio never attended the gathering, nor did she contribute financially.

“communist index card” from 1951 to at least 1954, meaning that in the case of a national emergency she could be subject to detainment. In 1954, the Albany field office, after conducting several investigations, concluded that Sergio did not hold membership in the communist party or any communist front organizations. On January 20, 1954, Albany agents requested that she be removed from the index.¹¹⁴ It is not known what the final decision of the Bureau was concerning this request; though Sergio’s file contained documents dated throughout the 1950s and 1960s, there was no reply to this request.

American Legion Cooperation with FBI

The American Legion played a large role in circulating the rumors that questioned Sergio’s loyalties. This role was apparently encouraged by a formal program of cooperation by FBI agents and local American Legion posts. The roots of American Legion anti-communism reached back to 1934 when the organization began making lists of people and organizations with radical politics.¹¹⁵ The campaigns took on national implications for broadcasters after Eleanor Johnson Buchanan, the daughter of a supermarket owner, gave a speech in 1951 to the American Legion post in Syracuse, New York, advocating removing communist sympathizers from programs on radio and television.¹¹⁶ When her father, Laurence Johnson, was elected to office in the National Association of Supermarkets, he was

¹¹⁴ Albany SAC to FBI Director, “Lisa Sergio, Was. Security Matter-C” 20 January 1954, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file.

¹¹⁵ O’Reilly, *Hoover and the un-Americans*. 35.

¹¹⁶ Barnouw, *The Golden Web*. 273.

able to give broadcasters the impression that he could influence thousands of grocery stores.¹¹⁷ Networks quickly tired of the attacks and, using *Red Channels* and the newsletter *Counterattack*, began filtering out those whose names appeared in the publications. Thus, “blacklist administration became part of the built-in machinery of the industry,” wrote historian Erik Barnouw.¹¹⁸

Additionally, during this time thousands of American Legion members were listed as “confidential national defense informants” for the FBI through a formal program known as the American Legion Contact Program. This program, instituted after 1940, was conducted secretly to “expand surveillance permanently by recruiting ‘reliable’ American Legionnaires as FBI informers” without having to seek congressional approval or appropriation. By 1941, FBI agents had contacted 813 Legion posts. Of 46,000 potential informants who were identified, 32,918 people had been contacted. By 1943, approximately 60,000 legionnaires had been contacted for recruitment as informers.¹¹⁹

Unfortunately for historians, Hoover authorized field offices to destroy their American Legion files in 1947 and 1956. But the Bureau’s main American Legion Contact Program policy file shows American Legion contacts uncovered almost no information of value. Instead, the Bureau used the program for public relations purposes and “intentionally leaked information from FBI files to Legion publicists and officers as part of a broad-based program to ‘educate’ public opinion.”¹²⁰ This program was eventually part of the Bureau’s broader Mass Media Program, which

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 274.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 277.

¹¹⁹ Theoharis, “The FBI and the American Legion Contact Program, 1940-1966,” 273, 277-278, 281, 284.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 281, 284, 286.

released information to ideologically “friendly” reporters and legislators. Through the program, the FBI helped to promote “indiscriminate anti-communism,” wrote scholar Athan Theoharis.¹²¹ The program “captures the most searing impact of the cold war on American institutions—its contribution to the evolution of a quasi-autonomous internal security bureaucracy administered by individuals indifferent to the legal and constitutional restrictions central to a federal system of divided government,” Theoharis wrote.¹²²

Two incidents in Lisa Sergio’s FBI file and personal papers shed light on FBI and American Legion cooperation. Both involve speeches Sergio made after the war and show how accusations made against Sergio by the American Legion (though they were later refuted to the Legion’s satisfaction) came to be preserved in Lisa Sergio’s FBI file and used as material in subsequent FBI reports for years.

In the first instance, an informant attended a speech given by Sergio at a breakfast meeting of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women’s chapter in Indianapolis on May 7, 1950, and took three pages of typed notes apparently intended to show that Sergio was a communist sympathizer. The notes were forwarded directly to Hoover.¹²³ These notes match the last three pages of a document held in the Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. titled “Donald Bruce Broadcast, May 8 1950, 5:45 p.m.”¹²⁴

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Indianapolis SAC to FBI Director 11 May 1950, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file.

¹²⁴ Donald Bruce, “Donald Bruce Broadcast May 8, 1950 5:45 p.m.,” Box 4 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1950.

Don Bruce worked in local radio in Indianapolis from 1941 to 1961, and then became a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1961 to 1965. In 1964 he undertook an unsuccessful bid for the Senate. After leaving Congress, according to his congressional biography, he founded the conservative political lobbying group, the American Conservative Union, which still operates in Alexandria, Virginia, issuing report cards for congressional members on conservative issues. It is not known how Sergio came into possession of Bruce's 1950 radio script, which criticized her speech by stating in part:

Yesterday right here in Indianapolis, a good American patriotic group of women heard a world figure ... The guest speaker was Lisa Sergio ... She was brought to Indianapolis by a group of women who are above reproach when it comes to their belief in America and our way of life. Listen to Lisa Sergio's speech ... [sic] here are excerpts from it as I took them down at the meeting yesterday...[sic] Listen carefully and think Americans.¹²⁵

The connection between this script and the notes contained in the FBI report is an intriguing one. Was Bruce one of the national defense informants recruited through the FBI's American Legion Contact program? No American Legion membership is listed in entries for Bruce in *Who's Who*; however, he was the recipient of an "Americanism citation" from the American Legion (though no date for the award is given).¹²⁶ *Who's Who* also states that he served on the House Un-American Activities Committee while in Congress.¹²⁷ Since American Legion membership records were not listed on microfilm until 1968, it is unknown if Bruce

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ *Who's Who in America*. Chicago: A.N. Marquis, 1964-1965. 266.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

was a Legion member in 1950.¹²⁸ He is not listed on Legion membership roles for 1968, the year before he died.¹²⁹

Bruce worked as a news commentator for the radio station WIRE for 1948 to 1957 in Indianapolis, Ind., which is also the site of the Legion's national headquarters. In his broadcast, he stated that he took notes on Sergio's Indianapolis talk, a copy of which later surfaced in the FBI report. Though the name of the source of the notes in the FBI report is redacted, the FBI report noted they came from someone working at WIRE, who had attended the speech and had also been in contact with the American Legion concerning the matter.¹³⁰ It seems likely that Bruce was an American Legion contact, and that this episode illustrates how the American Legion cooperated with the FBI, showing a connection between private and public loyalty investigations.

The second example of American Legion cooperation with the FBI in Sergio's case began with an American Legion-sponsored protest of a speech by Sergio and ended with Sergio signing a sworn statement for the Legion's Americanism Division that removed her from their blacklists. According to a report of the incident contained in Sergio's FBI report, on October, 28, 1949, Sergio gave a speech to approximately 9,000 teachers affiliated with the Central Ohio Teachers Association. That speech was protested by an organization called the "Ohio Coalition of Patriotic Societies" headed by Ohio State University professor William E. Warner. Warner circulated a

¹²⁸ Stacy Spaulding to Joe Hovish 22 July 2005, Phone call to American Legion Headquarters Library, Indianapolis, Ind.

¹²⁹ Joe Hovish to Stacy Spaulding 22 July 2005, Email from American Legion Headquarters librarian, Indianapolis, Ind.

¹³⁰ SAC

memo listing Sergio's "anything but quite acceptable" affiliations with organizations such as the Civil Rights Congress, the American Committee for the Protection of Foreign Born, and other organizations that were cited in the California and U.S. Congressional HUAC committees and were, the following year to be listed in *Red Channels*.¹³¹ The memo stated that "The Ohio Coalition of Patriotic Societies is interested in Miss Sergio's lectures, her sponsors, and especially in how accurately she is introduced, not to mention her particular "line", [sic] but that is its only [sic] interest."¹³²

According to Sergio's FBI file, the American Legion of Ohio received a copy of this memo and subsequently protested her speaking at the meeting.¹³³ The American Legion of Ohio also tried to prevent Sergio from appearing at the convention.¹³⁴ Somehow, after the Legion's Ohio secretary called Sergio's booking agent and was informed she was not a member of these organizations,¹³⁵ Sergio came into contact with Jack Preble, the Americanism director for the American Legion of Ohio. A series of letters between Sergio and Preble detail the process through which Sergio was able to have the Legion clear her name.

This series of correspondence began with a letter and a four-page memo, with enclosures, in which Sergio detailed her associations with every organization with which she was reputed to be affiliated.¹³⁶ These documents, which were to be the

¹³¹ Indianapolis Special Agent in Charge to J. Edgar Hoover 11 May 1950, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file.

¹³² Indianapolis Special Agent in Charge to J. Edgar Hoover 11 May 1950.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Jack Preble to Lisa Sergio 16 November 1949, Box 4 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹³⁵ Special Agent in Charge to Hoover, 11 May 1950.

¹³⁶ Sergio to Preble, 10 November 1949.

basis of her statement refuting her *Red Channels* and in securing the renewal of her U.S. passport (which will subsequently be discussed), were given to the special agent in charge at the FBI's field office in Cincinnati in 1950, they were forwarded to the New York field office and then to Hoover.¹³⁷ Preble also forwarded the memo and its enclosures to the Americanism Director at the Legion's national headquarters in Indianapolis, W.C. "Tom" Sawyer.¹³⁸

Sawyer, as it turned out, was a personal friend of Sally Butler, an attorney and at the time the president of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women, the federation for which Sergio was editing *Widening Horizons*. Butler was one of two people Sergio called on to vouch for her to the legion.¹³⁹ Ann Batchelder also wrote to Episcopal Bishop Charles Gilbert to write a reference for Sergio and to urge the Legion to act more quickly in removing Sergio's name from their list.¹⁴⁰ During this process, there was a period of about six months in which Sergio heard nothing from the Legion's national headquarters, though she was in regular contact with Preble. This delay in communication apparently frightened her, since halfway through it in February, 1950, Sergio wrote to Preble uncharacteristically offering to help with the "cleansing process" of an organization called the Society for the Prevention of World War II from infiltration by "reds" should she be provided a list

¹³⁷ Special Agent in Charge to Hoover, 11 May 1950

¹³⁸ Jack Preble to W.C. "Tom" Sawyer, 16 November 1949, Box 4 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹³⁹ Sally Butler to Raymond E. Burdick 11 September 1950, Box 4 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁴⁰ Batchelder to Gilbert, 28 January 1950.

of the infiltrators and evidence of their communist activities.¹⁴¹ Preble's response to Sergio was an enlightened one. He reminds her that he didn't refer to anyone as a "red," saying, "I rather think I referred to them then, as I do now, as members of Communist front organizations. He also refrains from giving her advice on her offer to go about "cleaning house," stating that he is afraid that she would be "smeared in the process."¹⁴² He did, however, send her a list of names, asking her to compare it to the names listed on the letterhead for the Scientific and Cultural Conference for World Peace. But even then he is cautious, noting "there are a few that always manage to get themselves into any organization with an idealistic name."¹⁴³

In this exchange of letters, Sergio's use of the word "reds" seems atypical, and is perhaps indicative that she was frightened and felt compelled to use a vocabulary that she felt would make her more believable as an anti-communist. Other comments she made publicly are also evidence of the supposition that Sergio began to change her rhetoric in order to avoid accusations of being a communist. For example, she told a Detroit audience that, "any American who becomes a communist is a born traitor or off his trolley or both."¹⁴⁴ This statement lacked Sergio's usual analysis and impartial stance found in her speech and radio transcripts. The report of this speech, published in the *Detroit Sunday Times*, also stated that Sergio looked to be in her 50s, (in

¹⁴¹ Lisa Sergio to Jack Preble 11 February 1950, Box 4 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁴² Jack Preble to Lisa Sergio 13 February 1950, Box 4 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ "Brands American Red Traitors or 'Off Trolley'," *Detroit Sunday Times*, 29 October 1950, part 1 page 3. Box 14 Folder 8, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

actuality she was 45) giving perhaps further evidence of the stress Sergio may have been under.¹⁴⁵

After Preble communicated with the Legion's national headquarters, he contacted Sergio to tell her that if she was willing to make a statement "completely denouncing" all of the organizations she was cited for, and allow the Legion to make the statement public, it would remove her name from the Legion blacklist.¹⁴⁶ Though Sergio readily agreed, the Legion rejected an early version of her statement, because it did not contain "any clean and clear-cut repudiation" of the organizations.¹⁴⁷ Wrote Sawyer to Gilbert, reflecting the Legion's view of its righteous mission and the seriousness of the sin of communism:

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Preble to Sergio, 13 February 1950.

¹⁴⁷ W.C. "Tom" Sawyer to Charles H Gilbert 10 April 1950, Box 4 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

I am sure you will agree, if you will pardon the simile, that there is considerable difference between explaining [sic] how one came to fall into the paths of sin and repudiating [sic] all forms of sin and avowing an intention to refrain from such transgression in the future.¹⁴⁸

Sawyer further noted that Legion lists were based entirely on a person's "repeated" affiliations with suspect groups, and that in naming who was not acceptable for Legion sponsorship was not unlike what a religious organization, or fraternal or labor organization, might do in terms of excluding nonmembers.¹⁴⁹ Sergio's amended statement, accepted by the Legion in October, 1950,¹⁵⁰ read:

I am not in sympathy with the Communist movement, domestic or foreign, with the tenants and teaching of Karl Marx, Lenin and Stalin, and oppose totalitarianism of all kinds and I further believe that the present government of Russia, under Stalin, is an absolute dictatorship and completely undemocratic.

I have already severed any connection which I may have had previously with the following organizations: NATIONAL COUNCIL OF AMERICAN SOVIET FRIENDSHIP, JOINT ANTI-FASCIST REFUGEE COMMITTEE, AMERICAN COMMITTEE FOR PROTECTION OF FOREIGN BORN, AMERICAN COMMITTEE FOR YUGOSLAV RELIEF, CIVIL RIGHTS CONGRESS, AMERICAN RELIEF FOR GREEK DEMOCRACY. [sic]

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Henry H. Dudley to Lisa Sergio 24 October 1950, Box 4 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

I hereby re-state that I publicly withdrew my sponsorship of the CULTURAL AND SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE FOR WORLD PEACE [sic] before it opened in New York in March 1949, and was in no other way connected with it. Should I, unbeknown to me at this time, have any connection with any other Communist-front organization, I hereby sever such connection. I declare that hereafter in lending my name to any organization, now or existing, I shall carefully check its purpose and backers to make sure that they are not subversive to the interests and Government [sic] of the U.S.A.¹⁵¹

The Legion publicized Sergio's clearance in the *Ohio Legion News*, and Preble sent a copy of Sergio's memo to *Counterattack* and *Red Channels*. In a letter of congratulations, he advised her to "PLEASE [sic]—next time look before you leap, and investigate before you lend your good name to anything."¹⁵² Though the process of clearing her name with the Legion did take almost exactly a year, it might not have happened so quickly were it not that correspondence between Sergio and Preble was marked with apparent graciousness on both parts. Preble apparently sincerely wanted to help Sergio. In his first letter to her, Preble wrote, "It's terribly hard to make a letter sound right when it is an office communication such as the attached."¹⁵³ Preble said he had a sincere "personal desire to make amends for any embarrassment," and believed that "The good name of the Legion depends on being fair and honest for without being so our voice in state and national affairs would amount to nothing."¹⁵⁴

The two shared a mutual interest in archaeology, on which they at times compared

¹⁵¹ Lisa Sergio, 21 October 1950. Amended statement of loyalty drawn up for the American Legion, Box 4 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁵² Preble to Sergio, 7 November 1950.

¹⁵³ Preble to Sergio, 16 November 1949.

¹⁵⁴ Preble to Sergio, 16 November 1949. The ACLU-sponsored report *The Judges and the Judged* also noted the sincerity of the anti-communist movement, finding that "most of those so engaged [in blacklisting] profess to be sincere, and to regard their private activities as necessary because they believe that the activities of the security agencies of the executive branch of the government do not extend far enough." Miller, *The Judges and the Judged*. 21z.

notes.¹⁵⁵ Sergio wrote to Butler that Preble was the first Legionnaire to attack her, but was very gracious in trying to make things right:

“[He] has been quite wonderful in trying to make up for the harm done and I think you will like the letter he wrote me and the piece he put into the *Ohio Legion News*. Also his voluntary approach to *Red Channels* and the House Committee indicate his honesty and kindness and may really bring the matter to a conclusion in all respects.”¹⁵⁶

Though Sergio was removed from the Legion’s blacklist, the accusations against her were cemented with the publication of *Red Channels*, which occurred while Sergio was corresponding with the Legion. It is ironic that Sergio was removed from the American Legion’s blacklist just as the *Red Channels* blacklist came into wide use.

