



The Woman in the Hat

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In 1970, Bella Abzug took on an incumbent Democratic Congressman—and won. A tough Jewish lawyer raised in the Bronx, Bella would become one of the icons of second-wave feminism, passing laws that changed the lives of men and women. 50 years after she first ran for Congress, Bella has had a resurgence. In the past few years there have been plays, movies, and TV shows about her life. Why does she still spark such fascination today? How did she rise to power so quickly? And why didn't she stay in office longer? All we'll say for now is that everyone we interviewed for this podcast couldn't stop talking as soon as we said the words "Bella Abzug."

Jeremy Fassler: The 1960s were a time of massive social upheaval in America. There was the Civil Rights Movement—

*Martin Luther King: We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.
(Sound of applause)*

Jeremy: There was the anti-Vietnam War movement—

Demonstrators (chanting): “Hell no, we won’t go! Hell no, we won’t go! Hell no, we won’t go!”

Jeremy: And then there was the women’s rights movement.

Music in.

Betty Friedan: But if we do get on with our revolution and we restructure society to make equality really possible, then I think the war between the sexes will end, and for the first time, we will have possible true human sexual liberation.

Jeremy: That’s Betty Friedan. In 1963, she published *The Feminine Mystique*, which challenged the idea that women found their greatest happiness from being mothers and housewives. That book launched what we now call second wave feminism.

Nadia Batool Bokhari: At that time women still couldn’t attend most Ivy League colleges. They couldn’t get legal abortions. They couldn’t even serve on juries in all 50 states. And there were only 11 women in Congress. By the 1970s, these things were changing. It was because of the second wave feminists.

Feminists (chanting): Free abortion on demand! Free abortion on demand! Free abortion on demand!

Nadia: In that decade, many of the Ivies went co-ed. In 1973, *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion. That same year, women were given the right to serve on juries nationwide. And more and more women ran for higher office, fighting for equality in the halls of Congress.

Music out.

Bella Abzug: Work with me and vote for me. When I win, you’ll win.



A photograph of Bella Abzug and Gloria Steinem, 1977, courtesy of Getty Images.

Nadia: One of the leaders in the fight for women's rights was a Jewish lawyer from the Bronx named Bella Abzug.

Announcer: Vote for Mrs. Bella Azbug, Democratic candidate for Congress, a wife and mother whose place is in the House – The House of Representatives.

Jeremy: Bella would become one of the most influential feminists of her time.

Gloria: You know, in the beginning, I was a bit afraid of her, like everybody else. You know, I admired her, but I was afraid of her. But gradually, we became much more like family members.

Jeremy: Gloria Steinem was a journalist when she first met Bella.

Music in.

Gloria: I remember saying to her once, "Bella, you're the mother I should have had." And Bella said, "I'm not old enough to be your mother!" (laughter)

Jeremy: She was in awe of Bella.

Gloria: It seemed to me that Bella was born to be one of two things: mayor of New York, a member of Congress, and probably president of the United States.

Nadia: I am Nadia Batool Bokhari.

Jeremy: I'm Jeremy Fassler. This is Shoe Leather.

Jeremy: We investigate New York City's past to find out how yesterday's news affects us today. This season, we're focusing on the 1970s. We'll look beyond the bell bottoms and disco to explore what made this decade notorious in New York's history. A decade in which the Big Apple went by a far more sinister nickname —

Hughes Rudd: Unionized employees of New York City who face dismissal have put out a booklet describing Fun City as 'Fear City.'

Jeremy: Bella Abzug was instrumental in New York City politics at the time. At the age of 50, she ran for Congress. Once she got elected, she passed laws that changed the lives of men and women in America.

Music out.

Jeremy: She cultivated an image of herself as “Battling Bella,” always on the frontlines for social progress. But her time in office was cut short when the same tactics and personality that propelled her to Congress would lead to her leaving only a few years later.

