

Episode 3 Script: She Galvanized A Movement

Brendan: It's 2019, and there are 127 women serving in Congress – that's 27.3%, the highest percentage in United States history.

One hundred years ago, in 1919, we had only one – shout out to Jeanette Rankin, of Montana. A number of the women serving today are children of immigrants or immigrants themselves, and some of them are mothers who brought their own children to the swearing-in ceremony. Something about this moment in American politics feels so new. But in fact, today's immigrant politicians are standing on the shoulders of giants.

Welcome back to How to Be American. I'm Brendan Murphy.

The right to vote is a core part of the American identity. But as we know, that right hasn't been extended to every citizen in this country throughout history. It had to be won. In this episode, we'll explore how women, especially immigrant women in New York City, were central in gaining the right to vote. We're going to zoom in and examine the lives of two women, both immigrants. One of them was close to the heart of the action during early years of women's suffrage; the other is actively participating in the democratic process today.

We begin in November of 1918 with a woman whose life had just been turned upside down.

Sarah Burinescu was a petite woman with big brown eyes, dark hair, and thin lips. I imagine her sitting in her dimly lit apartment at 97 Orchard Street, surrounded by her five young children, and visibly pregnant with her sixth. The flickering of the gas light cast shadows as her friends and family somberly drifted in and out of the room. As Sarah prepared to welcome a new life, she was mourning the passing of another:

Her husband, Jacob Burinescu, had died on November 8th, 1918 at the age of 34. He had succumbed to influenza in a pandemic that swept the globe killing nearly 50 million, 675,000 of them in the United States. Jacob had been the president of a mutual aid fund for Yiddish Theater Actors, and according to his daughter, he caught the flu while visiting a sick member of the association.

Both Sarah and Jacob had come to America from the Russian Empire as young adults, with their families. Sarah arrived in 1900 around the age of 16. Sometime later, on the Lower East Side, she met and married Jacob.

By 1918, Sarah and Jacob had made a life and built a family together. And then, within the span of a few days, it had all changed. After Jacob's death, she was left to figure out what came next. Her mind must have been racing between the pain of losing her partner, and the need to find a way forward without him.

Sarah found work in a garment factory. In an oral history, Sarah's daughter Jacqueline, the last of their children, recalled her mother as street smart and kind.

Jacqueline Burinescu Richter: Well, she was always there for us and everything. I used to - when I was small, I used to think she never slept because I went to bed, she was still up. And then when I got up in the morning, she was up, so I used to think she never slept, but I guess she had too (laughs). So...

Brendan: And, Jacqueline adds, she was an extremely hard worker. And like a lot of working single mothers, she found that childcare options were limited.

Jacqueline Burinescu Richter: She'd take me along and like she said, she'd give me a lick and a promise, and put me in a basket. Cause I used to tease her, I'd say, "Ma! Even as a baby I used to go to work!" (laughs) But that was the only way she could handle it.

Brendan: Sarah's entire world had shifted. She was both mourning her husband and entering the workforce as a garment worker. One would think political participation would have been the last thing on her mind. She had to feed her children. She had to pay her rent. Yet instead of simply being a victim of horrible circumstances, the aftermath of Jacob's death marked the beginning of Sarah's understanding of her own political and social power. For at this moment when everything was in flux, Sarah Burinescu registered to vote as a Socialist. And she was not alone. All around her, working-class immigrant women were beginning to discover the power of the vote.

Sarah's story made me wonder about how she became a politically active citizen. Did she cross paths with the suffrage movement? What role did immigrant women play in securing the right to vote in New York State and eventually the Nation? How were women like herself engaging in politics – and did that inspire her to register to vote?

To help me answer these questions, I reached out to Valerie Paley, the Director of the Center for Women's History at the New York Historical Society.

Valerie: I'm Valerie Paley. I'm Chief Historian at the New York Historical Society. I am also director of the Center for Women's history, which is the first such center within the walls of a major museum dedicated to studying, exploring women's contributions to the past.

Brendan: I asked Valerie to take me back to the early years of the suffrage movement and help me understand its rise and how it spread. In school, many of us learned that its roots were in the 1848 Seneca Falls convention, where a group of 300 mostly wealthy, white women met to create an agenda for women's rights. But Valerie told me, it wasn't quite that simple.