Consequences of Anti-Communist Investigations Against Sergio

Clearing her name was a challenge for Sergio for years. Organizations that had contracted Sergio to speak contacted newspapers, lawyers, friends, and even the FBI for years to come to inquire whether or not she was a communist.¹⁵⁷ Her lectures were occasionally targeted by protestors, such as when letter writers urged that a 1951

¹⁵⁵ Preble to Sergio, 16 November 1949; Sergio to Preble, 10 November 1949.

¹⁵⁶ Sergio to Butler, 14 November 1950.

¹⁵⁷ Stanley M. Isaacs to James Moore 10 March 1954, Box 1 Folder 42, Sergio papers; Olive K. King to J. Edgar Hoover 17 February 1966, Memo contained in Sergio FBI file; American Legion National Headquarters to Edith Davis 18 April, Box 4 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

speech in West Virginia be canceled.¹⁵⁸ At other times, Sergio's lecture appearances met with leaflets protesting her alleged communist associations.¹⁵⁹

Such protests and accusations sometimes generated bad publicity, such as resulted from a 1954 incident in Mt. Lebanon, a suburb of Pittsburgh, which one author called a "violent epicenter of the anti-Communist eruption in postwar America."¹⁶⁰ *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph* coverage of the controversy surrounding this woman's club speech featured a picture of Sergio that a caption contended showed the lecturer rushing from a car that had driven "to the rear" of the "ultra-respectable" Mt. Lebanon Woman's Club, where the "mink-clad" Sergio "ran a gauntlet" of reporters before "ducking" into the back door.¹⁶¹ (See figures 14 and 15). In this case, Sergio's alleged communist associations had been publicized by a group calling itself Americans Battling Communism. This group was apparently founded by Harry Alan Sherman, a local attorney, and Joseph and Marry Mazzei, former FBI undercover agents.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁸ Bayard F Ennis, "Forum Speaker, Accused 'Pink,' Gives Ardent Plea for Democracy," *The Charleston (W.V.) Gazette*, 26 January 1951, 7. Box 15 Folder 8, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁵⁹ "Interesting Highlights About Lisa Sergio, Today's Speaker," Box 4 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁶⁰ David Cate, *The Great Fear*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978. 216.

¹⁶¹ "Hornet's nest of questions for speaker," *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*, 8 March 1954. Box 23 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁶² Ibid. Joseph Mazzei had posed for the FBI as a communist for 12 years. In 1953 he began testifying in government trials and congressional hearings exposing alleged Communist party members, including an apparently malicious accusation against a waitress who had filed a paternity suit against him. The government later doubted parts of his testimony, and the Supreme Court ruled that five communists convicted on his testimony should be retried. *Mesarosh v. U.S.* 352 U.S. 808 (1956); Frank B. Allen, "Never a Red, Steel Union Aide Swears," *The Washington Post*, 12 June 1955, A2. ; Cate, *The Great Fear*; Warren Duffee, "Plot to Assassinate McCarthy Recounted," *The Washington Post*, 19 June 1953, 10. ; Herbert Foster, "Senate to Pay Attorney Fee For Defense of McCarthy," *The Washington Post*, 14 August 1954, 2. ; Anthony Leviero, "McCarthy Ejects a Balky Witness," *The New York Times*, 13 August 1954, 1. ; Murrey Marder, "Justice's Challenge of Own

The charges against Sergio caused an especially large uproar, noted the *Sun-Telegraph*, because that “fashionable” area of town “hasn’t recovered from charges ... that its library is ‘loaded’ with Commie-line books.”¹⁶³ Leaders of the women’s club contacted by the paper said they did not know anything of Sergio’s background or the charges against her, only that she came through a booking agency.¹⁶⁴ After the speech, some club women leaving the meeting told the newspaper the speech was “wonderful and “very inspiring.”¹⁶⁵ One even told the paper that “there was nothing communist about it. She talked against communism.”¹⁶⁶ Others said that Sergio was “very clever in putting over her ideas.”¹⁶⁷ Sherman, who publicized the *Red Channels* accusations, told the newspaper:

I got a good outline of her talk and I can say this. She spoke in what is known as communist dialectics. It is the science of befuddlement--the legerdemain of debate, saying one thing and meaning something else. Sure the women liked it. I would be pleased to meet on any platform and at any time with Lisa and debate with her on her version of what is best for international peace and good will without surrendering our Constitution or the American way of life.¹⁶⁸

The paper stated that “the current Communist Party line is strongly concerned with convincing the American people that our international relations are being impaired by a national anti-Communist attitude.”¹⁶⁹ The paper said that Sergio used

Witness To Be Reviewed by Supreme Court,” *The Washington Post*, 9 October 1956, 1. ; C.P. Trussells, “Red Plot Alleged to Slay McCarthy,” *The New York Times*, 19 June 1953, 1.

¹⁶³ “Hornet’s nest of questions for speaker.”

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ “Speaker in Mt. Lebanon Admits She Joined Red-Front Groups,” *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*, 1. Box 23 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

the word “fear” a number of times in her talk, stating that in the last 17 years the country has “declined in happiness because we are living in fear.”¹⁷⁰ She was quoted as saying: “You can’t have happiness with fear. We label everything as a communist today—fear is great.”¹⁷¹ The article was headlined “Speaker in Mt. Lebanon Admits She Joined Red-Front Groups” because Sergio told the reporter that she had been a member of such organizations, but had severed her contact with them.¹⁷²

Because of the fear of bad publicity such as this, Stanley M. Isaacs, a lawyer and the president of the New York City Council, advised Sergio not to get involved in the American Civil Liberties Union inquiry into *Red Channels*, which became the basis for the book *The Judges and the Judged*, written by Merle Miller.¹⁷³ This investigation was an attempt to trace the consequences of anti-communist campaigns.

Beyond study of newspaper headlines, the effects of anti-communist investigations are difficult to evaluate today. It is not easy to measure what jobs Sergio may have been passed over for, or which lecture contracts she never received consideration for because she had been branded a communist. In two instances, however, it is evident that suspicions regarding her gave her serious difficulties, holding up her application for citizenship in 1944 and revoking her passport in 1953.

Sergio filed the appropriate papers to declare her intention to become an American citizen by on March 17, 1938, the day she turned 33.¹⁷⁴ Even though her

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Stanley M. Isaacs to Lisa Sergio 6 June 1955, Box 1 Folder 42, Sergio papers; Patrick Murphy Malin to Lisa Sergio 9 October 1950, Box 4 Folder 3, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁷⁴ Anonymous, *Elisa Maria Alice Sergio, with aliases, Lisa Sergio, “The Golden Voice of Rome”*, 1

birth mother was American, Sergio was considered an enemy alien during the war years. This meant that she had to personally appear at the U.S. Court House in New York City to request permission to travel.¹⁷⁵ On one occasion in February, 1942, she was denied permission by the government to fly by plane to a speaking engagement in Springfield, Massachusetts, since enemy aliens were not allowed many travel privileges.¹⁷⁶

Sergio's application for citizenship was briefly delayed in August 1944, when the government objected on the grounds that she had not lived in the United States for the required five years before applying for citizenship, according to *The New York Times*.¹⁷⁷ In a letter to Samuel Rosenman, White House special council, Estelle M. Sternberger, a fellow WQXR commentator, stated that, "The severest finding against Miss Sergio has been her view expressed in 1938—that fascism was all right for Italy. She has not expressed those views since that year. She has learned better."¹⁷⁸ Sternberger added: "I have the strongest confidence that Miss Sergio will make her mark in service to American democracy ... It is undeniable that America has given her a new soul."¹⁷⁹

Letters show the network of contacts that Sergio and Batchelder called on in petitioning for citizenship. Rep. Charles A. Plumley (R-Vt.) sent a telegram to

¹⁷⁵ Mathias F. Correa to Lisa Sergio 16 January 1942, Box 4 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ "Lisa Sergio's Citizenship Held Up," *The New York Times*, 16 August 1944, 17.

¹⁷⁸ Estelle M. Sternberger to Samuel Rosenman 26 August 1944, Box 4 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

Batchelder in 1942 giving the address of who to send Sergio's application to and followed up with a letter offering to trace the application.¹⁸⁰ Isaacs also offered his help after reading in *The New York Times* that action on Sergio's citizenship application was being delayed. He wrote to her that he was an old friend of the Judge John Knox and that "if a letter to him or oral testimony before him could be of any use to you, I am entirely at your disposal. I certainly want you to become an American citizen, because I know of few people who can be as useful to this country as you have been and will be."¹⁸¹

Other letters supporting Sergio's naturalization also emphasized her patriotism and her enthusiasm for the war effort. Marion Miller, executive assistant to the War Finance Committee, wrote that Sergio was considered one of the committee's most effective speakers.¹⁸² Charles Parr, a member of the Connecticut Commission to Study the Organization of the Judicial Department, wrote that he had known Sergio in Italy and had observed her interactions with Americans, noting she was "consistently a champion of our interests."¹⁸³ Parr also wrote that in America Sergio had never been affiliated with pro-fascist elements. "I have had a number of private conversations with Miss Sergio and I feel that she is thoroughly sound and patriotic to

¹⁸⁰ Charles A. Plumley to Ann Batchelder 20 April 1942, Telegram, Box 4 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁸¹ Stanley M. Isaacs to Lisa Sergio 18 August 1944, Box 4 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁸² Marion M. Miller to John C Knox 23 August 1944, Box 4 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁸³ Charles Parr to John C Knox 21 August 1944, Box 4 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

the core,” he wrote.¹⁸⁴ Yolanda Mero-Irion, chair of the Women’s National Radio Committee, wrote, “Regardless of what Miss Sergio broadcast from Italy, she is a staunch anti-fascist and an enthusiastic American. She made the most moving speeches of anybody I ever heard in behalf of our own war effort.”¹⁸⁵ Of her speeches and their influence over American clubwomen, Constance Sporborg, international relations chair for the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, wrote that Sergio’s “sympathetic appeal for justice to all minority groups has aligned her with the real spirit of our American institutions and has challenged thousands of us women to greater appreciation of the great heritage that is ours as American citizens.”¹⁸⁶

In a speech to women at the New York State Fair in Syracuse the month before she was finally awarded citizenship, Sergio had called the application process “disheartening.”¹⁸⁷ But nevertheless, she was naturalized in September, 1944, by Judge John C. Knox who wrote in a personal letter to her that he was “very glad” to confer citizenship on her.¹⁸⁸

In April, 1953, Sergio attempted to renew her passport so that she could attend the International Federation of Professional Women convention in Stockholm the first

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Yolanda Mero-Irion to John C Knox 21 August 1944, Box 4 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁸⁶ Constance A Sporborg to John C Knox 22 August 1944, Box 4 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁸⁷ Kathleen McLaughlin, “Poletti Upholds Fair Exhibit Ban,” *The New York Times*, 29 August 1941, 11.

¹⁸⁸ “Lisa Sergio Naturalized,” *The New York Times*, 7 September 1944, 8. ; John C Knox to Lisa Sergio 6 November 1944, Box 4 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

week in July, then “make the rounds” of Europe.¹⁸⁹ After Stockholm, she planned to visit France, Belgium, Switzerland and West Germany.¹⁹⁰ When there was a delay in the renewal of her passport, Sergio wrote to Mrs. R.B. Shipley, chief of the State Department’s Passport Division, that “certain family conditions developed a few days after I applied for a renewal” which had made her abandon her summer plans, but that she still wanted to go abroad the following fall.¹⁹¹

In July, three months after first writing to the State Department, Sergio was informed by Shipley that the State Department would not renew her passport because “evidence indicates on your part a consistent and prolonged adherence to the communist party line on a variety of issues and through shifts and changes of that line during the period of many years.”¹⁹² The letter alleged that Sergio had addressed party meetings, and that “many pro-communist and anti-American statements in your speeches and commentary” suggested that she had advanced the communist cause.¹⁹³

Sergio consulted with Isaacs who wrote to Shipley, stating that Sergio “has been the subject of an unfounded attack from time to time” and asked that the case be reconsidered.¹⁹⁴ Isaacs sent copies of Sergio’s American Legion affidavit and the subsequent letter from the Legion clearing her name, and also wrote his own character reference for Sergio:

¹⁸⁹ Sergio to Shipley, 23 April 1953.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Mrs. R.B. Shipley to Lisa Sergio 22 July 1953, Box 4 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Stanley M. Isaacs to Lisa Sergio 31 August 1953, Box 4 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

Because of my intimate knowledge of Miss Sergio's activities, I feel certain that she never did address any communist Party meeting and that she never has been engaged in any activities which could have advanced the communist cause. Too often these days loyal Americans who find it necessary to oppose those who want to restrict freedom within this country, are branded with the Red label. If she is a victim of this same process, you must realize she is in excellent company.¹⁹⁵

The State Department required Sergio to write a lengthy affidavit again detailing her associations with alleged communist front organizations.¹⁹⁶ Sergio did so, on the advice of Isaacs. "I think I would do literally all that she asks, annoying as it is, because I think it would be most helpful to have the picture cleared once and for all," he wrote.¹⁹⁷

When the passport was finally renewed in November, Isaacs wrote to Sergio and said, "It was outrageous that it was held up, but at least their bad judgment has been rectified and I am glad that I was able to handle it so that it came out right in the end." He urged her to thank Shipley.¹⁹⁸ But Sergio, who wrote gracious notes to everyone (including even Jack Preeble of the American Legion) refused, and wrote that Batchelder, too, was "opposed to my thanking the department for something which ... was their obligation to do."¹⁹⁹

Sergio's experience with the anti-communist investigations of the HUAC, FBI and the American Legion showed the important role that individual citizens played in triggering each subsequent round of examinations. Her FBI file sheds light on how the FBI used reports from private citizens attending Sergio's talks to bolster its own

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Shipley to Isaacs, 23 August 1953.

¹⁹⁷ Isaacs to Sergio, 31 August 1953.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Sergio to Isaacs, 15 November 1953.

investigations. Also, the letters between Hoover and investigating agents displayed Hoover's persistence in tracking possible political subversives. These letters showed that even as agents dragged their feet, Hoover was relentless in pushing for additional investigations, never content to let any inquiry close. Sergio's FBI file consistently noted that there was no evidence she was a communist or a fellow traveler and that she had severed connections with all groups alleged to be front organizations, despite her being exposed as a communist by Louis Budenz. Yet Sergio was still included in the FBI's security and communist index card files for at least four years.

Sergio's case also shows that the political rhetoric and tactics most associated with McCarthyism started before the 1950s, the time period commonly associated with it. Accusations against Sergio began during the first red scare in the late 1940s and flowed from her status as enemy alien and former fascist. Sergio's experience also emphasizes the power of *Red Channels*. Many of the accusations made against her during the 1950s and published in 1950 in *Red Channels* were allegations that she had refuted in 1949 to the satisfaction of the American Legion. While it is impossible to state that Sergio's citation in this book cost her specific jobs, it is clear that the accusations listed there followed her for years.

From 1950 to 1954, the period when full-fledged McCarthyism bloomed in the country, Sergio had already been removed from the American Legion blacklist. But she had been inactive in radio for several years, and had retreated to Vermont to care for Batchelder. Her life at this point must have seemed bleak. While she cared

for Batchelder, she wrote, “Everything [was] allowed to go into decline as far as my affairs are concerned.”²⁰⁰

After Batchelder’s death, Sergio was left alone, an unmarried woman with few prospects for continuing her radio career. Batchelder’s will left all her possessions to Sergio, including a piece of land in Ontario that Sergio sold for \$5,000 in 1980 and Batchelder’s pension from The Curtis Publishing Company. (Sergio received monthly payments of \$225.78 from 1955 to 1960.)²⁰¹ Friends such as *Peoria Star* owner and publisher Sidney Baldwin urged Sergio to leave Vermont after Batchelder’s death. “I hope you are not going to let yourself be set permanently in Vermont,” Baldwin wrote. “We need people like you in the stream of things.”²⁰² But Sergio remained for five years—perhaps because of financial difficulties and her devotion to Batchelder.²⁰³ Sergio wrote to Dorothy Canfield Fisher, a writer and Vermont neighbor, in 1955 that, “so long as I am here, in the place which Annie loved so deeply, I am hardly aware of her physical absence.”²⁰⁴

²⁰⁰ Sergio to Garrett, 22 November 1952.