Jeremy: Now that 50 years have passed since she became a Congresswoman, we wanted to know: why was she able to break through the glass ceiling? Why didn't she stay in power longer? And how did she make herself into an effective leader?

Jeremy: This is New York City Drop Dead: “The Woman in the Hat.”

Jeremy: When people asked Bella Abzug when she became a feminist, she gave one of two answers. The first was “the day I was born.” She was born in 1920, the same year that the 19th Amendment gave women the right to vote. The *second* was the day she defied Orthodox Jewish tradition.

Jeremy: When her father died, Orthodox Judaism dictated that his son would have sung the Kaddish in the synagogue. The Kaddish is the Hebrew prayer for the dead. Here's what it sounds like:

Music in: a cantor singing the Kaddish in Hebrew.

Jeremy: The problem was that he only had daughters.

Liz Abzug: In the Orthodox tradition, women and girls are relegated to upstairs in the synagogue or behind the curtain, to sit separately from the men.

Jeremy: That's Bella's youngest daughter Liz.

Liz: My mother decided, with her grandfather that she was going to say the prayer for the dead, the kaddish, every day for a year in their synagogue.

Jeremy: It was the first time Bella defied expectations for what women were *supposed* to do. And it would not be the last.

Music in.

Nadia: That sense of independence was something Bella learned at a young age ... from her mother. After her father died of a heart attack when Bella was only 14, her mother had to raise Bella and her sister as a single mom in the south Bronx.

Here's Liz again.

Liz: Growing up in the Bronx and being independent, relatively independent that my mother was, because she was raised by a single mom, she was a real survivor and an independent woman.

Nadia: In a public conversation with journalist Ronnie Eldridge, Bella talks about how she broke gender norms as a young girl.

Bella: I started very early fighting for justice, fighting for my right to have my immies in the streets.

Nadia: Immies means marbles. Bella liked playing marbles in the streets, even though that was usually thought of as a game for boys. She also liked riding bikes, and her Mom wouldn't buy her one. So she made friends with the boys in her neighborhood and rode *their* bikes.

Nadia: When Bella graduated from college, she decided to pursue a career that didn't include many women — law.

Music out.

Bella: Well I can remember ever since I was a very young girl saying that I was going to be a lawyer.

Jeremy: Bella went to Columbia Law School in 1942. During her second year, she fell in love with a businessman named Martin Abzug ... who would become her biggest cheerleader.

Music in.

Jeremy: He typed all her papers in law school because Bella didn't know how to type. She never learned .. on purpose. She once told a friend: "if I knew how to type, the lawyers would've always asked me to type things, so I just decided I was not gonna learn how to type." Martin's support of Bella was a defining part of their marriage. They treated each other as equals.

Bella: My husband has always played a role in which he understood that I was a wife and a mother, but also was a lawyer who had a right and a duty to develop my talents and my potentiality, and therefore, worked side by side in the efforts to help with family, with the chores, and with the general decision making. We all participated in it together, he and I."

Jeremy: After graduating Columbia, Bella landed a job at a law firm. But given how few female lawyers there were at the time, Bella had a hard time getting people to see her as one. Her daughter Liz remembers a story that her mom used to tell about that time.

Liz: When she was a young lawyer she went in to represent a client, into a firm, and she walked into the receptionist's and she said "I am Bella Abzug, from Kramer, you know, Cohen, such and such and such and such," and the receptionist said, "OK, sit down." And then 5, 10, 15, 20 minutes later, she's still waiting. So she went back up to the receptionist and she said "Hi, I said I am Bella Savitsky from the firm," and the receptionist said, "Well, we're waiting for the lawyer." And at that, you know, my mother said, "Well wait a minute, I am the lawyer." She was so unused to seeing women as lawyers, the receptionist, that she said, "well where's the lawyer?" and my mother said "I am the lawyer!"

Jeremy: Later that night, Bella complained to her husband Martin. He had an idea.