Valerie: It didn't spring out of nowhere. I think the thing that I'm discovering more and more, uh, with, with some sort of potency is the value and the necessity of collective action, particularly among women. I think women are more apt to embrace the ideas that they are standing on the shoulders of giants.

Brendan: According to Valerie, it took more than 70 years and countless activist efforts by a wide range of women before they won access to the voting booth. During those years there were a number of referendums giving women the vote on individual states, many of those in the American West. New York State was late to the game. We see the years of activism come to a head in the 1910s, and Sarah Burinescu was in the thick of it.

In those years, New York City was a hive of radical action. Suffrage was not the only right women were demanding. People took to the streets to march for peace, for worker's rights, and to end lynching.

Valerie: There are a radical ideas brewing in New York City and in this moment, and we see a striking shirtwaist factory workers, and all of these people come together by marching. So there are sort of aspects to the optics of, of people coming together, marching down city streets to bring a focus to their particular gripes about what's going on in the world. It's, it's sort of the beginning of the modern age where society is rethinking the way one lives in society and in New York, which often sort of the things that happened in New York kind of become amplified in the rest of the nation. It's about empowerment. It's about equality. It's about civil rights.

Brendan: We don't know which calls for change were at the forefront of Sarah's mind, but she certainly was aware of them. Neighbors might have talked about them over tea. She might have picked up pamphlets from coworkers at the garment factory. She might have talked politics with other working-class women, women who lived on Orchard Street and shopped at the pushcarts like she did. Immigrant women who spoke Yiddish and shared her faith. Socialist women who were both fighting for their right to vote and fighting for their rights as factory workers.

Valerie further explained the way women like Sarah became enraptured with these ideas.

Valerie: It's in the air. Literally given the nature of her work. She did house cleaning, and she did piece work at home and perhaps in the factories too. She probably wouldn't have been in a union, but given her background, it's no surprise that she would have registered as a socialist. She would have known about the organizations like the women's trade union league, the equality league of self-supporting women and the wage earners suffrage league. These were all these organizations that were promoting the notion of suffrage. They argued that the right to vote was, was very much in the interest of working-class women. So - and that she was Jewish

also would put her in another pro-suffrage demographic. Statistically, Jews were, were large supporters of suffrage, women's suffrage in New York.

Brendan: Women like Sarah were fighting for their rights as full citizens, and labor laws and suffrage were both a part of that struggle. In this swirl of collective action, numerous women would stand out as leaders. One of those women was Clara Lemlich, a fellow Lower East Sider. Like Sarah, she was Jewish and spoke Yiddish, and also like Sarah she came to New York from the Russian Empire as a teenager. Clara Lemlich was 23 when she catalyzed a historic labor action.

Valerie: Clara Lemlich was a number of things, but she's best known as the leader of the uprising of the 20,000. This was a massive strike of shirtwaist workers in New York. The story goes, and this is documented, so it's not just lore, that there was a meeting at Cooper Union and she sat for two hours listening to labor leaders talk about what they were going to do-

Brendan: Men.

Valerie: (laughs) Yes. And she just had had enough, and she's most famous for this call to action.

Voice Actor as Clara Lemlich: I am tired of listening to speakers who talk in general terms. What we are here to decide is whether we shall or shall not strike. I offer a resolution that a general strike be declared now! If I turn traitor to the cause I now pledge may this hand wither from the arm I now raise.

Valerie: What was most exciting about this was she also invoked a, a modified version of a Jewish oath of fidelity to Israel about how you know if I turn traitor to the cause may my hand wither off my arm. She galvanized support for the strike, which, did effect some change.

Brendan: Clara gave her speech in Yiddish. Imagine those women who watched as this young 23-year old activist transformed words they all knew into something new, and powerful and American. Hundreds of women heard Clara's speech in 1909 at Cooper Union, not far from where Sarah lived. In the months following that speech, 20,000 people walked off the job, most of them young immigrant women like Sarah herself.