²⁰¹ “Last Will and Testament of Ann Batchelder,” Box 1 Folder 7, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1954; J Bousquet, James to Lisa Sergio 29 October 1980, Box 1 Folder 7, Sergio papers; Ford F. Robinson to Lisa Sergio 2 August 1955, Box 1 Folder 7, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

²⁰² Baldwin to Sergio, 22 September 1955.

²⁰³ Though there are no specifics on Sergio’s day-to-day finances, letters from friends indicate Sergio suffered financial difficulties. “I am really horrified that you have been subjected to such a long ordeal,” wrote Dorothy Canfield Fisher to Sergio in 1958. Dorothy Canfield Fisher to Lisa Sergio 14 November 1955, Box 1 Folder 23, Sergio papers; Dorothy Canfield Fisher to Lisa Sergio 22 September 1958, Box 1 Folder 23, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

²⁰⁴ Lisa Sergio to Dorothy Canfield Fisher 8 August 1955, Box 1 Folder 23, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

Sergio lived out the remainder of the 1950s in Vermont, where she edited *Worldaround Press*, and voluntarily edited *Widening Horizons*, the official publication of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women. She continued lecturing, and by 1958, she again entered “the stream of things” and embarked on a lecture tour of the Middle East and a visit to Israel.²⁰⁵ Soon she created yet another life for herself—this one in Washington, D.C.

²⁰⁵ Lisa Sergio, “Chapter XI Rise of the Native Isms,” Box 5 Folder 26, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1.

Chapter 9: Commentator Once Again (1960-1989)

“Woman’s awareness of her power, lying dormant through the ages, is now awake, and the call for her rightful equality with man no longer falls on deaf ears. Now is the time to drive beyond equality to take on the challenge of full-fledged partnership with man.”

—Lisa Sergio, 1975¹



FIGURE 17. Lisa Sergio Publicity Photo, 1960s-era

This photo was used on the book jacket of two of Sergio’s books: *I Am My Beloved* (1969) and *A Measure Filled* (1972). Said friend Kathryn Lee of the way Sergio looked in photos: “The seriousness of her look doesn’t convey the wit or brightness ... she had a wonderful laugh and sparkling eyes that lit up.”² Photo reproduced from the book jacket of *I Am My Beloved*.

¹ Lisa Sergio, *Jesus and Woman: An Exciting Discovery of What He Offered Her*. McLean, Va.: EPM Publications, 1975. 122.

² Garner interview; Edward and Kathryn Lee, interview by author, 28 May 2005, Merion Station, Pennsylvania.



FIGURE 18. Lisa Sergio with Martin Luther King, Jr.

Sergio and King were awarded honorary degrees in 1963 from Keuka College, Keuka Park, New York. Photo used with permission: Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Box 14 Folder 38.



FIGURE 19. Awards

Awards Sergio won include (from left) the of Chevalier in the French National Order of the Legion of Honor from France (1947), the Medal of Independence or Order of Al-Istiqlal of the First Degree from Jordan (1976) and the Cavaliere of the Order of

the Star of Italian Solidarity (1975). Photo used with permission: Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Box 16 Folders 4, 5.



FIGURE 20. 1531 34th Street, Georgetown

The brick house on the left is the house Sergio rented in Georgetown and lived in for the last 30 years of her life. The house was owned by her next-door neighbor, Mrs. Tillman Leigh, who lived in the home to the right. Photo by author.

Lisa Sergio moved to Washington, D.C., in September, 1960.³ In Washington, Sergio lived in a little Georgetown house on Thirty Fourth Street that she rented from

³ This was one year before Dorothy Thompson died. Thompson was perhaps Sergio's last and strongest connection to the northeast. Ryan, "Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America", 66.

her next-door neighbor, Mrs. Tillman Leigh, for \$300 per month.⁴ She lived there until her death in 1989.

Niccolo Tucci, who had known Sergio in Italy and New York, believed it was Helen Hamilton Burgess who persuaded Sergio to move to Washington.⁵ Burgess, a founder of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the wife of the U.S. ambassador to NATO, was typical of members of the social circles Sergio moved through while living in Washington. In his profile published after Sergio's death, William F. Ryan reported that Sergio made an impression on Washington. "At lunches, receptions and soirees, she was the tiny lady who smoked too much and could assail you with the names of friends rich and mightily. Those who really knew her loved and revered her. Her elegance was uncanny. ... Her conversation was exquisite."⁶

In a society that valued access to power, Sergio's previous connections to powerful politicians and journalists gave her social cache. She became known as well-connected. "She was not a shy, wallflower type. I think people appreciated that she was honest and straightforward and very clear about things," remembered Sanford Garner, the rector of Christ Church Georgetown from 1973 to 1990. "She knew everybody in Washington and everywhere else. She was broadly connected with people of her day and people, I remember, in the diplomatic service and others

⁴ Burling interview.

⁵ Ryan, "Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America", 66.

⁶ Ibid.

who were involved in world affairs all respected her tremendously and valued her presence and opinion.”⁷

Her sense of humor and charm were a hit on the Washington dinner-party circuit, as evidenced by one note Sergio received from an admirer in 1966: “You are by all odds the most delightfully cosmopolitan person that I know, and by sheer personality you turn a luncheon into a major event.”⁸ Sergio was fun, not “stuffy or boring,” remembered Frida Burling, friend and Georgetown resident.⁹ Burling, the daughter of Sergio’s next-door neighbor and landlord, also remembered that Sergio “had a cute way of handling her money” by dressing only in black, white or red so that all of her clothes, shoes and accessories paired well.¹⁰ Garner remembered that Sergio lived simply, though she was “beautifully groomed—simply—but beautifully and stylishly.”¹¹ Sergio was a woman who seemed very alive, said Isabelle Claridge Taylor, who knew Sergio through their involvement in the International Federation of Business and Professional Women in the late 1930s and 1940s. After moving to Washington, D.C., Sergio often traveled to Taylor’s Philadelphia home for weekends. “She seemed to be the embodiment of vitality. She was one of those people whose eyes would snap,” Taylor said.¹² She stated that Sergio “lived in politics daily” and

⁷ Garner interview.

⁸ Thomas W. Miles to Lisa Sergio 13 July 1966, Box 3 Folder 31, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁹ Burling interview.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Garner interview.

¹² Ryan, “Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America”, 64.

had a “crusading spirit,” though her sense of humor and her barbed verbal retorts at times put some people off.¹³

Friends remember Sergio as a good story teller, which in combination with her knowledge of prominent people made her somewhat of a living legend. “She was a diminutive person, you know, in some ways and physically, but she was a larger-than-life figure, and you know, those people don’t come along every day, every once in a while, every generation or so,” said Garner.¹⁴ But she could also be negative and contrary. A friend, Katheryne Loughran, described Sergio as “ornery” in a 1990 interview. “In day-to-day conversations she wasn’t religious or charitable at all. In many ways, a split personality. She had big swings in her temperament and her character.”¹⁵

It is not known when Sergio became devoutly religious, only that she converted to the Episcopalian religion of Ann Batchelder sometime before 1950.¹⁶ In her autobiographies, Sergio is chiefly concerned with presenting herself as a broadcast pioneer and neglects to expound upon the meaning of religion in her life. Nevertheless, it is not unknown for people to become more religious as they age, and this appears to be the case with Sergio. It is interesting that this religious identity emerged at a turning point in Sergio’s life in which her female support network (Batchelder and Thompson) died, leaving her alone and searching for a new social network in a new city.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Garner interview.

¹⁵ Ryan, “Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America”, 67.

¹⁶ Batchelder to Gilbert, 28 January 1950.

In Washington, Sergio's religious conviction began to merge with her broadcasting endeavors. An association with the film commission of the National Council of Churches brought her the opportunity to host a short-lived Sunday round table program on NBC in 1960. Guests discussed topics such as "Why don't the churches quit fighting among themselves?" and "Why aren't the churches keeping up with the times?" and "What do emerging nations need from us?"¹⁷ Sergio also hosted a series of television programs from July 3 to September 25, 1960, titled "New Nations of Africa."¹⁸ An even shorter television series included "The Women of the Bible"¹⁹ and "Today in your Life," a series about the Bible,²⁰ both of which appeared briefly in 1960. Finally, Sergio also hosted an interview program, "In the Balances" from March to April 1960 on Washington radio station WMAL for the Council of Churches.²¹

Aside from these, Sergio's longest running broadcasting endeavor was a radio series called "Prayer through the Ages," in which she participated as a volunteer, reading short poems and prayers to the background of organ music. This program was broadcast at 7:45 a.m. on Sundays on WMAL from 1962 to 1989. "Prayers Through the Ages" was produced in association with the Council of Churches of Greater

¹⁷ Lisa Sergio, Topic list for television shows sponsored by the National Council of Churches, Box 13 Folder 12, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1960.

¹⁸ Lisa Sergio, "Pilgrimage to the New Nations of Africa," Box 13 Folder 13, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1960.

¹⁹ Lisa Sergio, "The Women of the Bible," Box 13 Folder 14, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1960.

²⁰ Lisa Sergio, "Today in Your Life," Box 13 Folder 14, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1960.

²¹ Lisa Sergio, "In the Balances," Box 11 Folder 82, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1960.

Washington. Sergio collected over 1,000 prayers and poems for the program,²² which was part of a Sunday morning ritual for many Washington church goers.²³

When National Public Radio began in 1980, Sergio did a short series of commentary programs for the fledgling news department. She wrote and delivered eight commentaries, for which she was usually paid \$90 each. Her topics included “Khomeini and the terrorists,” “Somalian bases,” “European response to hostage taking,” and “secrecy versus security.”²⁴

However, broadcasting was not Sergio’s main occupation at this point. She was principally a writer and lecturer. Sergio published several books during this period of her life, including *Prayers of Women* (1965) a book of poems and prayers,²⁵ a biography of Anita Garibaldi, the wife of popular hero and freedom fighter Guiseppe Garibaldi, titled *I Am My Beloved* (1969),²⁶ a biography of Lena Madesin Phillips, founder of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women, titled *A Measure Filled* (1972),²⁷ *Jesus and Woman* (1975), a book that claimed Jesus had a feminist vision for women,²⁸ and *You Can Upholster!* (1978), a guide for home upholstering, which she occasionally did for herself and friends.²⁹

²² Lisa Sergio, “Introductions, Prayer Through the Ages,” Box 12 Folder 9, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

²³ Garner interview; Lee interview.

²⁴ Lisa Sergio, Tape invoice submissions to NPR, Box 13 Folder 9, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1980.

²⁵ Lisa Sergio, *Prayers of Women*. New York: Harper & Row, 1965.

²⁶ Lisa Sergio, *I Am My Beloved: The Life of Anita Garibaldi*. New York: Weybright and Talley, 1969.

²⁷ Sergio, “Curriculum Vitae.”; Lisa Sergio, *A Measure Filled: The Life of Lena Madesin Phillips Drawn from her Autobiography*. International Federation of Business and Professional Women, 1972.

²⁸ Sergio, *I Am My Beloved: The Life of Anita Garibaldi*; Sergio, *Jesus and Woman*; Sergio, *A Measure Filled: The Life of Lena Madesin Phillips Drawn from her Autobiography*; Sergio, *Prayers of Women*.

²⁹ Sergio told interviewers that she came up with the idea for the book while she was visiting Jordan for the wedding of King Hussein to Queen Noor. While she was staying with Crown Prince Hassan and Crown Princess Sarvath, 14 mahogany dining room chairs arrived from America. The princess

Sergio also translated another book from Italian into English, *The Religions of the Oppressed: A Study of Modern Messianic Cults* by Vittorio Lanternari (1963).³⁰

She also wrote or proposed several other books, such as her autobiography, that were never accepted for publication. Though many of her books were announced in *The New York Times*' "Books Today" or "A Listing of New Books" columns, none were ever critically reviewed by the paper.³¹ Nor is it apparent that her books made her much income.

Instead, lecturing was Sergio's main source of income. Her friend Tucci believed Sergio was a better speaker than writer. "She was most gifted as an extemporaneous speaker of high quality," according to Tucci. "She was a good polemical writer ... but she had no talent as a writer. She was an excellent speaker. But her writing was a bit pompous. I hate to say that, but I'm speaking frankly."³²

From 1961 to 1971 Sergio was a Danforth lecturer on public affairs, one of a group of lecturers for a program funded by a grant from the Danforth Foundation and administered by the Association of American Colleges to "assist undergraduate colleges in their efforts to strengthen liberal education," according to a promotional

wanted them covered in red silk velvet in time for a dinner party. "Ms. Sergio didn't see any problem," reported the *Woodbridge (N.J.) News Tribune*, "and had the entire royal party and staff lined up helping her upholster the chairs." Vera C. Stek, "Furniture Upholstery," *Woodbridge News Tribune*. Clipping in Sergio scrapbook, Box 18 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 6 December 1978. Lisa Sergio and Lisbeth Loughran, *You Can Upholster! A Do-It-Yourself Guide*, 1st ed. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1978.

³⁰ Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed: A Study of Modern Messianic Cults*, 1st. American ed., Translated by Lisa Sergio ed. New York: Knopf, 1963.

³¹ "Books Today," *The New York Times*, 17 June 1963, 22. ; "Books Today," *The New York Times*, 23 February 1965, 30. ; "List of Recently Published Books," *The New York Times*, 3 July 1972, 15. ; "A Listing of New Books," *The New York Times*, 14 October 1969, 44. ; "Recent Religious Books," *The New York Times*, 21 September 1963, 18.

³² Ryan, "Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America", 62.

brochure for the 1967-1968 roster of lecturers.³³ The foundation was formed in 1927 with the proceeds from Ralston Purina Co., and is today headed by former U.S. Senator John Danforth, the grandson of the founder. In its 78-year history the foundation has given about \$1 billion to education, science and civic projects. For example, in 1983 the foundation gave \$2.3 million to establish teaching centers at five universities and colleges: Harvard, Northwestern, Stanford, Empire State College and Spelman College.³⁴ Since 1997, however, the foundation has funded revitalization projects only in the St. Louis area and today exclusively focuses exclusively on biomedical and plant sciences in the region.

Along with Lisa Sergio, the 1967-1968 roster of Danforth Foundation lecturers included scholars in the fields of linguistics, oceanography, architecture, chemistry, theater, and Hispanic relations. In being a Danforth lecturer, Sergio was in eminent company, one of the few women to be sponsored by the organization. Other lecturers included: George D. Kelsey, a professor of Christian ethics and mentor to Martin Luther King Jr.; anthropologist Ethel Alpenfels, a professor at New York University, author of the book *Sense and Nonsense About Race*³⁵ who had been named woman of the year by the National Organization for Negro Women in 1955; British conservative politician Norman St. John-Stevas, who served as leader of the House of Commons from 1979 to 1981 and later became a member of the House of Lords; Wing-Tsit Chan, a leading scholar on Chinese culture and philosophy who

³³ "Danforth Visiting Lecturers 1967-1968," Brochure for Danforth Foundation lecture program, Box 10 Folder 13, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1968.

³⁴ Alice Alfonsi, "Teaching Professors to Teach," *The New York Times*, 18 August 1985, ES33.

³⁵ Ethel Josephine Alpenfels, *Sense and Nonsense About Race*, Study and action pamphlets on race relations. New York: Friendship Press, 1946.

authored *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*,³⁶ an important resource in Asian studies; French historian Roland Emile Mousnier who wrote *Les Hiérarchies sociales* (Social Hierarchies)³⁷ in 1969, which has been called a rant against communism. Also on the list was John Akar, Sierra Leonian ambassador of culture who wrote his country's national anthem and founded the country's National Dance Troupe.

Danforth lecturers traveled to college campuses where, for two days, they participated in a series of public lectures, informal meetings and classroom discussions. Sergio was paid \$200 per school visit from 1961 to 1963 and from \$300 to \$500 per school visit from 1967 to 1971.³⁸ Schools that she traveled to were principally small colleges, but the list also included better known institutions such as Valparaiso University, the Tuskegee Institute and The George Washington University.³⁹ As a lecturer in the program, she visited over 300 colleges. "I

³⁶ Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963.

³⁷ Roland Mousnier, *Social Hierarchies: 1450 to the Present*. London: Croom Helm, 1973.