Liz: This is the time of Eleanor Roosevelt and the hats, gloves. And he said, "You know what, Bella? In order for you to distinguish yourself, why don't you wear a hat, and maybe gloves like Eleanor Roosevelt, all right?" So my mother said, "well, I'll try and wear a hat."

Jeremy: Once Bella put on her first wide-brimmed, felt hat, everything changed. Years later, she told a *Newsday* reporter that she liked the way she looked in them, and the more she wore them, the more people began recognizing her as Bella Abzug, "the woman in the hat."

Music out.

Nadia: In the late 1940s, Bella worked on a case that would land her in the national spotlight. She went down to Mississippi to appeal the case of Willie McGee.

Music in.

Nadia: McGee was a Black man who was sentenced to death for sexually assaulting a White woman. Many believed McGee was innocent, including celebrities like Albert Einstein. Bella argued that McGee was having a consensual affair with this woman.

Nadia: This was a stressful time for Bella. Vigilantes patrolled the courthouse, keeping people from testifying about McGee's innocence. During the trial, Bella received her first death threats. And she suffered a miscarriage.

Nadia: In 1951, Bella got Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black to grant a stay of execution for McGee. But ultimately, the Supreme Court refused to hear his case. And McGee was put to death.

Announcer: I'm sure that you have heard over both radio stations, WFOR and WAML, that all channels open to Willie McGee to save his life have now been exhausted—

Music out.

Announcer: And the execution is to take place here this evening.

Nadia: Even though Bella failed to overturn McGee's death sentence, every person we interviewed for this story brought it up as a defining part of her legacy.

Jeremy: It was this case that gave Bella a reputation on the national stage as a fighter for the persecuted. She'd then take that fight to Hollywood.

Congressman: Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?

Dalton Trumbo: Mr. [inaudible], you must have some reason for asking me this question.

Archive: You can address the committee.

Music in.

Jeremy: In the mid 1950s, at the height of the Cold War, the fear over communism in the United States reached a fever pitch. Hollywood became a focus of Washington. The House Un-American Activities Committee was looking for Communists in showbiz. Actors, writers, and musicians were brought before the committee, and if they didn't cooperate, they could be blacklisted, meaning they may never get to work in Hollywood again.

Jeremy: Bella took many of these people on as clients. Although she was not able to keep all of them from being blacklisted, Bella earned a lot of friends in Hollywood, theater, and music. And Hollywood would eventually repay its gratitude.

Music out.

Nadia: By the 1960s, Bella looked around at what was happening in the world, and grew more and more concerned.

Bella: I became much more aware of some of the larger problems outside the country in terms of the struggle for a competition between nations and ideologies.

Nadia: She was especially concerned with the Vietnam War—

Crowd: Protests, inaudible.

Nadia: Which she called “an illegal and immoral war”. So she decided to become more of an activist. She organized protests against the war with the group Women Strike for Peace.

Bella: And I spoke out against Vietnam when people were actually afraid to open up their mouths. Speaking up and working when others were silent, that’s my life.

Nadia: But she soon realized that to make real change, she had to get involved in politics.

Music in.

Nadia: So she became a political organizer, working on behalf of candidates like New York Mayor John Lindsay. Lindsay was a Republican, but he was a progressive on social issues and he opposed the Vietnam War. Bella was an organizer for his re-election campaign in 1969.

Gloria: I’m pretty sure I met her in the New York street (laughs) where she was involved in a Mayoral campaign.

Nadia: That’s how she first met Gloria Steinem.

Gloria: You know, there could not be a better, typical place to meet Bella because everyone in the New York street was her friend if (laughs) she was anywhere near them. She was interested in involving everyone.

Nadia: Mayor Lindsay would go on to win his re-election. But Bella was not given a job in his administration.

Bella: And I spent a lot of time helping various candidates when they finally took a position that was a good position to get elected, and organize people to help them get elected, and I got fed up with the fact that when I helped to get them elected, not much change took place. And I also decided that it was time for women, as you know, to be more represented in the power structure.

Nadia: It was then that Bella realized what she needed to do—

Music out.