Valerie: Clara Lemlich would represent her, you know, wow, a woman, a woman with a voice, a woman who people are listening to. Seriously listening to - 20,000 people go on strike after hearing her call to action. That women do have an important role to play and that perhaps, perhaps a is it is an extremely important part of that sort of empowerment project. I think that Clara Lemlich was as an inspiration and certainly because she's a woman, just like the women she was representing but had an articulate voice and a ballsy attitude. I think it must've been just a sensation.

Brendan: Clara galvanized a movement. However, not everyone approved of her call to strike. How did the factory owners and police react to this call to action? What happened to the women who went on strike and marched?

Valerie: They were jailed. They were, they were beaten. Actually, several of Clara Lemlich ribs were broken. It was, it was quite violent, and they were really trying to suppress these women. Not just their, their voices, but really they withstood a great violence.

Brendan: Shop bosses opposed to labor reform even paid sex workers to infiltrate the strikers, trying to paint them as morally corrupt. But these tactics and the outright violence didn't cause women like Clara to back down; instead, it energized them. It gave their movement momentum and their message gravity. Women, and working-class immigrant women, in particular, were learning how to effectively organize.

Now here's something cool. These lessons born out of the labor movement were adopted by suffrage movement leaders. Upper-class women, members of the millionaire Gilded-Age elite, stood up and took notice.

Valerie: It's interesting to look at images of that period, of the people who were marching and the people who were striking. One of the elements of the costume that the strikers wore were sashes that explained what they were striking about. They kind of—at least visually—gave them a kind of uniform solidarity, that ultimately the suffragists take on that look and do adopt the sash as part of their costume as well when they marched. And it might have been unintentional, but in so far as the ideologies are the same, the whole idea of that kind of empowerment. Suffrage didn't just sort of come out of nowhere. And in New York City, in particular, there are other things. The labor movement, the anti-lynching movement, different activities that are, is that are all part of, have the same moment. And suffrage comes out of that sort of radical moment.

Brendan: I mentioned how New York City was a hive of radical action. Valerie helped contextualize how the various movements, not just the fight for labor rights, worked together during this period.

Valerie: They see what's going on in the south in particular. And most famously there is a silent march of African Americans walking in white and women are part of this very much part of this, down Fifth Avenue to protest lynching. Birth control, we see people like Margaret Sanger are on the city streets, in Brooklyn, opening her clinic. The notion that women should have some, at least knowledge about how their bodies work, but also some control over how many children that could have. And that's a radical idea.

Brendan: New York at this time was a progressive and dynamic place. It's unlikely that Sarah Burinescu could sit in her apartment in the Lower East Side and not feel the revolutionary spirit that had taken over Manhattan. It seeped through every window and onto every newspaper front page. Even women whose daily lives were consumed with working, raising their children and keeping house could not have avoided it. And they didn't.

I asked Valerie about the arguments immigrant mothers used during this fight for equal rights.

Valerie: Well, it's interesting from a sort of an in the kitchen sort of level with children running around trying to feed them. It's hard to argue with the idea that mothers should have a say in who makes the laws about food and safety schools and sanitation for their children, as mothers. And this is why they should be granted the right to vote as well. So this sort of home keepers, the women who were keeping the house and keeping the family together, why shouldn't they have to vote? So, to have that kind of a conversation at your kitchen table, it's kind of provocative to think about it.

Brendan: It is easy to forget that this may have been a huge departure from some women's lives in their home country. In many of the countries these women were immigrating from, there were stricter gender roles and social structures. Even the mere concept of Democracy may have been brand-new. Talk about culture shock. As Valerie said, to be a part of a movement, to march in the streets, to advocate for themselves, to possibly defy the men in their lives in doing so – all of this was absolutely radical.

Many textbooks are missing chapters on young, radical immigrant women and their role in the suffrage movement. In high school, I remember hearing more about upper- and middle-class women. Valerie helped me better understand how these communities worked together and why working-class immigrant women were pushed from the spotlight.