³⁸ "Danforth lecture contracts," Box 10 Folders 5-8, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

³⁹ A partial list of colleges visited by Sergio includes the following in 1961: University of Akron, Mount Union College, Beaver College, Randolph Macon College, College of Emporia, Lincoln University, Colorado Woman's College, Nebraska State Teachers College, Concordia College, Arkansas College, Morris Harvey College, Valparaiso University, Manchester College, Tuskegee Institute, St. Mary of the Wood College, Juniata College, Southwestern University; In 1962: Howard College, Columbia College, Queens College, Newberry College, Westman College, La Grande College, Converse College, Shepherd College, Longwood College; In 1963: Notre Dame, Peace College, Meredith College, St. Bernard College, Texas Lutheran College, McMurry College, Transylvania College, Cottey College, Bethany College, Tabor College, William Jewel College, Southwestern College; In 1964: Manchester College, DePauw University, Elmhurst College, Madison College, Greensboro College, Buena Vista College, Bethel College; In 1965: Judson College, Berry College, Boston College, Otterbein College, Jasper County Jr. College, North Central College, Salem College, School of the Ozarks, Bakersfield College, Knoxville College, Shorter College, Central Methodist College, Morning Side College, Sioux Falls College, Iowa Wesleyan College; In 1966: Sullins College, Blue Mountain College, Chowan College, Bluefield College, Mitchell College, Rio Grande College, Albright College, Capital University; Belmont Abbey College, Guilford College, The Woman's College, Davis & Elkin College, North Carolina Wesleyan, Kentucky Wesleyan; In 1967: Anne Arundel Community College, Florida Atlantic University, Monroe Community College, The King's College, Alabama State College, Millsapa College, Wilmington College, Huntington College,

discovered the nature of American higher education and the mercurial nature of American students in the sixties and seventies,” Sergio wrote about the experience.⁴⁰ “They were motivated and agitated by events which they sensed emotionally but were hardly able to understand intellectually.”⁴¹

Sergio’s association with prominent thinkers of her day through the Danforth lectures is evidence that she was able to recover somewhat from the vicious attacks and investigations of the 1950s. Sergio was not able to return to broadcasting full-time, in part, perhaps, because of television’s growing impact on broadcast news and radio’s retreat from news into music-only formats. Instead, she concentrated on her work as lecturer and author, a career that she received recognition for. In 1963 she was the recipient of an honorary degree from Keuka College in New York for her work as journalist, radio and television news analyst and discussion moderator and lecturer.⁴² (Martin Luther King, Jr., also received an honorary degree from Keuka that year.)⁴³ She also was given honorary degrees from St. Mary’s College, Notre Dame, Indiana in 1966 for having “pioneered the field of communications, both through the written and spoken word,” and having “made the communication of freedom her vocation to the world,”⁴⁴ and Valparaiso University in 1970 for having been an

Baker University, Central Methodist College, Bethany College, West Virginia Institute of Technology, Wofford College, King College, Lenoir Rhyne College, Tift College, Sacred Heart Junior College, Stratford College, Franklin College.

⁴⁰ Sergio, “Chapter XII From the Nation’s Capital,” 1.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Keuka College, “Fifty-Fifth Annual Commencement.” Graduation program, Box 11 Folder 4, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 16 June 1963.

⁴³ “Keuka College Fifty-Fifth Annual Commencement,” Box 11 Folder 4, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 16 June 1963.

⁴⁴ St. Mary’s College, “Commencement.” Graduation program, Box 13 Folder 20, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 4 June 1966; St. Mary’s College,

“outstanding lecturer, writer, and broadcaster, fearless militant for freedom, active, articulate Christian woman.”⁴⁵ She received international awards from Italy (the Cavaliere of the Order of the Star of Italian Solidarity in 1975, given to Italians who work to improve knowledge of Italian language and culture abroad) and Jordan (the Medal of Independence or Order of Al-Istiqlal of the First Degree in 1976, for her work in integrating women workers into Jordan’s industries). These awards and activities not only pointed to Sergio’s ability to recover her reputation, but to her ability to continue using her talents to build a career as a mass communicator and public commentator even though she held no longer held a full-time job in the broadcast industry.

An examination of news reports about Sergio, along with her speeches (both her Danforth lectures and other speeches she made) and unpublished manuscripts, point to the three subject areas that occupied Sergio as a public commentator: world affairs, feminism and religion. This chapter examines these materials to show how she attempted to comment on public affairs and contribute to public dialogue.

World Affairs

“Doctor of Laws, honoris causa.” Box 18 Folder 4, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 4 June 1966.

⁴⁵ Valparaiso University, “Doctor of Laws, honoris causa.” Box 18 Folder 5, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 7 June 1970; Valparaiso University, “Citation Upon the Conferring of the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Laws on Lisa Sergio.” Box 13 Folder 21, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 7 June 1970.

Not only did Sergio see herself as a commentator on the state of world politics, but also her activities attest to the wide circle of others who also singled her out for her knowledge. Less than a decade after refusing to renew her passport, the U.S. State Department contracted Sergio as a speaker in the American Specialists Program. For two months in 1962 and 1963, the program paid her to travel and lecture on America and public affairs in Dacca, Pakistan and New Delhi. The program provided funding for artists, academicians, sports figures, political leaders to spread American ideas and influence abroad.⁴⁶

On her State Department biographical form, Sergio's fields of specializations were listed as international relations, sociology, religion, archeology, Italian renaissance art, and political, cultural, social and economic aspects of U.S. life.⁴⁷ A State Department retiree who was involved with the program recalled that Sergio was well received abroad. "She was an elegant, charming person, with a presence. She was also spiritual," recalled Richard Gookin, who worked for the department from 1954 to 1994. In the 1960s, Gookin worked in the department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, which administered the American Specialists Program. He said, "Ms. Sergio was an extraordinary, moving speaker conveying her thoughts with much depth and intelligence. Audiences were transfixed and inspired by the content of her message and her delivery."⁴⁸ Sergio again traveled under State Department auspices in the late 1960s when she undertook a South American lecture

⁴⁶ Richard Gookin to Stacy Spaulding 8 May 2005, Email to author.

⁴⁷ Lisa Sergio, State Department biographical form, Box 4 Folder 11, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁴⁸ Gookin to Spaulding, 8 May 2005.

tour. In 1977, Sergio visited Somalia for several weeks as a U.S. State Department lecturer, where she worked with Ambassador John Loughran and his wife, Katherine, and became their close friend.

These experiences, and the other contacts she cultivated in Washington, led to other opportunities. In 1963, Sergio served on the press committee set up by the organizers of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom for African Americans. She served on two committees associated with the Presidential Commission for the U.N.-designated International Cooperation Year (1965) and was present at the signing of the proclamation for it by Lyndon B. Johnson.⁴⁹ Sergio also attended the 1975 U.N. World Conference of Women in Mexico City. The same year Virginia Bacon, Washington hostess and the widow of Rep. Robert Low Bacon (R-N.Y.), invited Sergio to become a board member of the Bacon House Board of Trustees.⁵⁰ Sergio was a participant in an Aspen Institute for Humanistic Studies workshop on “public/private collaboration and third world food systems” in 1978 where she was the only woman among 35 speakers, and where she claimed every suggestion she made was adopted.⁵¹ (Though she participated in many conferences, she felt they rarely accomplished anything of value. “My general feeling is that conferences, while

⁴⁹ Lyndon B Johnson and Lady Bird Johnson to Lisa Sergio 6 October 1964, Box 1 Folder 43, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁰ Virginia Bacon had bequeathed her house at 1801 F. Street N.W. as a place for politicians and statesmen and groups with no Washington headquarters to meet informally. The house today is known as the DACOR Bacon House, reflecting a merger with Diplomatic and Consular Officers, Retired. Virginia Bacon to Lucius Battle and H. Chapman Rose 19 October 1979, Box 3 Folder 6, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁵¹ “Globe Trotter Lisa CWU Speaker Here,” *Tulsa World*, 25 October 1978. Box 14 Folder 18, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

interesting and profitable for those who run them, do not lead to any conclusion,” she wrote in the unpublished notes for her autobiography.⁵²⁾

In 1977, Sergio was invited to be a member of the board of governors for the Middle East Institute, a non-partisan research organization based in Washington. Sergio served on the Institute’s library committee—the institute maintains one of the largest collection of English-language materials outside of the Library of Congress.⁵³ The president of the institute, L. Dean Brown, in recommending Sergio for a fellowship in 1986, stated that he introduced Sergio to Crown Prince Hassan of Jordan. Brown wrote that Sergio’s question to the prince, “What’s the role of women in the development of Jordan?” led to several invitations for Sergio to visit Jordan.⁵⁴ On occasion she even flew to the country in the presence of King Hussein.⁵⁵ She helped develop a plan to integrate women workers into Jordan’s industries, a plan that was sold in part by using radio soap operas to educate women on how to adapt family life to accommodate workplace demands. Sergio was special advisor to a conference on woman power in Amman in 1976 and in 1978 attended the U.N. Conference of Women of the Arab World. Sergio also attended the 1978 wedding of King Hussein to Queen Noor, telling the *Tulsa World* that it was “a delightful low-keyed event in

⁵² Sergio, “Chapter XII From the Nation’s Capital,” 3.

⁵³ L. Dean Brown to Lisa Sergio 23 January 1981, Box 4 Folder 37, Sergio papers; Malcolm C. Peck to Lisa Sergio 8 November 1977, Box 4 Folder 36, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁴ L. Dean Brown to Woodrow Wilson International Center Fellowships Office 2 October 1986, Box 7 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁵ Ryan, “Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America”, 67.

the garden of the Queen Mother's lovely palace. It was gay and simple and fun! They made me feel very much a part of the family in their own delightful way."⁵⁶

Friends in Washington did not see Sergio as an activist, but more of a "nonpartisan political animal who was cause-oriented rather than politics-oriented."⁵⁷ And as she had done in previous eras, Sergio continued to use her experience of fascist dictatorship to interpret the impact of current events, including Watergate as in this unpublished article:

If the American people are wise enough and politically adult enough to learn a lesson when it is before their very eyes, then the uncovering of the Watergate disgrace will deflect us from the course that has been taking this nation towards moral as well as political disaster. To put it more bluntly, we have allowed ourselves to be pushed into a political landscape so filled with fascist landmarks as to send shivers down the spine of anyone who, like this writer, has lived through the experience of Mussolini's totalitarian rule.⁵⁸

This particular manuscript was rejected by at least six publications, including *Harper's*, *The New York Times*, *New York Magazine*, and the *New Yorker*, evidence perhaps that this approach had become dated in relation to the economic and political crises of the 1970s.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ "Globe Trotter Lisa CWU Speaker Here."

⁵⁷ Ryan, "Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America", 67.

⁵⁸ Lisa Sergio, "The Watergate and Mussolini," Box 7 Folder 47, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1973, 2.

⁵⁹ Nelson W Aldrich to Lisa Sergio 10 August 1973, Rejection letter from *Harper's Magazine*. Box 7 Folder 46, Sergio papers; Nona B Brown to Lisa Sergio 30 May 1973, Rejection letter from *The New York Times*. Box 7 Folder 46, Sergio papers; Pearl Iacovelli to Lisa Sergio 7 September 1973, Rejection letter from *New York Magazine*. Box 7 Folder 46, Sergio papers; William Shawn to Lisa Sergio 20 July 1973, Rejection letter from *The New Yorker*. Box 7 Folder 46, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

Feminism

Besides receiving a political education from Dorothy Thompson, Sergio may have also been schooled in Thompson's views on the status of women in the United States. Thompson, in her youth, had been active in the New York state suffrage association and believed that women would play an important role in post World War II America. Sergio wrote in an unpublished and undated manuscript about Thompson:

Between speeches and broadcasts, columns and articles, trips to the war theaters in her correspondent's uniform and interviews with whoever wielded, or might later wield, power, Dorothy found time to discuss 'the shape of the future' with like-minded men and women. She wanted women to become full and equal partners of men in an immediate effort to gather and study any available fact that would prove useful later in working out plans designed to attenuate, if not resolve, the serious social and economic problems that would derive, worldwide, from the end of the shooting war. She was ahead of her time, but she sowed some seeds.⁶⁰

Likewise, Sergio felt that American women had a large role to play in postwar peace. During her war-era speeches, Sergio lauded American women who had become daily consumers of domestic and international news.⁶¹ She saw women's role in creating peace as a lifelong concern. In a 1981 interview, Sergio stated, "We will never achieve peace in this world until we solve our social problems, and these will never be solved until we have more women in positions of influence."⁶²

⁶⁰ Sergio, "Dorothy Thompson, The Blue-Eyed Tornado," 10.

⁶¹ "Women of Today Clear Thinkers, Lisa Sergio Says," *Larchmont Times*, 21 October 1943. Box 20 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁶² Jeanne Pugh, "Jesus and Woman: Did Jesus Intend That Men and Women Should Be Equal Partners?" *St. Petersburg Times*, 27 June 1981, 4. Box 14 Folder 20, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

Sergio held that women could combine careers, marriage and family, and still stay “absolutely women.”⁶³ She said women had a role to fulfill in broadcasting, and particularly in religious broadcasting, though her reasons for this were largely essentialist. “No one would deny that in the commercial field of broadcasting and TV, business and industry have found a special role for women and have assigned her to play it,” Sergio said in a 1960 speech to clergy interested in religious broadcasting. “In the far more important field of public affairs and religious affairs, there are situations and angles which a woman is infinitely better equipped to understand, explain and share than men.”⁶⁴ Women journalists, Sergio said, were better suited by nature to spot the social, emotional and spiritual context of a story than men, who were better trained to find the political, military and financial causes. For example, she wrote in 1961 that women “have a better natural appreciation of what is involved in foreign aid than most men, because such a large part of our foreign aid program is destined to relieve conditions with which women are more familiar than men: health, nutrition, housing, education.”⁶⁵

It is significant to note that several of Sergio’s books were on the subject of women. Two were biographies of notable women. *A Measure Filled* (1972), published by Robert B. Luce Inc., is the story of Lena Madesin Phillips (1917-1972),

⁶³ Billy Skelton, “Lecturer Fed Up With ‘Feminine Mystique’ View,” *The Clarion-Ledger*, 13 January 1967, 4-C. Box 24 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁴ Lisa Sergio, August 4, 1960 speech given to International Television Radio Workshop, Box 10 Folder 32, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1960.

⁶⁵ Lisa Sergio, “Women--The Power We Are Not Using,” Manuscript dated August, 1961, Box 8 Folder 45, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 6.

the founder of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women, of which Sergio was a member. Phillips formed the Federation of Business and Professional Women in 1919 while working as the secretary to the YWCA's Business Women's Committee. Envisioning a similar international organization of business women, Madesin formed the International Federation in 1930 and she served as its president for multiple terms. After her death in 1955 from a perforated ulcer, Phillips left an unfinished autobiography and approximately 100,000 words that she had dictated on the history of the organization. The executors of Phillips' estate first asked Catherine Drinker Bowen, biographer and essayist, to finish the work. When she turned it down they offered the project to Sergio.⁶⁶ Sergio's biography of Madesin Phillips is also a history of the IFBPW from Madesin Phillip's formation of the organization in Switzerland in 1930 through her death. It also illuminates Sergio's interest in the organization and her perception of the significance of Madesin Phillip's life. "The fact remains that what Susan B. Anthony was to woman suffrage, or Jane Addams to social work, Lena Madesin Phillips was to the business and professional women—at first in her own country, later around the world," Sergio wrote.⁶⁷

Sergio also wrote *I Am My Beloved* (1969), published by Weybright and Talley. The book is a narrative biography of Anita Garibaldi, the wife of Giuseppe Garibaldi, credited with creating a united kingdom of Italy in the 1860s during the Risorgimento (or "resurgence.") Sergio received a \$6,000 advance on the book, collected material in both South America (where Anita Garibaldi was born) and Italy

⁶⁶ Marjory Lacey-Baker to Catherine Drinker Bowen 14 March 1957, Box 2 Folder 28, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁷ Sergio, *A Measure Filled: The Life of Lena Madesin Phillips Drawn from her Autobiography*. 50.

and painted a romantic picture of Garibaldi as soldier, nurse and wife.⁶⁸ Upon its publication, publishers Weybright and Talley portrayed Sergio as a “militant feminist” by quoting Sergio as stating that she was “all for militant women when the cause is worthy” and that “a woman can be as militant and daring as any man.” Yet, paradoxically, the press release also quoted Sergio as stating that woman “must remain woman even if she brandishes a gun.”⁶⁹

In actuality, Sergio’s beliefs were decidedly anti-militant. She advocated a partnership between men and women based on the belief that women were instinctively nurturers, while men were instinctively providers, as presented in Sergio’s frequently stated essentialist beliefs in the inherent differences between men and women.⁷⁰ Women, she said, would always be the primary child nurturers.⁷¹ And women should not try to become men, in her view. “If a woman wants to achieve the position of a stevedore, that’s perfectly all right,” she said in a 1976 interview. “Let them, but what’s not what society needs.”⁷² In the course of her lifetime, several articles quoted Sergio stating that women should remain feminine and should not imitate men. One 1965 article in *The Washington Post*, a social report on a bridal shower, gave Sergio’s views on the proper conduct of women:

⁶⁸ Royalty statement from publishers Weybright and Talley, Inc. Box 5 Folder 32, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1969.