Nadia: She would run for office herself.

Bella: People need change. No congressional seat belongs to anyone. It belongs only to the people.

Nadia: On March 13 1970, Bella announced she was running for Congress in New York's 19th District. At the time, there were only 11 women in Congress.

Nadia: Her slogan was "This woman's place is in the House...the House of Representatives." That message, and her legal-activist work, got the attention of other feminist leaders at the time. Several joined her that day.

Nadia: One of them was Shirley Chisholm. She was the first Black woman ever elected to Congress.

Shirley Chisholm: Now I've traveled a great deal, and I've never seen a place where people are so hung up on sex physically, psychologically, educationally, than in the good old USA.

Nadia: So was Betty Friedan, who wrote *The Feminine Mystique*.

Betty And we need the constitutional guarantee of equality. And we also need it because there are a great many people, especially housewives, who really are discriminated against.

Nadia: Gloria Steinem was there. She was excited for Bella, but worried about her chances of winning.

Gloria: Yes I always worried, you know, because she was so ahead of her time and outspoken that clearly she had adversaries.

Jeremy: Gloria had good reasons to worry.

Jeremy: Before she could win the general election, Bella had to win a primary against a sitting Democratic Congressman. His name was Leonard Farbstein.

Music in.

Jeremy: Farbstein was a moderate Democrat who'd been in office for 14 years. Harold Holzer, who was a journalist for *The Manhattan Tribune* at that time, remembers him this way:

Harold Holzer: Farbstein was deeply unpopular and very tough. Vicious as a fighter. But he always won by a handful of votes. And we'd never laid eyes on him. In fact, no one had ever (laughs) laid eyes on him. He lived in Washington, not in the district.

Jeremy: Not only was Farbstein unpopular because he was absent from the district, he also supported the Vietnam War. Progressives had been trying to replace him with one of their own since the late 1960s, when the anti-Vietnam movement took off. But they'd always come up short.

Nadia: There was another challenge facing Bella—the fact she was a woman. In 1970, the idea of a woman openly campaigning for office was pretty new. There had been female representatives and female Senators before. But as Steinem explains, they usually got to office a different way:

Gloria: The only way for a woman to get high political office is to have a husband who has it and he dies. And we suggested that that path to power was a little hard on men.

Nadia: It's true. About half of the women who had ever been in Congress inherited their seats from their late husbands. But times were changing. Women like Shirley Chisholm had won by running themselves. Bella hoped to follow in her footsteps.

Music out.

Jeremy: The 19th district, where Bella ran for Congress, looked like a backwards J. It started on Manhattan's Upper West Side and cut through downtown. It ended at the East River.

Jeremy: It was a working-and-middle-class district, and it was growing more diverse. Jews and African-Americans lived on the Upper West Side. Hispanics and Asians lived on the Lower East Side.

Music in.

Jeremy: And one of the biggest issues facing the city, and the district, was unemployment. It was 8.7% in the 19th district. Jobs were leaving New York. Political scientist Esther Fuchs explains more:

Ester: While there were still working people and middle-class people living on the West Side and the Lower East Side, a lot of the city was hollowing out to a certain extent. There was an increase in poverty and an increase in need, essentially. And so the needs of the population and the needs of the city were very high at this period, and the capacity of the city to actually solve these problems was reduced dramatically.

Jeremy: Bella's message was that the only way New Yorkers would get help was from larger changes to U.S. policy.

Bella: And the biggest injustice is that the people in this country have been subjected to tyranny by reason of the fact that the benefits and the great traditions and the great resources of this country, the richest country and one of the great countries in the world, have not been made available to the people.

Jeremy: She argued for a total withdrawal of troops from Vietnam. That way the government could stop paying for missiles, and start paying for infrastructure, and that would bring jobs back.

Bella: That there be an end to militarism, that there be immediate commitments of our energy and our resources to the business of our real democracy, which is to make it possible for all the people in this country to have decent homes, to have shelter, to have hospitals.