Valerie: Well, we see people very well-meaning a middle-class people, women in particular, as represented by the National American Women's Suffrage Association, the NAWSA, right, who were really at the vanguard, at least in the early part of the century of the suffrage movement. But ultimately it became frustrating for those who really wanted to truly push the amendment over the edge so that it would become a national amendment as opposed to a local and state

referendums for suffrage. So, people even like Harriot Stanton Blatch, who was Elizabeth Cady Stanton's daughter, also a big suffragist, and she learned at the knee of the master, she felt that NAWSA's influence had been plateauing in part because they were only preaching to the converted and not really reaching out to working-class women. So, in that regard, Sarah Burinescu was their ideal target. Certainly part of that, that change comes about with people like Inez Millholland, a beautiful, well educated, a lawyer and horsewoman. So, she leads a suffrage parade all dressed up and she brings great interest to the cause because there she is leading the parade on horseback. She's gorgeous, and she knows it, and she can use her intellectual skills, but also visually brings the media is all over her because it's... I think there are a lot of women like that. Certainly, some of the more educated ones that are, that are coming out of Greenwich Village society by society. Not high society, but just what's going on in the world, in Greenwich Village that see that they can draw attention to the movement of the lower classes by using themselves and they see the value of that. And I, you know, I guess it's also using the new media of the time you've got not only newspapers but the film, the print media.

Brendan: These women helped make the movement less threatening to those outside of New York's radical circles. Millholland riding her horse through the streets may or may not have meant as much to someone like Sarah as Clara Lemlich's speech did. But women from different cultures and classes came together to fight this fight.

With that said, despite the suffrage movement having intersectional elements, these different cultures and classes weren't treated as equals. Often, the face of a movement becomes one that's palatable to the powerful – and often that means white, middle- or upper-class, and Protestant. This is one of the reasons that the story of immigrant women and women of color in the suffrage movement is painfully underrepresented in American history.

Valerie: It's so much more pleasant to think of this as an intersectional movement and for its time, I guess it sort of is, but it does break down over race. And, you know, often the black women are relegated to have a separate march or you know, the back of the of the march itself. We see, you know, a very multicultural kind of a movement, but I don't know for its time, I think it was as, as blended as could be, but you'll see that sort of racial division all the time and certainly what, you know black women are looking for is...the black experience is very different from the white experience. And that is an unfortunate truth.

Brendan: As is the case with much of our history, two things can be true at once. Although this movement was flawed, it eventually succeeded in getting women the right to vote on a national level with the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1920, and it empowered millions of women across the country to step up to the ballot box and make their voices heard. It empowered Sarah Burinescu to engage with the American political system, to register to vote and to cast her first ballot -- possibly for Eugene V. Debs, an influential Socialist candidate for President who won close to one million votes.

She may have brought her baby daughter with her to the polling place. She certainly brought her opinions and hopes for what she wanted the world to look like for all of her children. She took steps that millions and millions of women would follow.

Valerie: It was in August of 1920 that the National amendment passed— a huge moment for women. But, it is important to note also that that wasn't the end of the story. That you know, women are still fighting some fight or any other. The equal rights amendment didn't pass. And we'll always see sort of, you know, regressive ideas or ideas that, that again, are more nuanced. One would like to tie this whole movement towards suffrage with a tidy little pretty bow and, you know, a march toward August of 1920 that then, you know, they get the vote and then the end. But that's not what happened, or it is what happened, but it was only the beginning.

Brendan: As Valerie said, it was only the beginning. Immigrant women are still fighting to ensure their community's votes are secured and voices are heard. New York City council representative Margaret Chin embodies that spirit. She has dedicated her career to tearing down barriers that still exist for her community, especially when it comes to access to the vote.

Margaret: I am Margaret Chin, a city council representative for District One in Lower Manhattan. I immigrated to New York City January 9th, 1963 and when we landed at the airport, it was the first time that I saw snow and touched it. I mean, I've seen it in movies, but it was the first time that I saw the real thing.

Brendan: Margaret immigrated to the United States from Hong Kong with her family when she was 9 years old. She grew up in New York City's Chinatown, a community that is now part of the district she represents. Her parents worked in the restaurant and garment industries, and she went to a local elementary school, P.S. 130. While attending Bronx High School of Science, she learned her third language, Spanish. She studied education at City College, and it was there that Margaret discovered her passion for community service and activism.