⁶⁹ “Woman Can Be Both Militant and Feminine,” Press release for Lisa Sergio’s book, *I Am My Beloved*, Box 5 Folder 32, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1969.

⁷⁰ “Sergio: Imitation Basis of Problems,” *The Sentinel*, 20 June 1977. Winston-Salem, N.C., Box 14 Folder 17, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁷¹ Pugh, “Jesus and Woman: Did Jesus Intend That Men and Women Should Be Equal Partners?”

⁷² Steve Know, “Geography: Nobody Bothers to Teach it Any More,” *The Raleigh Times*, 11 October 1976, 4-B. Box 14 Folder 16, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

When she first came to America she was astonished to find so many obviously smart U.S. women so unsavvy about the face they turn to the world. "So many of them seemed to think they had to act like men," said Miss Sergio. "The truth is that woman can best make an impact upon the modern world by being womanly. Her brains will be used to finest advantage by expressing them with charm and all the feminine persuasion at her command." Miss Sergio was appalled to discover so many intelligent women in the field of U.S. Government "dressing so dowdily and acting so pushy in their ways. ... Women have a tremendous role to play in the years ahead. Only they have not yet found their place in the world or how best they can influence it. ... They will never find that place as long as they ape men."⁷³

Sergio said that within the modern women's movement, women had disastrously tried to become men: "Today woman is not a partner, because she has tried to become a substitute for man in too many fields," she said in a 1960 speech.⁷⁴ "She has looked down upon what nature and God designed to be her part of the task of improving society, and has sought to step into shoes manufactured for the male whose destiny is to conquer while woman's is to nurture and conserve."⁷⁵ In Sergio's view, to encourage women to become men meant risking the loss to society of what she felt were qualities that women particularly possessed. "This produces poor and unwanted imitations of men and fails to inject into the planning of man's future the natural capacity of woman to think in terms of human, emotional, psychological and social values as against man's paramount ability to think cogently in terms of structural, economic, financial and scientific values," she said in a 1968 speech.⁷⁶ Though Sergio advocated women's greater influence in the home, marketplace,

⁷³ Dorothy McCardle, "Take Cue From Compliment to Bride-To-Be Don't Ape Men," *Washington Post*, 16 August 1965. Box 22 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁷⁴ Sergio, speech at International Television Radio Workshop, 1960.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Lisa Sergio, "The Growing Power of Woman in Today's World," May 17, 1968 speech to the New Jersey Federation of Women's Clubs, Box 11 Folder 47, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1968, 2.

workplace and community, she drew on essentialist notions of women's moral qualifications as nurturers to justify this influence.⁷⁷ Her rhetoric drew on maternalist views that justified women's roles in public life by promoting the idea that motherhood equipped women with a special understanding of social problems. This strategy was rejected by feminists as incompatible with emancipation.⁷⁸

In Sergio's view, women bore the responsibility of creating opportunity and education for themselves. She said the feminist movement would not perform miracles, but could encourage "merely woman stepping in, setting her goals, and using her own and not man's attributes to achieve them."⁷⁹ Sergio did not go as far as anti-feminists did in condemning the movement, perpetuating stereotypes about feminists, or in claiming that the movement was not relevant to most women. She said that demonstrations should be only part of the feminist strategy; she believed women needed to be educated and trained for equality.⁸⁰ This included, she said, having a clear sense of values and being willing to "compromise or surrender on the details, but never on principles."⁸¹ She also believed that women shouldn't plead for

⁷⁷ Sergio, "Women--The Power We Are Not Using," 2.

⁷⁸ Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, eds., *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 2.

⁷⁹ Lisa Sergio, "A New Dimension for Feminism," July 23 speech to the national convention of Business and Professional Women, Box 11 Folder 48, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1972.

⁸⁰ "Girls Must Train to Become Equal," *Tulsa World*, 1 May 1977, 3. Box 24 Folder 1, Sergio papers; Lisa Sergio, "The Role of Women in the Nuclear Age," Box 8 Folder 39, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁸¹ Lisa Sergio, "Women Can Shape Our Policies," July 29 speech to Quota Club International, Box 11 Folder 50, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1948, 1.

equality. Equality “will never be anything more than subservience if we have to plead for it,” she told a businesswomen’s club in 1972.⁸²

Sergio’s chief complaint with the feminist movement was its demand for equality. Instead, Sergio advocated partnership.⁸³ Equality, she said, would not change convention in a society that allowed men to have control: “Equal status is a stepping stone, the goal is equal power which can be found only in partnership.”⁸⁴ Partnership, she said, would recognize “the equal importance” of partners with “different significance of their respective particular responsibilities.”⁸⁵

Sergio’s pointed criticisms of the movement perhaps illustrate why she was called a “complainer” in a profile after her death.⁸⁶ She often told Katherine Loughran that “American feminists weren’t doing it right and that the movement in the U.S. wasn’t feminine enough.”⁸⁷ Few more than a “trifling handful” of women were interested in international affairs, she said.⁸⁸ And though she accorded great power to women in the context of a political-maternal rhetoric, such as in a 1965 speech when she claimed that “women are the ones to prevent ... collapse in the United States,” she also attributed great blame to women. That collapse, if it came, was a moral collapse for which women were responsible, she said. “When the young people of a

⁸² “Don’t Plead, Women Told,” *The (N.J.) Press*, 24 July 1972, 29. Box 14 Folder 15, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁸³ Sergio, “A New Dimension for Feminism,” 3.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Sergio, “Women--The Power We Are Not Using,” 2.

⁸⁶ Ryan, “Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America”

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁸⁸ “Women Hold Thinking Balance,” *The Courier-Journal*, 29 February 1968. Box 24 Folder 2, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

country go astray, I say, look to the failure of the women of that country,” she said. “This nation has become so rich that our moral values have softened.”⁸⁹

Despite all her writing and advocating for women, Sergio admitted to a newspaper reporter in 1981 that she still felt more comfortable with a male priest. “...but she attributed that to her European upbringing and the fact that women have had little opportunity to develop their leadership talents,” reported the writer. “Once women are encouraged to develop their ‘brilliance,’ she said, such prejudices will also vanish.”⁹⁰

Religion

Sergio was originally a Catholic, though some friends believed that she renounced the church in her youth out of “blind hatred” for her mother.⁹¹ Sergio converted to the Episcopalian church, the faith of Ann Batchelder, sometime before 1950.⁹² Tucci found her conversion to be illogical. “She had impulses that were at times absurd. We often had discussions about it. She criticized me a hundred times and I criticized her. It was ridiculous to leave the Catholic Church and become an Episcopalian. That was one thing I found absolutely wrong,” he said in a 1990 interview.⁹³ Regardless, Sergio appeared to be a deeply religious person, particularly so later in her life. Her lectures, friends said, always had a “high level of spiritual

⁸⁹ “Decay of Morality Blamed on Women,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, 13 May 1965. Box 24 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

content.”⁹⁴ Said Katherine Loughran: “She would say that all of us have a spark of divinity.”⁹⁵

Sergio wrote that spiritual and political enlightenment were linked.⁹⁶ She also stressed her belief in the personal, transformative power of religion. “I do so believe in the power of prayer—prayer from our heart for help for our own spirit and prayer that others may be helped,” she wrote in one letter to Dorothy Thompson:

There is always an answer even when to our mortal and finite minds it does not seem to be the one we asked for. But when it comes, peace carries it as on wings and there comes too the wonderful sense of closeness to those we love and can no longer touch and see.⁹⁷

Sergio was a member of Christ Church in Georgetown from 1968 until her death in 1989. She was particularly close to the rector, the Rt. Rev. John Aschutz, now deceased. Sanford Garner, who succeeded him as Christ Church rector from 1973 to 1990, remembers Sergio as both a traditionalist and an open-minded seeker of the truth. “I think she was ... a very open person to change and to new understandings and new approaches and she was not a high-bound fundamentalist by any sense of the imagination. That was one of the things that endeared Lisa to me.” Garner said. “But she would stand strong for what she believed. If she thought you were transgressing or on the wrong track, she was game to tell you so.”⁹⁸

⁹⁰ Pugh, “Jesus and Woman: Did Jesus Intend That Men and Women Should Be Equal Partners?” 4.

⁹¹ Ryan, “Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America”, 65.

⁹² Batchelder to Gilbert, 28 January 1950.

⁹³ Ryan, “Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America”, 65.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ Sergio, lecture at religious broadcasters’ session of International television Radio Workshop, 1960.

⁹⁷ Sergio to Thompson, “New York, Saturday 12th”

⁹⁸ Garner interview.

Evidence of Sergio's religious devotion cut across her professional endeavors in the latter part of her life. From 1955 to at least 1969, Sergio served in several voluntary roles for the National Council of Churches, including membership on the organization's board of managers and its broadcasting and film commission as well as hosting eight television programs for the organization.⁹⁹ In 1976 she helped coordinate a Sunday morning prayer service for the inauguration of Jimmy Carter. The service received some public criticism for not featuring Jewish rabbis or Orthodox Christian leaders. Sergio was quoted as stating that all the featured clergy were friendly towards the new administration. "We're not attempting to bring in a religious cross-section," she said.¹⁰⁰ Though she was not a member of the inaugural committee, in memos and letters in the Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Sergio referred to herself as the coordinator of religious events. Memoranda show that she worked with the inaugural committee's Cultural Events Director, Molly Dillon.¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ John Bachman to Lisa Sergio 6 March 1964, Box 5 Folder 1, Sergio papers; Mrs. Jesse M. Bader and Leslie S. Bidwell to Lisa Sergio 12 December 1958, Box 5 Folder 1, Sergio papers; Mrs. Harold S. Faust to Lisa Sergio 24 October 1961, Box 5 Folder 1, Sergio papers; William F. Fore to Lisa Sergio 3 April 1964, Box 5 Folder 1, Sergio papers; Ella Harllee and Mrs. Emory Ross to Lisa Sergio 30 December 1955, Box 5 Folder 1, Sergio papers; Paul Jr. Moore to Lisa Sergio 12 September 1969, Box 5 Folder 1, Sergio papers; Mrs. Russell Putnam to Lisa Sergio 26 July 1961, Box 5 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰⁰ "Carter's Sister, Clergy Featured at Inaugural," *The News and Observer*, 15 January 1977. Box 1 Folder 14, Sergio papers; "Jewish, Orthodox Leaders Criticize Inaugural Plan, Two Groups Left Out," *Washington Post* 1977. Box 1 Folder 14, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹⁰¹ Molly Dillon and Lisa Sergio, Joint memo from cultural events director of the 1977 inaugural committee and coordinator of religious events to Washington area clergy and religious leaders, Box 1 Folder 13, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1976; Ceri McCarron to Stacy Spaulding 12 August 2005, Email from archives technician, Jimmy Carter Presidential Library.

Sergio also wrote two books that combined her interest in women and religion. The first, *Prayers of Women* (1965), published by Harper & Row, was a collection of prayers authored by women throughout history—from the early Christians, Middle Ages and Renaissance through modern times. Modern women included in the book included Edna St. Vincent Millay, Coretta Scott King, Mary Pickford, Lena Madein Phillips, Dorothy Thompson, Welthy Fisher, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, Marian Anderson and Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy, who gave Sergio the permission to reprint this short prayer: “Dear God, please take care of your servant, John Fitzgerald Kennedy.”¹⁰²

The second book, *Jesus and Woman*, was published in 1975 by EPM Publications, Inc., just as the women’s movement was able to permanently establish women’s concerns on the national political agenda. Unlike language used in the press release for *I Am My Beloved*, publishers for this book touted Sergio as a “feminine feminist.”¹⁰³ In the book, Sergio observed that “almost every time Jesus broke new ground in his ministry, a woman was cast in a primary role at his side, as though he wished to highlight her importance by linking her with an act which he had never performed before.”¹⁰⁴ These acts, she believed, illustrated women’s role as partners to men and their place in Christian ministry.

As explained in *Jesus and Woman*, Sergio’s religious beliefs reveal the reasons behind her essentialist beliefs regarding feminism. Arguing as in her secular

¹⁰² Sergio, *Prayers of Women*. 173.

¹⁰³ “One Billion Women Are Still Chattels, Says Lisa Sergio,” October 31, 1975 press release, Box 6 Folder 7, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1975.

¹⁰⁴ Sergio, *Jesus and Woman*. 5.

pronouncements, Sergio advocated that religious women became “man’s equal partner, and not merely his equal in the sense that he accepts her on his own terms in a society tailored to his traditional supremacy.”¹⁰⁵ Sergio advocated religious ministry: men were assigned the task of “outreach,” or going out into society to minister, while women were assigned the task of “inreach,” which meant building the “moral and social foundations” within each member of society.¹⁰⁶ Since this foundation was hidden from view, Sergio argued, “Jesus, symbolically, gave woman her commission wrapped in subtle implications.”¹⁰⁷ Sergio contended that women were well equipped for this task since they had a special capacity for morality, selflessness, faith and spirituality than men.¹⁰⁸ Interestingly, Sergio did not attribute these characteristics as merely instinctual or God-given. Instead, she attributed them to biological and environmental factors such as the influence of motherhood and culture since women were “excluded by the very supremacy of man from most power struggles.”¹⁰⁹

There were a variety of reactions to Sergio’s book, predictably both pro-feminist and anti-feminist. Many of Sergio’s friends seemed to view the book with favor, such as Edgar Ansel Mowrer , journalist and Pulitzer prize winner, and his wife Lillian. Edgar Mowrer, in a 1975 letter congratulating Sergio on the book’s publication, called it “the most impressive ‘feminist’ book I have ever read”:

I think I agree with you that men and women are not “equal.” They are different except as equally important human beings. Although I am an

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 2.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 119-120.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 119.

old Bible reader, I had never noted how many of his revelations Jesus made to women. So far as I know, you are the first to have pointed it out--quite a discovery. You have also given an answer to the "lady libs." They seem as prejudiced, in their fashion, as any man in his. Actually, in the old French joke referring to sexual variety as "vive la petite difference," the French were saying somewhat of what you and Lillian and I believe--"equality" is not the right word.¹¹⁰

As evident in *Jesus and Woman*, Sergio's essentialist rhetoric regarding woman's nature and her religious beliefs were deeply entwined. This was apparent in her speeches, as well. In a 1974 commencement speech, Sergio used Biblical support to advocate a maternalist view of women's role in society:

I believe that Jesus saw the role of woman in society as intimate and yet as universal and as indispensable as that assigned to her by nature, in the role of the mother. To society she would give from her mind and spirit, rather than from her physical being. Giving what, you ask? Giving to society those basic moral and human values that are at once uniquely personal and completely universal. Jesus wished her to be the custodian of values and things eternal, passing them on from generation to generation.¹¹¹

Sergio said she believed Jesus saw woman as different from man, but still his equal, thus her position as the "feminine feminist." But this did not preclude Sergio from advocating women's work outside the home. She connected the religious and moral responsibilities of women to their obligation to undertake a public life by advocating careers in politics, teaching, business, and public relations. She also connected this moral and spiritual responsibility to women's collective power as consumers:

¹¹⁰ Edgar Ansel Mowrer to Lisa Sergio 8 August 1975, Box 2 Folder 20, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹¹¹ Lisa Sergio, "St. Mary's College commencement address," Box 11 Folder 5, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1974.