Jeremy: Bella also campaigned on equal pay for women, public housing reform, and universal childcare. She even had a daycare center—

Music out.

Jeremy: In her campaign headquarters for female volunteers to drop off their kids.

Bella: These are the things that I am committed to. These are the things I have been fighting for.

Nadia: She ran her campaign out of New York's West Village, where she lived with her family. Bella's neighbor Joe Gilford saw her campaigning at the time.

Joe: I remember the excitement, and I remember it's just, 'You're for Bella, or you're, you're against civilization!' (Laughs) *It was like, there was no gray area there! But I think that was also Bella.*

Nadia: Bella pounded the pavement from day to night, making herself available to every voter in the district—something that her opponent, Farbstein did not do.

Joe: That is absolutely right, and she was someone who was just out in the neighborhood all the time.

Music in.

Joe: You stopped her on the street, she would not be aloof at all. She would stop and talk to anybody.

Nadia: Bella also gave out catchy campaign merchandise, as Harold Holzer remembered:

Harold: She was giving out shopping bags that said "Carry Bella to Congress." She had great slogans like "Abzug-loutely." "This woman's place is in the house (dot dot dot) The House of Representatives."

Jeremy: Pretty soon, Bella amassed an army of volunteers. Many of them were young people in their 20s and 30s who said they were inspired by her passion. One of them was Peter Riegert. Years before he became famous playing Boone in *National Lampoon's Animal House*—

Peter: (in Animal House): It's not gonna be an orgy. It's a toga party.

Jeremy: Peter was one of Bella's most dedicated campaign aides.

Riegert: "The thing that was great about Bella was she understood the theater of politics, and she was a brilliant orator and she loved debating with people and loved challenging them, even those who would, you know, disagree. I didn't realize at the time, but the two months I spent with her was like the greatest acting lesson I ever could have gotten."

Jeremy: Bella also had something else going for her—

Music out.

Jeremy: Celebrity endorsements. These were not as common in the 1970s as they are now. But remember, Bella had made a name for herself in Hollywood fighting against the blacklist decades prior.

Jeremy: These endorsements were crucial to Bella's campaign. She couldn't access funds from the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. Those were reserved for incumbents like Farstein. So Bella brought out the stars. Jane Fonda, Warren Beatty, and Rita Moreno were among her biggest supporters.

Jeremy: Bella's most prominent celebrity endorsement was from Barbra Streisand. Bella was the first candidate she ever endorsed.

Here she is singing "Happy Days Are Here Again" at a concert called Broadway for Bella.

Music in.

Barbra Streisand (singing): "Howdy gay times/Cloudy gray times/You are now a thing of the past..."

Jeremy: If there are any Barbra fans out there, take note: this is the only time she sang this song up-tempo.

Barbra: "Happy days are here again/The skies above are clear again/So let's sing a song of cheer again/Happy days are here again!/All together, shout it now..."

Music out.

Jeremy: Bella's daughter Liz says it wasn't just her mother's record fighting against the Blacklist that led to all these celebrity endorsements. It was Bella herself.

Liz: Truthfully, Jeremy? It's because she was a star. Now what do I mean by that? She was really, very much dynamic, very engaging. You know, her mother always thought she'd be an actress. She was very attractive as a younger woman, by the way. Very. You can check it out. And she, people who were in Hollywood, I think, glommed on to her because she was such an unusual, dynamic, and so articulate and yet fun-loving, had a great sense of humor. So in that respect, she was a real personality.

Jeremy: Whatever the reason, celebrities held several fundraisers for Bella, and they were critical for her campaign's success.

Nadia: Towards the end of the campaign, Farbstein realized how much Bella's campaign and message were resonating. So he came back to the district from Washington. But by then, as Harold Holzer explains, it was too late.

Harold: Farbstein could not keep up with it. He had no idea that women's rights had become a viable new cause in the United States.

Nadia: The night before the election, Peter Riegert was driving Bella home.