Margaret: But it wasn't until I got to City College where I took an Asian American history class, and it's called Chinese in America. And that was the first time I learn about our history in this country. The struggle, the discrimination and our contribution, you know, our ancestors contribution to help build his country. And that's how my journey started. That fighting for, you know, equality and justice, what's important. And for the first time, I realized I have roots in this country that I am not a foreigner. And so I think that's sort of like set the path for me to do community organizing, helping people fight for their rights.

Brendan: Before graduating, Margaret went through the extensive process of becoming a citizen of the United States. She then used her experience to help others navigate the process.

Margaret: I had to be a citizen before I graduated. So that's when I went and applied. I think my brother was my witness and I passed the test. I did all the paperwork myself. And then from that experience, I was able to help you know, other family members. And I know that growing up I was always the one to help people fill out forms and you know, relatives applying for housing, I was the one that was doing the translation. And I'm really proud that I kept up with my Chinese language.

Brendan: Margaret's advocacy work and career grew out of these individual acts of service. Long before running for office, she forged her identity as an Asian American woman advocating on behalf of her community. She was a founding member of Asian Americans for Equality, an organization dedicated to social and racial justice.

Margaret: We actually work to build a summer program, and after-school program for children because at that time there were, none of these programs were available. And oftentimes during the summer, the kids have nowhere to go, and a lot of them end up in the garment factory, with their mother. And so a bunch of college students. We worked at the basement of Transfiguration Church and provided an educational program, a summer program, for these children. I also got involved in organizing to elect the first school board member that's Asian in the Lower East Side. And that's what was the beginning of Asian Americans for Equality.

But being a citizen isn't the same thing as being a registered voter. It doesn't automatically invite you into the democratic process. While later in her career Margaret became known for her work with voting reform, earlier on she focused on creating change outside of the voting booth.

Do you remember when you registered to vote?

Margaret: I do, but it was much later. After I became a citizen and thinking back, it was that there wasn't really an atmosphere of voting in the community. It was more focused around fighting for basic needs. I really didn't register until 1983 when I got involved in running for a school board seat, because by then I was already a mother.

Brendan: When I was in college and living in the dorms, there was always a voter registration drive going on. I was explicitly invited to participate and told my vote was important. They made it so easy. But that is not the experience for so many communities across the country. Margaret's community wasn't actively deciding to not vote - they were experiencing firsthand the long legacy of voter exclusion. Margaret came up against this time and time again.

Margaret: Education is very important. And then ever since then, it was registering people cause a lot of people weren't registered to vote, have no idea. And even for school board election, you don't even have to be a citizen. All you do is have to have a kid in the school, even just educating people. And that brings me back in the 70s, early 70s, when I went knocking on doors. And the way I did it with like, I had a volunteer with me that didn't speak the Chinese dialect, and I did, and I would be the one knocking on the doors so that they would see a woman. And once they opened the door, I wouldn't stop talking to get them to register for the school board election. And I think that's how we sort of continue on and focus a lot on registration.

Brendan: Margaret explained to members of her community that the school board elections were different from the other elections that they may have heard about. It required two separate registrations. All that work Margaret described reaffirmed how even once you are here, there can be so many barriers to participation. From the convoluted system, overcomplicated language, cultural norms— even what appears to be an open and free process can be alienating and discouraging. This became clear in her own race for State Democratic Committee in the late 1980s.

Margaret: Ultimately a lot of people did not understand about you have to first register to vote. I remember on election day there were people coming with their passport. I want to vote for you. Cause in New York City, you have to vote in the primary and in order to vote in the primary you have to register with a party. And for a lot of immigrants, they really don't understand what that means and bringing, you know, the experience, let's say from China, they don't want to be that politically involved. So like getting them to register as a Democrat, it was very, very difficult. A lot of people would just say blank, you know, I don't want to register with a party. It would take us decades to sort of explain over and over again, for them to understand the importance, you know, all of a primary election and how that would be so decisive.

Brendan: For folks outside of New York, New York City traditionally votes Democrat, so the Democratic primary is the race to win. If you win that, you're almost always good to go. By the 1990s Margaret had co-founded an advocacy organization, served on the state democratic committee, and had been knocking on doors for almost 20 years. She was ready to represent her community. When a new city council seat was created in Lower Manhattan, she seized the opportunity.