I, who have made a profession of mass communication, can tell you that, as purchasers of everything that makes radio and television paying concerns, women have the power to force truth and moral values to prevail. You can refuse to buy a product promoted by appealing constantly to the worst instead of the best in us.¹¹²

Sergio's religious beliefs also apparently included an aside into the supernatural. In 1952, Sergio did some professional publicity work with the Parapsychology Foundation Inc., headed by a personal friend named Eileen J. Garret. The Foundation was formed in 1951 with the purpose of supporting scientific inquiry into psychic phenomena. Sergio was given the rights to adapt materials for presentation on radio and television, and was promised she would receive half the receipts, though it is not apparent that the deal ever garnered any profit.¹¹³

Sergio, Batchelder and Dorothy Thompson apparently shared a belief in psychic experiences. Sergio wrote about this belief in an unpublished manuscript titled "Maxim and the Medium," which relates the details of the death of Thompson's third husband Maxim Kopf and the subsequent appearance of a man calling himself Max at a séance which Sergio attended and heard his words of comfort for Thompson. Sergio's notes on the 1958 séance, contained in her papers, show the experience brought some comfort for her as well, since she believed she received messages from Batchelder and her mother, who apologized and begged her forgiveness for their estrangement.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Eileen J. Garrett to Lisa Sergio 4 June 1952, Box 1 Folder 34, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

¹¹⁴ Lisa Sergio, "Maxim and the Medium," Box 2 Folder 37, Sergio papers; Lisa Sergio, "Séance with Arthur Ford Sept, 1958 Heartland Vermont," Box 2 Folder 37, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

Her Last Years

These three areas—world affairs, the status of women, and religion—can be characterized as the three meta themes that dominated Sergio’s work as broadcaster, writer and lecturer throughout her life. But why were these themes so important to Sergio? Her interest in international affairs is easily understood through her perspective as an Italian-born immigrant. Her world view was more encompassing than that of most Americans. Throughout her life she not only felt a keen interest in politics (perhaps starting from the time she read newspapers to her grandmother) but also from her first-hand experience with dictatorship and World War II. This may explain why in so many of her speeches and writings she said she wanted to educate Americans and help them think through international issues themselves. Perhaps Sergio’s religious fervor, and to some extent her interests and psychic phenomenon, could be explained by a personal search for hope. Friends say that Sergio’s condition in life was “always tragic.”¹¹⁵ Also, it is significant to note that this outwardly religious phase of Sergio’s life came after many of her important friends and influences (such as Thompson and Batchelder) had died, perhaps leaving her with a sense of loneliness and a lack of direction.

The dominance of women’s issues in her writings and speeches is intriguing, especially since comments regarding the status of women were often interwoven into her comments on religion and world politics; indeed, the themes are at times difficult

¹¹⁵ Ryan, “Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America”, 62.

to separate. This preoccupation can perhaps be traced to several factors. First, many of her speeches during the war and in the early postwar era were to women's clubs and business women's groups. In the newspapers of the era, Sergio was most likely to make headlines on the women's pages of the newspapers. Thus, the subject of women's political concerns was fruitful for securing not only lecture appointments, but continued publicity. Second, in her youth, Sergio was among the first wave of Italian women who found it fashionable and profitable to seek professional employment outside the home. She was also deeply impressed with Mussolini's attention to Italian women and frequently alluded to that experience in speeches and writings throughout her life.

What is harder to explain is Sergio's dual existence as "militant feminist" and "feminine feminist," her rejection of equality in favor of partnership, and her insistence that women remain feminine. Obviously, Sergio was not a militant or radical feminist. But her rejection of equality in favor of partnership put her at odds with the mainstream feminist movement, symbolized by the National Organization of Women, which advocated both partnership and equal rights.¹¹⁶ She was also at odds with social scientists, who, during the postwar era, were rejecting biological determinism and increasingly exploring the idea that culture shaped gender identity.¹¹⁷ Sergio's emphasis on beauty also connects her to a backlash movement against feminism that reinforced the "ugly feminist" stereotype. In the context of scholar Naomi Wolf's definition of the beauty myth, Sergio's call for femininity was

¹¹⁶ Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds its Past*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979. 42.

¹¹⁷ William Henry Chafe, *The Paradox of Change: American Women in the 20th Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991. 182.

not a call for greater attention to outward appearance, but for acceptable behavior.¹¹⁸

Thus, her position as a “feminine feminist” interwove her support for the feminist movement with her criticism of it and disagreement with it. Such a tempering of the subject made it both an appropriate lecture topic to be included in world affairs lectures to college students and women’s business groups, which would perhaps be more supportive of radical politics, and in lectures dealing with Christian themes to groups that might be more supportive of a conservative political outlook.

Such a dualistic approach cloaking criticism and disagreement in terms of praise was not out of character for Sergio. In an interview after Sergio’s death, Katherine Loughran connected this negative outlook with an isolation Sergio experienced as she grew elderly:

Her opinions were always strong but there was no constancy about them. She was a pugnacious kind of person. Sometimes her remarks would be rather sweeping in terms of race. I think in later years she was very hard on black people. On any number of issues she was not consistent. As she got older I tried not to get into any of those discussions that wouldn’t lead us anywhere. I loved her and I felt in a way that she was a bit frail. I felt that negativity didn’t work in her favor. We really loved each other. She was lonely. So many friends were gone. I felt that she needed loving arms around her.¹¹⁹

Indeed, not only was Sergio increasingly frail as she grew older, but also her financial situation was not always clear to her friends. “I don’t know how Lisa lived. I mean where her income came from. I have a feeling that there were people in Washington of means who were devoted to Lisa and who helped support her,” said

¹¹⁸ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*. New York: Morrow, 1991. 13-14.

¹¹⁹ Ryan, “Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America”, 67.

Sanford Garner.¹²⁰ During his visits to her home, Garner would note that her furniture was well worn and wonder if she were getting enough to eat. “Of course, you would never know that. She would never reveal that.”¹²¹ Yet, Garner noted, in spite of her simple and even meager lifestyle, she “traveled in a very high diplomatic and social circle in Washington.”¹²² She represented the ideal way to age gracefully for Kathryn Lee, the wife of Bishop Edward Lee who was also a good friend of Sergio’s. “I really love the picture of an older woman that Lisa presented. She was kind and deeply religious and I think that’s the way older women should become,” Kathryn Lee said.¹²³

Sergio died on June 22, 1989, at the age of 84. Earlier that year she’d had two heart attacks, and friends said that Sergio was angry that doctors had saved her life after those attacks. “She was ready to die, she didn’t want to live, and she resented this rescue,” remembered Eric Weinmann.¹²⁴ Sergio asked to be released from the hospital so that she could die at home, “amidst her photos, rare books and memorabilia.”¹²⁵ She had directed friends to give her a “simple Episcopal burial service,” and asked that the hymn, “Ten Thousand Times Ten Thousand” be “sung gaily as befits the end of a journey that has lasted a long time,” according to a statement attributed to her in the burial service program.¹²⁶ Sergio was cremated and

¹²⁰ Garner interview.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Lee interview.

¹²⁴ Weinmann interview.

¹²⁵ Ryan, “Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America”, 67.

¹²⁶ “A Service of Thanksgiving for the Life of Lisa Sergio,” June 27, 1989 burial service program in author’s possession, 1989.

her ashes buried at Riverside Cemetery in Woodstock, Vermont.¹²⁷ In her will, Sergio left several bequests to friends. To Eric and Mary Weinmann, she left six sterling silver forks and knives valued at \$600 and inscribed with her father's initials, "A.S."¹²⁸ To Isabelle Claridge Taylor, in memory of their "long, loving and true friendship lasting well over 50 years," Sergio left a diamond broach valued at \$8,500 that Sergio had inherited when her mother died in 1957.¹²⁹ Sergio left the balance of her estate, a sum of just over \$23,267, to Georgetown University to be used for a scholarship in her name for undergraduate students who demonstrated a financial need. The Weinmanns supplemented this with their own money to ensure its continuance.¹³⁰ Said Kathryn Loughran after Sergio's death: "She left a cantankerous hole in our lives."¹³¹

¹²⁷ William Batchelder to DC Superior Court 10 August 1993, Letter contained in Sergio probate file. Case number 1989 ADM 001589, Federal Record Center, Suitland, Md.

¹²⁸ "Last Will and Testament of Elisa Sergio," Contained in Sergio probate file, D.C. Superior Court. Case number 1989 ADM 001589, Federal Record Center, Suitland, Md., 1985, 1.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 3-4.

¹³⁰ Weinmann interview.

¹³¹ Ryan, "Lisa Sergio: The Golden Voice of Rome, The Progressive Complainer in America", 67.

Chapter 10: The Making and Re-Making of Lisa Sergio

“Develop and use your brains and your skills, but never lose your femininity.”

—Lisa Sergio, 1986¹



FIGURE 21. Lisa Sergio at the Lecture Podium

Sergio speaking at a Woodstock, Vermont, high school graduation on 5 June 1981. Photo used with permission: Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Box 14 Folder 50.

¹ Palazzetti, “Europe’s First Woman Broadcaster Recalls Career ‘Boost’ From Mussolini.”

This dissertation has examined the life of Lisa Sergio with the aim of answering a key research question: How did Lisa Sergio create a twentieth century career in mass communication despite gender, political and social barriers? The answer is not a simple one. This study suggests that Sergio's talents, her unusual experience, her skills at networking and extemporaneous speaking all played a role in answering the question.

This examination, however, has concentrated primarily on her self-representations of her life. These self-portrayals are evident in the autobiographical writings and outlines, radio and speech scripts, and other materials available in her personal papers, as well as in the numerous news items and profiles about her that appeared in the mass media. In short, much of the material examined for this dissertation, because of the way it was shaped by Sergio herself, forced this study to examine how Sergio presented herself to the public.

In an effort to augment possible limitations of materials that were perhaps self-selected by Sergio for her personal papers, an examination of her career as presented in the media of her day seems in order. Therefore, this chapter asks: What images did the U.S. press present of Sergio during her career? This chapter reevaluates many of the same news and magazine profiles already examined from the viewpoint of her portrayal, noting that Sergio must have had a hand in shaping her public image. In analyzing the narratives about Sergio privileged by the news media, this chapter adds to the overall research question of this project by examining what these images said about the barriers Sergio faced in creating her U.S. career.

To this end, this chapter examines the public construction of Sergio in the 1930s, immediately after her arrival in the United States, and during two periods of the greatest progress for women: the 1940s and 1970s.² Articles from these eras were chosen because they seemed to offer the meatiest material for examination. In other eras, news profiles either concentrated less on making meaning of Sergio's life or were non-existent (for example, fewer items about Sergio appeared in the 1950s mass media in the wake of anti-communist investigations and Sergio's own retreat to Vermont to care for an ailing Ann Batchelder).

What emerged from this analysis is a better understanding of how the press characterized Sergio's career and ideologically explained the gender role of an exceptional woman over the course of her life. This examination suggests that Sergio's self-portrayals, in combination with the narratives privileged by the press, together created a mutually beneficial social representation of reality by fashioning a public image of Sergio that appealed to readers. A benefit from examining this mutually created public representation of gender is the ability to peek behind stereotypes to examine the ideal values held up for American women by the mass media during the twentieth century.³ This examination shows that in news profiles of Lisa Sergio as an exceptional woman, journalists wrote about values women should aspire to and achieve; that these values and their definitions changed over time; and that unusual circumstances not reflecting these values were ignored. In the case of

² Hosley and Yamada, *Hard News*. 57.

³ Media historian Janice Hume has authored several articles using the mass media to explore the concept of female heroines. See: Janice Hume, "Changing Characteristics of Heroic Women in Midcentury Mainstream Media," *Journal of Popular Culture* 34, no. 1 (2000):9-30; Janice Hume, "Defining the Historic American Heroine: Changing Characteristics of Heroic Women in Nineteenth-Century Media," *Journal of Popular Culture* 31, no. 1 (1997):1-23.

Lisa Sergio, she was described as ladylike but apolitical in the 1930s, ladylike but independent in the 1940s, and ladylike but a socially acceptable militant in the 1970s. This analysis also shows Sergio was most consistently portrayed as ladylike, though the definition of this value changed drastically over time.

Early Articles: Sergio as Apolitical

As has been noted in earlier chapters, Lisa Sergio was always admired for her beautiful speaking voice. This gave her permission to be an exception to the rule barring women from prestigious announcing posts. In praising her “unusual phonetic facility,” *The New York Times* also clearly positioned her as a pioneer for other women who desired radio careers.

It is wondered in radio circles if the gate to the microphone will open for other female announcers. ... American radio men and the long list of women who aspire to be announcers are expected to watch with interest Miss Sergio's invasion of the American 'ether.'⁴

This article simultaneously portrays Sergio doing something exceptional and unusual, but something that other women might also hope to do. This theme was repeated throughout Sergio's life as she was held up as an example of values that women should aspire to and attain. The use of the word “invasion” perhaps has a double meaning here. It alluded to her recent arrival from fascist Italy and her unusual position on network radio. It can be read as positioning Sergio as a woman who is on unfriendly territory, perhaps the first wave of many women to follow.

⁴ “Miss Sergio With ‘Fluent Phonetics’ Points Way for Women Announcers.”

An article appearing the same year, 1937, in *Harper's Bazaar* also took care to emphasize the unusual qualities of Sergio's voice and the supposed intemperance of the microphone:

It never crossed her mind that she might have something unusual in her voice—that it might be that rare kind of voice to which the microphone, capricious and obstinate instrument, yields without a struggle.⁵

Again, this statement gives Sergio permission to be atypical since unlike other women, she had tamed the microphone. But this article goes much further in defining and emphasizing Sergio as a woman in a tone that navigates society's prejudices against women's voices and their involvement in politics. The author took care to state that though women like to talk, Sergio had eyes that sometimes give the "feeling that you are listening to them."⁶ This quieter alternative was no doubt more alluring than the image of a talkative woman. Also, the author stated that having more women on the radio will offer women a "new kind of public life," but then took pains to note "Miss Sergio's work is not to be political as long as she is in America."⁷

This minimized the fact that her background was highly political, and led readers to believe that she would not comment on news and politics, although, of course, she did. Her work even at this early stage in America had a political nature: In a letter written years later, she claimed to have undertaken a radio "sting" operation in the United States to persuade Italians that Mussolini was wrong.⁸ A 1938 article in

⁵ Dangerfield, "They Talk to the World", 99.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 120.

⁸ Sergio, "Lisa Sergio to Gayle K, Yamada, 1986"

NBC's employee newsletter, *NBC Transmitter*, confirms that Sergio did indeed work in the company's international program division, broadcasting to Italy.⁹

These same themes—the unusual voice, being a listener to rather than a talker, and apolitical intents—are also noted in a profile of another woman in the same *Harper's Bazaar* article. The author said that radio personality Muriel Draper had “a listener's head,” and a voice “that distinguishes her conversation.”¹⁰ The author also said that Draper's talks principally concern “life as a creative process” and that if they turned political, “it is because she believes that the creative side of modern life expresses itself more immediately through politics than through the arts.”¹¹

These articles help illuminate ideas of the era regarding women's place in the public sphere. First, is the apparent lack of connection between women's physical voices and their political voices. As has been noted, radio took root in a new political era—the Nineteenth Amendment, giving women the right to vote, was ratified in August of 1920, just a few short months before KDKA in Pittsburgh dramatically launched radio service by broadcasting presidential election results.¹² And though women were involved in radio from the start, perhaps the societal prejudice that curbed appropriate roles for women's physical voices on the air helped to curb public political involvement as well.

⁹ “Know Your Company No. 12 International Program Division.”

¹⁰ Dangerfield, “They Talk to the World”, 98-99, 122.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² This broadcast is credited with setting off a “national mania,” however whether or not KDKA was the “oldest station” is the subject of ongoing scholarly debate. Barnouw, *A Tower in Babel*. 68-70; Joseph E. Baudino and John M. Kittross, “Broadcasting's Oldest Stations: An Examination of Four Claimants,” *Journal of Broadcasting* (1977).

A second notion on women's place in the public sphere prevalent in articles of this era had to do with the prominent references to Sergio's attributes as a woman. This was especially clear in the *Harper's Bazaar* article. This was evidence of a common paradox faced by women in the nineteenth century whose own popularity could "taint" them, wrote historian Janice Hume:

...during much of American history, the very actions that would distinguish a woman as 'hero' if she were living by male standards of morality, might just label her as unladylike and thus make her an unfit symbol of 'heroine' for women of her day.¹³

These articles give evidence of changing social values: women who maintained their femininity could become popular icons in the late 1930s. In contrast to the sensuality and consumption that characterized images of flappers of the 1920s, economic strife forced women of the 1930s to be seen as "grownups, partners in the struggle of survival," wrote historian Sara Evans.¹⁴ "Ideas about the proper roles of women and men crashed headlong into harsh realities, shaping responses, limiting options, but unable to govern behavior all of the time."¹⁵ In Sergio's case, it seems she was valued as a pioneer as long as she remained ladylike. This meant that she—and other women who desired to be like her—were allowed to move in the public sphere because of their exceptionality but were not to have overt political interests or talk too much.