Peter: It was probably 1:30 in the morning, 2:00 in the morning, and she was wired. And she said to me, "what do you think?" and I said, "Well, all I've got is my opinion, but based on what I'm seeing, I think you're going to win." And she said, "Hmmm," kind of made a noise like that. And I said, "what's wrong?" She said, "I don't want to go to bed. What do you want to do?" I said, "Well, there's a bar around the corner called the Corner Bistro." She said, "great idea." And we walked in at 2:00 in the morning, and the place erupted in applause."

Nadia: As it turns out, Peter was right. Bella defeated Farbstein by 10 points, or, as she later said, "70,000 shopping bags."

Peter: She said something after it was clear that she won. I'm paraphrasing, I don't remember it exactly, but it was something along the lines of—"Now what do I do?" (laughter).

Jeremy: Bella's winning the primary made her a virtual lock to win the general election. The 19th district hadn't voted for a Republican since the 1920s. Still, she wasted no time getting right back to work. Her Republican opponent was radio host Barry Farber.

Barry Farber: A broadcaster has better credentials for Congress than almost any other profession I can think of.

Music in.

Jeremy: In their debates, Farber constantly talked over her and belittled her credentials.

Barry: But I assure you, Mrs. Abzug, that I have interviewed, cross-examined, explored, more social issues with more experts from more neighborhoods of our district at greater length, in

more languages than you have, and I think I've lived in the district longer. And I don't like the appellation of 'beginner' any more than I like the appellation of 'hawk,' and I'll ask you to withdraw that too.

Bella: I think that broadcasting is a very important industry, and since you've been so good at it, I think you should remain in the industry.

Jeremy: Farber grew increasingly desperate throughout the fall. He claimed that the moderator of one of their debates had rigged it for Bella—a claim for which there's no evidence. He also questioned Bella's Jewishness, asking his listeners to send evidence that Bella had ever protested the Soviet Union's mistreatment of Jews.

Barry: If anybody listening, beginning with Bella Abzug, has any evidence that Mrs. Abzug has ever protested Soviet mistreatment of Jews, get that documentation please!

Jeremy: Farber's mudslinging ended up cutting into Bella's margin of victory. She beat him by less than she beat Farbstein in the primary.

Music out.

Jeremy: But she still beat him.

Jeremy: On January 3rd, the day she was sworn into Congress, she made an impromptu speech to her fans who had gathered at the U.S. Capitol.

Bella: I just came out to say hello, to say how pleased I am to see you all here, and together, we will do things! But I must go inside first and I will be back outside again, and together we'll talk and make our commitments on these steps!

Music in.

Barbra (singing): "Happy days are here again!"

Music out.

Nadia: When Bella arrived in Congress, she got right to work. So Jeremy, how many credit cards do you have?

Jeremy: I have three. How about you?

Nadia: I have five—and it's because of Bella Abzug. In the 1970s, women were not allowed to have their own credit cards. If they wanted one, their husbands had to sign for it.

Bella: So I called up Martin, my husband, and I said, "What do you believe? Do you love me? Because American Express doesn't, and they want you to sign for my card!" He said, "I love you Bella, but American Express is going to have to give you their own card, and I'm going to fight with you until we do!"

Nadia: When Bella was in Congress, she passed the Equality Credit Opportunity Act, which allowed women to get their own credit cards. She made a parody credit card commercial about this.

Bella (amid cheering and clapping): So carry an American Express card as a symbol of women's right to credit! (Cheering)

Jeremy: Bella also brought greater transparency to government. She pushed through the Sunshine Laws as part of the Freedom of Information Act. If you've ever read a transcript of a government agency meeting, it's because of Bella Abzug.

Jeremy: She also got much needed money for New York. She helped pass the Interstate Transfer Amendment, which brought billions of dollars into New York for improving mass transit systems. She wrote the 1972 Clean Water Act, which brought jobs to New York by building new sewage plants.