Margaret: Our thought was, hey, you know, since we have no representation on the city council, it will be an opportunity to elect the first Asian American on the city council.

Brendan: Getting her constituents to the polls was once again an uphill battle. One of the biggest obstacles? The ballot itself. There is no national language in the United States. It is up to each state to decide what languages to print ballots in. New York doesn't have an official language, but every ballot handed out in Chinatown in 1991 was in English or Spanish. Many voters in Margaret's district found the system exclusionary.

Margaret: I fought for the bilingual ballot because in that election, um, voters were being turned away from the poll, because it's a political election, right? And people who work at the polls, they were appointed by political leaders. And so it was just shocking that every time they, they seen a Chinese, you know, voter coming in, they assume that, oh, this person is going to go from Margaret Chin and they're going to get a hard time.

Brendan: Though Margaret lost that election, she saw an opportunity.

Margaret: So even though I didn't win the election, we did file a suit against the board of elections. In terms of people who were turned away at the polls. And one of the settlements was to be able to provide more translation. And we met with the board of election, and they were very good. They really want to work with us. I, one of the issues was like that I had to fight for was translating the name, or having a Chinese name and having an English name, you know, phonetically. And also, for a Chinese candidate or Asian candidate, I have a Chinese name. So, within the community, they don't know me as Margaret Chin, right? They know me as “陈倩雯.” So, we said that to be fair on the ballot, they should be the English name and a Chinese name, whether it's the authentic Chinese name or a phonetic translation. Then they would say, oh, we don't have enough room. So, we had to like convince them. And we also have to show them like within the Chinese newspaper, like, people who were running, that you see their English name, but they also have a Chinese, phonetic translation of that name. So, we provided a lot of evidence. There was a whole, there was a committee of activists, community leaders who are working with us and we were able to get that done.

Brendan: This was a huge victory. Margaret continued to work to make voting less intimidating. She explained that some older members of her community were unfamiliar with voting machines, so they rented a machine so folks could try it out beforehand. After years of continuous advocacy, in 2009 Margaret was elected to the City Council, becoming the first Asian American woman to have that distinction, and the first Chinese-American to represent Chinatown.

If you have never seen a ballot in New York City, it is a beautiful thing. It's long, like really long. When I got an absentee ballot one year, the paper was about five feet double sided. That's because English isn't the only language on there. Each candidate's name is also written in Spanish, Chinese, Korean and Bangla. It seems like that this list is only going to grow. Voter registration forms now come in eleven additional languages: Russian, Urdu, Haitian Creole,

French, Arabic, Albanian, Greek, Italian, Polish, Tagalog and Sarah Burinescu's first language: Yiddish. This work that the Margaret and her colleagues are doing is making New York, a city full of immigrants, a city that works for immigrants.

Something that stood out when I spoke with Councilperson Chin was her emphasis on the "we." Her emphasis on collective action and working across traditional community divides reminded me of the stories I had explored with Valerie.

Margaret: So, I think looking at history that I've learned that it's really important for people to get involved. You know, at Asian Americans for equality, when we first fought for a construction job, at Confusions Plaza, we had to get help from the African American and the Latino community who were construction workers uptown. And we had to like get them to help us. Like, how do you demonstrate, how do you shape the job? You know, how do you do this and that. So, people have to see that coalition building is important, that we cannot do things by ourselves. And that's always so important. So, we have to have as our band together and work together so that we can improve conditions for everybody.

Brendan: Through learning more about the early years of suffrage in New York and from speaking with Margaret, I see even more clearly how powerful the vote is. It must be powerful if so many people have historically been excluded from it. If so many people today are still fighting for truly equal voting rights. For those who have struggled for the vote, being American has meant struggling to be heard. No, I take that back. Being American is refusing to be silenced. 127 is a great number, but we've still got a ways to go.

How to be American is a podcast from the Tenement Museum. This episode was produced by Max Savage Levenson. Our editor and composer is Craig Kepen. Jessica Underwood Varma provided additional vocals. Special thanks to: Valerie Paley, City Council Representative Margaret Chin, and Pineapple Street Media in Brooklyn, New York.

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From the Tenement Museum, I'm Brendan Murphy. Thanks for listening.