The 1940s: Sergio as Independent

¹³ Hume, "Defining the Historic American Heroine: Changing Characteristics of Heroic Women in Nineteenth-Century Media," 2 of Academic Search Elite database printout.

¹⁴ Evans, *Born for Liberty*. 197-198.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Just as World War II provided millions of women opportunities to enter the industrial labor force, it also opened a period of progress for women in broadcasting. As male broadcasters were forced to leave and become soldiers, women filled vacancies in the newsroom. But many of these women had difficulty gaining respect and equality. Because they lacked experience, women often worked in subordinate positions and men worked in management.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the time period when Sergio became a commentator on WQXR coincided with a period in which the media celebrated unconventional women.¹⁷ In addition to expanded employment, World War II provided opportunities for women to take positions of responsibility in civic, cultural, and public life that had long been held by men. Public officials and the press took care to emphasize “female competence and women’s vital part in achieving victory.”¹⁸

Likewise, press accounts of Lisa Sergio during this time dealt less with her womanly qualities than previously and began to emphasize her important contributions to the profession and society in general. It was not necessary for her to be apolitical. Instead, in 1943 she was praised as “one who speaks her mind”¹⁹ and the “prototype of a successful career woman” in 1944.²⁰ Perhaps the press no longer found it necessary to justify her position and soften reader prejudice. Sergio was even allowed to confront audience bigotry herself in a 1943 *New York Times* article titled,

¹⁶ Hosley and Yamada, *Hard News*. 27-28, 57-58.

¹⁷ Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982. 189.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁹ Mowrer, “Take Her Radio Word For It.”

²⁰ “Lisa of the Golden Voice.”

“Brains Have No Sex.”²¹ She stated that a few listeners had complained that a woman should not be commenting on the news, but that she had paid no attention to them. “In all these years, rarely, if ever, have I had reason to feel that being a woman was a handicap in this field,” she said.²² She rejected the views of “experts” who believed “listeners classify brains according to the speaker’s sex.”²³ She said:

If men and women are equally needed in the war effort, as they indubitably are; if men and women the world over are bearing the tragic burden of a war without quarter, as they are, it follows that men and women can equally contribute to the understanding of issues at stake and of the sometimes baffling trend of events which affect us.²⁴

News profiles from this time repeatedly portrayed Sergio as a glamorous independent woman with experience and political opinions. In *Vogue*, she was praised for breaking free from “conventions that kept girls at home, useless,” and for being “a fabulous figure—for her chic, her habit of wearing only black, red, and white, her incessant smoking ... and for her influence in high places.”²⁵ The highest compliment came at the end of the article: “Always her comments are serious and sophisticated, bedded in a solid ground of experience. Americans like her.”²⁶

Similarly, *Newsweek* stated that Sergio “set out to prove that a woman could do a man’s job as far back as 1922.”²⁷ Like articles of the 1930s, the magazine took note of her “beautiful voice,” but this time added that her “vitriolic anti-fascist

²¹ Sergio, “Brains Have No Sex.”

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Mowrer, “Take Her Radio Word For It.”

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ “Lisa of the Golden Voice.”

opinions” are hoped to “woo women listeners away from soap opera.”²⁸ This last comment is especially telling, in the light of the dichotomy between male and female programs. It unquestionably casts Sergio outside of the realm of traditional women’s programs. Yet, because she had to leave NBC in order to become a news commentator, it is perhaps evidence that she was not fully accepted as a broadcaster in mainstream network programming.

The most striking and complex combination of descriptions used to construct Sergio’s public image came from a September 1943 article in the *New York Herald Tribune*.²⁹ This article alternately painted her as a romanticized figure, an independent woman, an example of the triumph of American ideas, and an authority on European affairs. Her romanticized image as a war refugee is emphasized in the second paragraph, which said that she escaped the same day Mussolini signed her arrest warrant. And the story celebrates the triumph of American thinking by noting that its own newspaper correspondents gave Sergio her “political education.”³⁰ The article praises Sergio’s independence by recounting the way in which she first “spiked” a false news report written by Mussolini and later manipulated other news items:

Now she started playing her own little game. She would use a questionable item, but garble it in such confused English that it meant little. Mussolini was thrown off the track. ‘I must,’ he confessed to a friend, ‘know less English than I thought. I can’t always understand the very fine English that La Sergio uses.’³¹

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Bromley, “Lisa Sergio Sees Duce Dreaming of Comeback.”

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

But most intriguing was the amount of authority the newspaper awarded her. Even though she “had no formal education,” the story stated that her “thinking is so clear-headed and her information so extensive, that it is no wonder her WQXR broadcasts command a select radio audience.”³² According to the article, she alone understood fascism “better than 99 percent of the writers and on [sic] international events.”³³ The claims for her expertise seemed justified in light of contemporary events. Titled “Lisa Sergio Sees Duce Dreaming of Comeback,” the story ran on the very day that German forces rescued Mussolini,³⁴ just over a week before he reestablished his fascist government in 1943.³⁵ Similarly, a column in the *Ridgewood* (New Jersey) *Sunday News* held Sergio up as the “prototype of the citizen of the future,”³⁶ and as a model of leadership because of her background:

Lisa Sergio is the true internationalist—the world citizen, whose philosophy of life has been forged in the fires of world revolution and hammered out on the anvils of ideological controversy. ... If there is to be a future civilization of any kind it will be of a kind in which the Lisa Sergios will hold top rank in the councils of creative leadership.³⁷

From 1937 to 1949, representations of Sergio in the press evolved in a remarkable way. Sergio was at first presented as a highly feminized radio voice that sought to be apolitical despite a very political background. But during the height of the war, as millions of women took on jobs in male-dominated fields, Sergio was

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ “Mussolini is Taken by Nazis From Italians, Berlin Reports,” *The New York Times*, 13 September 1943, 1.

³⁵ “Berlin Announces Mussolini Cabinet,” *The New York Times*, 24 September 1943, 4. ; “‘Mussolini Broadcast’ Asks Italians to Fight the Allies,” *The New York Times*, 19 September 1943, 1.

³⁶ Robert Morrill Sand, “Sandscrip,” Newspaper article reprint from the *Ridgewood* (N.J.) *Sunday News*, 13 March 1949, Box 14 Folder 7, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

³⁷ Ibid.

portrayed as an independent, romanticized, glamorous figure. Finally, in 1949 as many women quit their wartime jobs and returned to their domestic roles,³⁸ Sergio was recognized solely for her political commentary and her thinking.

The newspaper stories were also instructive in terms of what they do not say. For example, in recounting Sergio's craftiness in deceiving Mussolini, she was characterized as brave and patriotic but not immoral. Traditionally, wrote historian Janice Hume, American female heroines also were characterized as ladies, since a woman who lived by male standards of morality ran the risk of being tainted.³⁹ Yet the depiction of Sergio clearly portrayed her deception of Mussolini and omitted any condemnation of her. This depiction endorsed the idea that while in war, women are sometimes forced to do unusual—and even immoral—tasks for the greater good.

Second, domesticity also was left out of these portraits. Images of women in movies, magazines and other popular media in the 1940s tended to portray women as replacing men only for the duration of the war, retaining their femininity and glamour while performing masculine duties, and emphasizing that their family role remained more important than their jobs.⁴⁰ The media told women that romantic relationships were still central to their lives.⁴¹ In Sergio's case, her glamour and femininity were emphasized. But no mention was made of her future plans, prospective beaux or her family interests. Only a few articles mentioned Ann Batchelder's adoption of Sergio,

³⁸ Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982. 286.

³⁹ Hume, "Defining the Historic American Heroine: Changing Characteristics of Heroic Women in Nineteenth-Century Media," 2 of Academic Search Elite database printout.

⁴⁰ Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond*. 23.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 163-164.

such as this mention in the social column “Elsa Maxwell’s Party Line” in the *New York Post*:

Lisa Sergio, commentator extraordinary, said this the other evening before she set out for her Larchmont home which she owns jointly with Ann Batchelor [sic] of the *Ladies’ Home Journal*. “Ann is my adopted mother,” Lisa told me. “My own mother is an ardent fascist ... she still lives in Florence—at least I think it’s Florence...I don’t know.”⁴²

This unusual part of Sergio’s domestic life, and the awkwardness of explaining it, may have been why it was rarely mentioned in the press; it could also be that Sergio did not speak of the personal relationships she had in Italy or her living arrangements later in the United States.

Indeed, this points to one of the lingering questions about Sergio’s life. It is not known if she was sexually drawn to women. Other women journalists, such as Dorothy Thompson, have left accounts of same-sex attractions in personal diaries. She wrote in 1932 of her attraction to German novelist Christa Winsloe, “So it has happened to me again, after all these years ... the soft, quite natural kiss on my throat, the quite unconscious (seemingly) even open kiss on my breast, as she stood below me on the stairs ... What in God’s name does one call this sensibility if not love?”⁴³ Sergio has left no accounts of encounters such as this. Sergio was frequently affectionate in letters, such as in one she wrote to Dorothy Thompson in 1958 in which she said, “You mean very much to me.”⁴⁴ A year later she wrote Thompson, “I

⁴² Elsa Maxwell, “Elsa Maxwell’s Party Line,” *New York Post*, 22 November 1943. Box 20 Folder 1, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁴³ Ware, *Letter to the World*. 70.

⁴⁴ Sergio to Thompson, 7 February 1958.

am selfish enough to want you well because you mean so very much to me.”⁴⁵ Such sentiments, however, do not seem unusual for a close friendship. A more tantalizing passage appears in a 1952 letter Sergio wrote to Eileen Barrett, head of the Parapsychology Foundation Inc., Sergio addresses the letter to “Eileen darling.”⁴⁶ After a long, talkative letter, Sergio ends it with several personal sentiments:

I wish I could see you. You are the cocktail I never drink. But even thinking of you and knowing you are there and remembering the kind of friendship you know how to give, provides a good substitute for the long talk I would love to have with you. Darling darling Eileen, whenever I feel like complaining about my burdens, I think of the grace that your friendship has been and is, of your steadfastness and warmth to me always, and I realize that I am richer by far than anyone I know. ... You are the impersonation of life and gaiety and fun and vivid brains, and when you are ill I can't stand it. I love you.⁴⁷

Sergio signs the letter, “always affectionately.”⁴⁸ Without additional evidence, it is impossible to know the exact nature of this relationship. And, as noted in chapter four, there are remarkably few writings that address the nature of Sergio’s relationship with Ann Batchelder. In her autobiography notes, Sergio wrote, “Through her I discovered belatedly what it can mean to have the understanding and affection of [a] mother.”⁴⁹ Perhaps the most personal written sentiment that survives is a small note written in an autograph book Sergio kept for her “Column of the Air” guests. In it, Batchelder wrote: “I loved being on your program Lisa just as I love being with you.”⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Sergio

⁴⁶ Sergio to Garret, 22 November 1952.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Sergio, “Chapter IX Another World, Another Life,” 2.

⁵⁰ Sergio, “Autograph book.”

The absence of mentions of Batchelder and other facts on Sergio's personal life from press accounts in the 1940s indicates that Sergio was accorded the status of an extraordinary woman who did not fit prevailing norms. That her personal relationship with Batchelder was rarely written about also may show that it was not understood or thought to be reflective of the values that women of the 1940s should aspire to.

The 1970s: Sergio as Militant

Though it has been characterized as a period of progress for women, World War II did not signal a momentous shift in opinion toward women workers and did not lead to lasting change, argued historian Alice Kessler-Harris.⁵¹ Instead, she contended, the war years "represented a response to emergency rather than a shift in attitude."⁵² This is evident, stated Kessler-Harris, from women's willingness to quit their jobs when war production ended. Unlike the earlier part of the decade when the absence of men opened up unprecedented prospects for women, in the late 1940s, according to one scholar, the "range of appropriate female behavior portrayed in the popular culture narrowed, in step with the contraction of their actual opportunities in public life."⁵³

After the war, some broadcast newswomen struggled to retain their positions in the workplace and others chose to resign their jobs for domestic responsibilities

⁵¹ Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work*. 295.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 286.

⁵³ Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond*. 189.

and husbands.⁵⁴ Some stations made efforts to hire more women after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. But it wasn't until the early 1970s—when the Federal Communications Commission changed its rules and required affirmative action—that a significant period of growth for women in broadcasting began. As the result of a petition filed by the National Organization for Women in 1970, the FCC decided to include women in minority staff counts. This meant that station operators were required to file paperwork showing their plans for creating equal opportunities for women when applying to renew a station's license, to sell a station, or to create a new station.⁵⁵

Men, however, still dominated powerful positions—both on the airwaves and in the corporate power structure. “More change came for women in the 1970s than in any decade since World War II,” write Hosley and Yamada. “But true equality remained an elusive goal.”⁵⁶ This was not unlike what earlier generations of women had experienced upon entering the professions from the late 19th century through the 1940s. Though they developed and used specialized strategies to enter the work force and secure their own place, many were unable to pave the road for future generations since few women were able to secure positions of power. This meant that successive generations of women had to start from scratch, as the pioneers before them had, unaware of their predecessors.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Hosley and Yamada, *Hard News*. 61-62.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 122-123.

⁵⁷ Penina Migdal Glazer and Miriam Slater, *Unequal Colleagues: The Entrance of Women Into the Professions, 1890-1940*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986. 231.

Similarly, as journalists during the 1970s wrote about Sergio's lecture tours and book debuts, their articles recounted her experiences as if she were unknown. These articles served to remind readers that although women were becoming more prominent on television and radio, other exceptional women had held prestigious positions in broadcasting in the past. These news profiles still portrayed Sergio as an independent thinker, but they also began to portray her as a militant. This image emerged in 1969 with the publication of Sergio's biography of Anita Garibaldi. For example, an article on the book published in *The Washington Star* was titled "Story of a Militant," which was used to describe both Sergio's life and the storyline of her book. The reporter depicted Sergio as a rebel against fascism and opponent of the Vietnam War. Sergio was quoted as saying: "I am all for militant women when the cause is worthy. A woman can be as militant and daring as any man, but she must remain woman (sic) even if she brandishes a gun."⁵⁸ This image is repeated in another story in *The Washington Post* titled "Ladylike But Militant." In it, the author stated that Sergio was "approving of the anti-war movement and disapproving of the words in which it is expressed."⁵⁹

In these articles, Sergio voiced her views on womanhood in a way not evident from earlier articles. For example, one story stated that Sergio "said women have few differences from men, but 'long live those differences.'"⁶⁰ In another, she said: "Here in the modern feminist movement, we have women who are trying to be men, and

⁵⁸ Barbara Kober, "Story of a Militant," 28 October 1969. The Washington Star Collection, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, Washington, D.C.

⁵⁹ Judith Martin, "Ladylike but Militant," 31 October 1969. The Washington Star Collection, Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library, Washington, D.C.

⁶⁰ Tweedle, "Woman Broadcaster Says: Mussolini Forced Her to Tell Lies."

that doesn't work at all. They make rotten men."⁶¹ And in still another article, she was quoted as recommending journalism as a career for women, since "the problems are more and more social problems and women are more sensitive to these kinds of problems than men."⁶²

But these were views she had espoused for years, as evident in manuscripts written earlier in her life. She saw women as "naturally humanitarian,"⁶³ and insisted that women were not a substitute for men. "Stop implying, as women sometimes do, that we should run the world instead of men,"⁶⁴ she wrote in 1948. "What is needed is joint action, by men and women together, each contributing their special talents and abilities."⁶⁵ That similar statements were finally openly attributed to her in newspaper articles, and cited as evidence of militancy, were confirmation of changing cultural values. "By 1970," wrote historian Sara Evans, "'women's lib' was on everyone's lips ... People were fascinated, intrigued, and often angered by the flamboyant tactics of feminist radicals."⁶⁶ In this light, newspaper articles presenting Sergio's views on women seem to be advocating a softer brand of feminism, one that worked within the system instead of against it. As evident from profiles of Sergio in the 1970s, women were now portrayed favorably as having political opinions, being activists and fighting for equality, as long as they were still ladylike.

⁶¹ Marcia Elliott, "She's a National Spokesman Educated By World," *The Fayetteville (N.C.) Observer*, 20 October 1977, 4B. Box 14 Folder 17, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C.