Bella: And we demand equality now and only one way – by the ratification of the ERA! (Crowd cheers.)

Nadia: And she became one of the biggest advocates for the Equal Rights Amendment, which would give women equal pay. Unfortunately, the Equal Rights Amendment has never been ratified into the Constitution.

Jeremy: Bella also failed to get her childcare bill passed. She wrote it with Shirley Chisholm. It would have established a multibillion-dollar national daycare system for working parents. It was passed in the House and Senate, but it was vetoed by President Nixon.

Jeremy: Bella hated Nixon, and the feeling was mutual. During the Watergate hearings, it was revealed that Nixon included Bella and Shirley on his "Enemies List," a list he made of Congressmen, Senators, and celebrities who opposed him.

Nadia: And not all of Bella's constituents liked her either.

Music in.

Nadia: Here's Joe Gilford again, who was one of Bella's neighbors in Manhattan.

Joe: Her, her personality, which was very aggressive if it needed to be, and mostly aggressive when she was in, at rest, you know, sort of mildly aggressive at rest and, and, and frighteningly aggressive when she had her motor running. So it was not something that appealed to everybody.

Nadia: She didn't suffer fools gladly. Journalist Carole Zimmer, who interviewed Bella once, recalls how Bella exerted herself when confronted by something she disagreed with:

Carole: There wasn't a lot of room for back-and-forth with Bella. She kind of took up a lot of space. If you, if you said something that Bella didn't like, she'd just like, be back at you in about 10 seconds, you know, like, "Actually no! That is not the way it happened! It happened like this!" You know, and very forceful.

Nadia: While looking through the Columbia Archives, I found hate mail that had been sent to Bella. Here are some of the things they said about her:

Jeremy (reading): "You are an ancient crock of rancid cow flop." "Fat ass with a loud mouth – take a hint." "To Big Mouth—what the hell are you? A male that didn't quite make it?"

Nadia: So what were the effects of those type of letters on your dad? What was the feeling of a man who is listening about his wife?

Liz: So when people attacked her, he was hurt by it. She was heavy at a later point in her life. She was not, as a young woman, but she had gained weight. So sometimes they attacked her for that in the Congress or the media or whatever. Sure, he was hurt by that. And what he would do is, when he got really mad, is he would go after the people who attacked her! He was more of a quiet guy, but when he got pushed, or when they got pushed, to the extreme, he would take care of it!

Nadia: In 1975, the year that New York City went bankrupt, Bella decided that she was ready to take her skills to the next level. She decided to run for the Democratic Nomination for Senator from New York.

Bella: If you go into the Senate at this particular moment, there are no women there. It's a no-woman's land, or as I and others have said, it's...a stag Senate, and that means a stag nation.

Nadia: Not only were there no women in the Senate, but New York had never had a woman Senator. But in order to run for Senate, Bella would not be allowed to run for re-election in the House of Representatives. Bella's husband Martin believed running for Senate was a mistake. He wanted her to stay in the House. Bella believed this was her moment.

Music out.

Nadia: She was either going to the Senate—or going home.

Jeremy: Bella's main competition for the Democratic Senate nomination was Daniel Patrick Moynihan. He had served in the Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon *and* Ford Administrations.

Daniel Patrick Moynihan: The United States Senate needs a voice that is unafraid to tell hard truths about national policy in an age of policy ignorance and dishonesty.

Music in.

Jeremy: He had a reputation as an intellectual, but he rubbed some people—even Democrats—the wrong way, especially Gloria Steinhem

Gloria: No, Moynihan was nobody you would ever want to represent you, are you kidding me? He was just completely dictatorial. Nobody could talk around him. (Laughter)

Jeremy: Bella didn't think highly of him either. She especially criticized him for working in the Nixon administration.

Bella: At least his announcement makes the choice in the primary clear: between Mr. Nixon's man, Daniel Moynihan, with his record of defending the Gang That Gave Us Watergate, and my own six-year record of congressional service in the best progressive and humane tradition of the Democratic Party.

Jeremy: For most of the summer of 1976, Bella and Moynihan were neck-and-neck in the polls. Whoever won the primary would have a good shot at winning in the fall against incumbent Republican Jim Buckley. Harold Holzer had become Bella's press secretary by

that time. He spent months working on the campaign with almost no time off. The week before the election, he decided to take a break.

Harold: Bella was scheduled to go to the Rhinebeck Fair, which sounded so innocuous that we decided to take our first weekend off.

Music out.

Jeremy: It was then that Bella made her biggest mistake.

Harold: Bella was asked at this fair, “if Moynihan wins the primary, will you support him?” and she said, “We’ll have to see” or something like that. The explosion of press was immediate and disastrous.

Jeremy: This was in stark contrast to Moynihan—

Moynihan: I will most assuredly support whichever Democrat does win if I do not, and I would hope the other Democrats will make a similar pledge.

Jeremy: Who, when he announced his campaign, said he would support whoever the nominee was. Bella was seen as uncompromising, not being a team player. And the Moynihan campaign ran with it.

Harold: I remember the Moynihan campaign said something sexist, incredibly sexist—“Apparently a print dress does not a lady make.” And that she was a “rule or ruin politician.” You know, it exposed her toughness at the expense of her humanity.

Jeremy: She lost the primary by one percent of the vote. She would never hold elected office again. Moynihan won the general election and remained in the Senate for 24 years. His successor was the first woman ever elected to the Senate from New York: Hillary Clinton.

Nadia: For the rest of her life, Bella remained a leader of women.

Music in.

Nadia: In 1977, President Carter made Bella the chair of the National Women’s Conference.

Bella: Let us make this conference the beginning of a stage in our quest for making democracy the thing it should be and should have been 200 years ago.

Nadia: It was the largest gathering of women ever in the United States.

Bella (amid crowd noises): This is the time that we will make women and men share equally in the greatness in America.

Nadia: She would go on to work for the United Nations, establishing the organization's first ever NGO that was focused on the environment. Her work with the United Nations took her all over the world. Soon, women everywhere began identifying with her.

Gloria: And I remember a young woman, and when I met her, she said, "I am the Bella Abzug of Yugoslavia."

Holzer: When she came to the United States, she said "I'm known as the Bella Abzug of Kenya."

Liz: "I'm the Bella of my village in Bangladesh."

Jeremy: Bella died in 1998.

Hillary Clinton: Now since Bella did pass away, Eleanor Roosevelt has been keeping me updated on all the dramatic changes in Heaven. (Laughter, applause)

Jeremy: At her funeral, Hillary Clinton delivered the eulogy, while wearing a hat.

Hillary: She has already started organizing a whole slew of what she calls "non-governmental angels" (laughter) all of whom are now supporting buttons reading "a woman's place is in the heavens." (laughter)

Music out.

Jeremy: Her legacy continues to this day. In 2018, a young bartender from Queens defeated an incumbent Congressman.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: This is what is possible when everyday people come together in the collective realization that all our actions, no matter how small or how large, are powerful, worthwhile, and capable of lasting change.

Jeremy: Now Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez has become a leading spokesperson for progressive causes, much like Bella. In 2019, AOC tweeted, “Members of Congress still pass down stories about Bella Abzug’s legendary tenure on Capitol Hill.”

Bella: I mean, if we’re right—and as many of you know, I’m a feminist (laughter), or have gleaned that I am— that feminism is something more than a political philosophy and movement relating only to the rights and just powers of women, if we are right that it’s a vision of what we love and how we would like society to be—

Music in.

Bella: Then our goals must be more than just bringing women into existing structures. It means that in order to accomplish these goals, we will have to transform these structures, because present institutions will not do it.

Jeremy: Shoe Leather is a production of the Columbia Graduate School of Journalism. This episode was reported, written and produced by me, Jeremy Fassler—

Nadia: And me, Nadia Batool Bokhari.

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