⁶² Bull, "First Woman Broadcaster Visits Aiken."

⁶³ Lisa Sergio, "Women Must Become Policy-Makers," Article manuscript for *Widening Horizons* (vol. 18, no. 4), the bulletin of the International Federation of Business and Professional Women, September/October 1948, Box 8 Folder 6, Lisa Sergio Papers, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division, Washington, D.C. 1.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Evans, *Born for Liberty*. 287.

But what was meant by “ladylike” in this era is not as easy to determine as in earlier eras. Styles of newspaper writing and standards of objectivity had evolved between the 1940s and the 1970s. Extensive narrative authored by the reporter disappeared; modern writers began to attribute controversial statements to their sources.⁶⁷ This allowed Sergio to speak for herself and the reporter to simply write transitions between quotes. For example:

Miss Sergio feels she has never been discriminated against because she’s a woman. “When I came to the United States,” she remembered, “I brought my unusual assets with me. Number one was the fact that I was Mussolini’s interpreter. None before had ever done this.” Miss Sergio thinks we’ve confused the issue of women’s lib. “Women qualify better in some things than men,” she said, “and men qualify better than women in other areas.” Miss Sergio’s all for equal work, equal pay. “We’re the only country in the U.N. that doesn’t have a federal law for women that do equal work for equal pay.”⁶⁸

In this type of news writing, the reporter’s own biases are supposedly left out of the reporting process. But this may not mean that modern news articles actually reflect less opinion. Scholar Michael Schudson has argued that the appearance of objectivity hides the political assumptions a story is based on, that the form of the story incorporates its own bias and reinforces existing structures of power, and that the reporting process “constructs an image of reality which reinforces official viewpoints.”⁶⁹

Thus, even though the value statements are couched in Sergio’s own words, they can still be considered representative of the values held up by the mass media as desirable for American women. In this light, “ladylike” meant many things.

⁶⁷ Mitchell Stephens, *A History of News*. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace, 1997. 261.

⁶⁸ Levinson, “Interpreter Protested War: Linquist (sic) Switched Mussolini Scripts.”

⁶⁹ Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers*. Basic Books, 1978. 184-185.

According to newspaper profiles of Sergio, as in previous eras it meant that women should be modest.⁷⁰ A woman was not to use vulgar language or wear vulgar clothes.⁷¹ But now it also meant that women were entitled to equal pay for equal work and should get “equality commensurate with their talents.”⁷² A woman should not advocate change by violence, but through the rule of law.⁷³ And finally, a woman could be a lady and run for political office, but she should not try to be a man.⁷⁴

In the midst of the women’s movement, these values provided an interesting juxtaposition. In this era, it seems ladylike women were encouraged to take a stand on issues, as long as they worked within the existing political system and did not try to overthrow it violently. The admonition against “trying to be a man” seems especially telling and may be aimed at protecting the existing power structure. A woman “trying to be a man” may have been a woman who had too much ambition, one who wanted not just equal pay, but an equal voice in management and politics still dominated by men. This definition of ladylike is more progressive than earlier definitions in news accounts of Sergio, but still seems aimed at curbing the political voice of women.

Making and Re-Making Lisa Sergio

“Heroes in the mass media not only personify the community’s ideal morals ... but they mirror real life, too,” wrote historian Janice Hume. She continues:

⁷⁰ Dan Fesperman, “From Mussolini to Somalia, She’s a Missionary of the Facts,” *The Fayetteville (N.C.) Times*, 19 April 1977, 6A.

⁷¹ Martin, “Ladylike but Militant.”

⁷² Tweedle, “Woman Broadcaster Says: Mussolini Forced Her to Tell Lies.”

⁷³ Levinson, “Interpreter Protested War: Linqvist (sic) Switched Mussolini Scripts.”

⁷⁴ Elliott, “She’s a National Spokesman Educated By World.”

Heroes stand on a pedestal, true, but in our egalitarian society that pedestal must be reachable for everyone; in America, a “hero” is not royalty or deity, but an average person who, through adversity, strives to reach society’s highest potential.⁷⁵

Hume wrote that a female heroine mirrors the morals of the community, embodies popular virtues of women, and is “she whom every American woman should wish to be.”⁷⁶ In examining articles from *Godey’s The Lady’s Book* in the nineteenth century and *Ladies Home Journal* in the twentieth century, Hume argued that characteristics of heroines portrayed in the media change as cultural values change.⁷⁷ These comments resonate with this chapter, which showed that the characteristics portrayed and praised in news profiles about Lisa Sergio changed as societal values changed.

But images like these could not have been created by the press alone if the subject is unwilling or uncooperative. At their core, such images benefit both writer and subject—they attract readers for newspapers and generate publicity for the profile subject. This would suggest that Sergio and the press fashioned a mutually beneficial social representation of reality by creating a public image of Sergio that appealed to readers. This implies an intelligence, political awareness and self perception on Sergio’s behalf; she was not only able to sense the changing values for women in various political climates, but was also able to recreate herself as emblematic of these values as needed. This survival technique makes her an important object for study—as a woman communicator Sergio was able to preserve her professional identity by

⁷⁵ Hume, “Defining the Historic American Heroine: Changing Characteristics of Heroic Women in Nineteenth-Century Media,” 2 of Academic Search Elite database printout.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Hume, “Changing Characteristics of Heroic Women in Midcentury Mainstream Media.”; Hume, “Defining the Historic American Heroine: Changing Characteristics of Heroic Women in Nineteenth-Century Media.”

recognizing what the public was looking for in a hero and what they were willing to accept in a heroine.

This survival technique, however, raises an enigma: If Sergio changed as needed from era to era, then who was she really? This professional biography highlights several constants of Sergio's life. She was an intelligent woman whose life was uniquely affected by key historical currents in the 20th century, currents she felt a need to comment upon and play a role in. Sergio was cosmopolitan, charismatic and well-connected, able to circulate in circles of power wherever she went. She was also an internationalist who felt that world politics were never isolated problems and always had social and economic contexts. She strongly believed that individuals, men and women alike, bore the responsibility for educating themselves and participating in politics. Particularly later in her life, she was a religious woman who believed that men and women had different abilities, but were both called to participate equally in political and social realms.

Sergio, however, was also a woman of strong opinions who could put people off or seem overly harsh in her judgments. And perhaps most importantly, Sergio struggled throughout her eighty nine years to find a place in life. Her turbulent childhood and adolescence, her fascist experience and exile from Italy, and her experience as an enemy alien and later as a blacklisted communist may have given her a constant sense of insecurity and unease, forcing her to extremes and dramatic adaptations, regardless of whether she wanted to or not.

During a life that dramatically reflected an historic panorama of the twentieth century, how did Lisa Sergio create a career in mass communication despite gender, political and social barriers? In answering the key question of this dissertation, this study suggests Sergio's talents, her unusual experience, her skills at networking and extemporaneous speaking all played a role in her success, along with her willingness to redefine herself as cultural values shifted.

First, Sergio desperately wanted to be seen both as an international broadcasting pioneer and an American. This is most evident in the comparison of Sergio's autobiographical writings—which not only claimed several broadcasting “firsts,” but also that she left Italy because of her growing anti-fascist sentiments—with reports contained in her FBI file that assert she was forced to leave because of indiscretions with numerous fascist officials. Her personal papers also minimized other parts of her life, such as her religious conversion to Episcopalianism or her adoption by Ann Batchelder. Sergio's unpublished autobiographical writings are evidence that she drew on her unusual history in a way that preserved an image she wanted to protect: her role as a woman radio pioneer and as a true American.

Second, Sergio's experience at NBC was an important one, since she met eminent journalists who would have a lasting impact on her life and career. Eleanor Roosevelt shared the lecture podium with Sergio and mentioned her at least twice in her newspaper column, no doubt providing publicity important to launching Sergio's U.S. career. Ann Batchelder adopted her in part to facilitate her obtaining U.S. citizenship and helped her get the position at WQXR. And Dorothy Thompson became not only a friend to Sergio but provided an important role model of a

successful woman journalist. Such networking in the United States would not have been possible without the help of contacts Sergio had made in Italy, such as Guglielmo Marconi, who provided her introduction letter to David Sarnoff. But it is remarkable to note that though publicly the names cited by the press as most influential in Sergio's life were all male (Benito Mussolini, Guglielmo Marconi and David Sarnoff, for example) the relationships that seemed to sustain her both personally and financially were female. This observation also addresses the question, to what extent did this social network shape the molding of Sergio's image in the U.S.? The evidence examined in this dissertation suggests that Sergio underwent her first professional transformation from a fascist broadcaster to an American broadcaster in the years she worked at NBC and met Thompson, Batchelder, and others who helped create the initial public images of Sergio.

Third, when Sergio ran directly into prejudice, she at times found ways around it without challenging the injustices directly. This is evident in her experience at NBC. When she claimed the network would not let her do news and commentary, instead of publicly challenging the network, she turned instead to WQXR. It was a trade-off—WQXR was a local New York City station and could not provide the national audience of the NBC radio network. But the switch allowed Sergio to break free of constraints that limited her solely to broadcasting the so-called “woman's point of view.” It also allowed her to make use of her unusual experience as a fascist broadcaster, in spite of being classified as an enemy alien during World War II before she gained citizenship in 1944. Instead of being constrained by the fascist associations of her past, she used them to justify an anti-fascist pro-democratic

awakening. This portrayal, in combination with the setting aside of gender barriers after Pearl Harbor and WQXR's unusual view of its audience, gave her a special license as a woman to give political and war commentary, a position in which she garnered critical and commercial success.

Fourth, this study suggests that the two periods of political turmoil and persecution that Sergio experienced, first in Italy and later during postwar anti-communist investigations, may have shaped her willingness to redefine herself as needed. The comparison of these experiences suggests that she perhaps learned painful lessons from her exile from Italy that allowed her to weather McCarthyism with some grace—Sergio drew on her network of allies and defended herself outright from such accusations, as seen in her correspondence with the American Legion and the U.S. State Department. Though she successfully fought to have her name removed from the American Legion blacklist, Sergio experienced devastating losses during this period of her life. Her radio career contracted and two key figures in her social network—Batchelder and Thompson—died.

Finally, that she emerged from such a dramatic turning point with a new life in Washington, D.C., is evidence that Sergio willingly redefined herself over and over again. That her life in Washington was so dramatically different—she hosted discussions of Christian politics on television, created a radio show on prayer, wrote biographies on women and discussed feminist theology—suggests that her postwar political battles may prompted a transformation that tempered her speech and her politics. In this transformation, as with her previous adaptations, Sergio was aided by

the press in creating a social representation of reality that was not only palatable to readers, but admired by them.

This professional malleability illuminates the way in which one woman created and preserved her professional identity throughout the twentieth century. Sergio described her life's work in 1974 as having "made a profession of mass communication."⁷⁸ Such a description of herself is intriguing because of its inherent elasticity. This broad terminology may have allowed Sergio to spotlight all of her assets—her well-modulated voice, her gift for speaking extemporaneously, her social networking skills, her knack for explaining politics—to seek out new and varied opportunities as obstacles closed old avenues in her life. If nothing else, this dissertation has found that the elasticity in Sergio's definition of herself is perhaps precisely the reason she was able to create a fifty-two year career in U.S. mass communication. It is the hallmark of her career.

This elasticity is illustrated by Sergio's use of varied mediums. Sergio was not a journalist in the strict sense of the term. She chiefly sought out audiences to speak to, not news makers to interview. She patterned herself after great commentators of World War II such as H.V. Kaltenborn and Dorothy Thompson, who, like her, were chiefly concerned with social and political issues. She also used a variety of mediums to communicate her ideas: first in her broadcasts, later in her books, and throughout her American life on the lecture podium.

⁷⁸ Sergio, "St. Mary's College commencement address."

But not only was she able to seek out audiences through varying mediums, this chapter has shown that Sergio was also able to adapt to changing definitions of what it meant to be ladylike and a feminist in various eras, perhaps in the end becoming a safe, moderate symbol during women's lib. Previous chapters, too, have shown a similar elasticity in Sergio's definitions of herself. She was able to successfully defend herself from anti-communist attacks of conservative groups in no small part because of her ability to both explain her past and to adapt to the political situation in which she found herself living, portraying herself as a moderate or conservative as the times called for, while in the era before she had been portrayed as progressive and in the era after as somewhat militant.

This remarkable ability to adapt is perhaps chiefly a result of her experience in the 1930s as a fascist-era broadcaster and refugee. As shown in chapter four, Sergio overcame defamatory information uncovered by the FBI of her days as a fascist broadcaster by managing her personal history—in many ways turning it into a personal myth that resonated with American values. What is most notable about this myth is that it enabled the survival of her public identity throughout the rest of her life. During World War II it would give her a license to speak freely on international politics, later it would guarantee her an audience for many college lecture tours and give her access to diplomatic and political circles in Washington, D.C. It enabled her to suppress damning allegations about her past, such as those contained in her FBI report that allege she was the mistress of high fascist officials.

Similar myth-making has been observed in the lives of other World War II era women. Most notably Leni Reifenstahl reinvented her Nazi past in the postwar era—

first justifying her complicity by insisting she had been fooled just as everyone else, second retooling herself as an “unpolitical artist.”⁷⁹ Among her personal rewrites, Reifensahl played down her close association with Adolf Hitler and gave the impression that she had a long career of directing feature films, and only directed two Nazi documentaries, when in fact, she only directed six films and four of them were documentaries. Noted Susan Sontag in 1972: “It is not that Riefenstahl’s Nazi past has suddenly become acceptable. It is simply that, with the turn of the cultural wheel, it no longer matters,” she wrote.⁸⁰ American photographer Margaret Bourke-White also carefully molded her public image and selectively omitted details about her personal relationship from her own autobiography—details that were “of the kind most people would have kept quiet,” and others that were simply inconvenient to the public picture she had constructed. “The unadorned facts would have sufficed for a contemporary fable,” wrote biographer Vicki Goldberg, “but her success was more deliberately planned and more becomingly polished than the ordinary kind.”⁸¹

While it cannot be said that Sergio’s personal myth-making allowed her the professional success of Margaret Bourke-White, it is important to note that Sergio’s professional transformations were more complete than Reifensahl’s. Sergio’s public image was not laced with public suspicion throughout her life (as with Reifensahl) but instead was used to justify her status as heroine and true American. Seemingly through sheer will, Sergio was able to suppress competing narratives of her life such as those preserved in her FBI file and recast her questionable associations with

⁷⁹ Rainer Rother, *Leni Reifensahl: The Seduction of Genius*. London: Continuum, 2002. 179-180.

⁸⁰ Susan Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism” in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1972), 83-84.

⁸¹ Vicki Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White: A Biography*. New York: Harper & Row, 1986. x, xi.

fascism (and later communism) as not only socially acceptable, but admirable evidence of a political awakening that appealed to the American public.

Though she was an example of the women radio workers in the 1940s who actively struggled for the right to participate in the public realm of broadcasting, Lisa Sergio was clearly not typical of these women. She helped Mussolini create Italian propaganda broadcasts, she “invaded”⁸² American radio, and remade herself into an anti-fascist wartime radio commentator at a time when these analysts were thought to be very powerful. She was also blacklisted during the zenith of American anti-communism, which gives credence to the stature and power she may have been accorded by others. Her ability to do this was in no small part due to the social construction of her image in the press and her reflection of desirable values for all women.

Sergio’s various professional transformations and the survival of her professional identity is perhaps the most striking discovery of this study. This finding resonates with a comment from one friend, who said that Sergio was more than just a survivor: “She was more in charge of her life than surviving.”⁸³ This professional and personal malleability was always rooted in her exceptional experience in fascist broadcasting, and shows the powerful role personal history plays in American life. As Sergio’s personal history was transformed into personal myth, it was, in many ways, inspired. It was a credible story that transformed her into a persecuted, sympathetic individual, and it gave her access to circles of journalism, politics, power and prestige

⁸² “Miss Sergio With ‘Fluent Phonetics’ Points Way for Women Announcers.”

⁸³ Lee interview.

throughout her life. The construction of this personal history was necessary to ensure the survival of her identity as a radio pioneer—perhaps especially in her early days in the United States when Sergio was an enemy alien in a time of war and a woman battling the prejudices of radio audiences and network executives as well as later during anti-communist investigations. This rewriting of her personal history is a testament to the social, financial and political pressures Sergio must have felt while creating a life in the United States. It is a testament to her own ability to shape her destiny as a mass communicator.

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