

CHAPTER 1

Pins and Needles

On a raw March evening in 1938, a group of awestruck young men and women, laden with garment bags and makeup cases, crowded past guards to find themselves in the spacious entrance hall of the White House. Ignoring the guard's request to check all cameras at the door, Katherine Joseph slipped her Rolleiflex unobtrusively into her capacious handbag and joined the excited throng.

They were cast and crew of the hit revue *Pins and Needles*, members of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) who sewed by day and sang by night, and they were excited beyond their wildest dreams to have been invited to the White House to give a command performance for the president. First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt had recently seen *Pins and Needles* in New York, and her glowing review in "My Day," her syndicated daily column, prompted a flurry of correspondence between the White House and ILGWU president David Dubinsky that began with Dubinsky's effusive letter of thanks to Mrs. Roosevelt and culminated in the White House invitation.

Written by fledgling composer Harold Rome and produced by the Cultural Division of ILGWU's Educational Department, *Pins and Needles* debuted on November 27, 1937, at the New York Labor Stage and became an instant box-office success. Its sketches celebrated

union life, satirized the advertising industry in songs that remain remarkably relevant, and lampooned the rise of imperialism and demagoguery. All of the original cast members were rank-and-file union members, primarily Jewish and Italian immigrants and children of immigrants, who in the early twentieth century had streamed from the Old World into the tenements and sweatshops of Manhattan. They brought to their new country passionate dreams for a brighter future in a system that would provide economic and social justice to the working class, and they built a successful labor movement that secured through years of struggle the protections and benefits that American workers now take for granted. The unprecedented success of *Pins and Needles*—the longest-running musical of the 1930s, with 1,108 New York performances and national tours—reveals how broadly union values had reached into American society. For the young men and women at the White House that night, who revered the president and first lady for their support of labor, the adventure was the thrill of a lifetime.

With little time to plan and limited space in the White House East Room that served as an ad-hoc theater, the show featured songs and skits from *Pins and Needles*, selected for the occasion to deliver maximum social and political punch. The number "It's Not Cricket to Picket" admonishes workers striking for better wages to



Eleanor Roosevelt with cast members of *Pins and Needles*, New York Labor Stage, February 14, 1938



Members of the cast and crew of *Pins and Needles* in makeshift dressing rooms, the White House, March 3, 1938

“go home and starve like gentlemen”; “Call It Un-American” skewers tactics used by the right wing to discredit progressive politicians:

*When investigating senators establish that your riches
Were extracted from the pockets of the public's tattered breeches
Never stop to contradict the socialistic sons of bitches,
Call them un-American.*

By all accounts the president loved the show and afterward, in his usual convivial mood amid social company, called for photos to commemorate the occasion. There was no official White

House photographer in those days, and the task of immortalizing presidential events fell to whoever happened to be on hand with a camera. Veteran ILGWU photographer Harry Rubenstein, Katherine's mentor (and likely more, but that's for a later chapter), had dutifully checked his camera at the door, so when President Roosevelt asked if anyone had a camera, Katherine pulled out her Rolleiflex and stepped forward. The cast gathered around the seated president, jockeying for coveted positions near their hero as he basked in their attention, delighted as always to be surrounded by adoring women, and Katherine immortalized the moment.



When it was all over, Katherine caught the late train back to New York and stayed up all night developing her film. Union publicists made the most of the presidential photo op with a parade of articles in the ILGWU newspaper, *Justice*, the most prominent of which carried the headline, "President Roosevelt 'Fraternizes' with *Pins and Needles* Cast" and featured a photo of FDR, smiling broadly and flanked by a beaming David Dubinsky and six excited young women. The caption read "President Roosevelt Took Time Out from Affairs of State to Spend a Few Social Moments with President Dubinsky and the Cast. The Cast Voted F.D.R. a Regular Fellow and a 'Warm Audience.'" The photo credit read H. Rubenstein and K. Joseph.

Unfortunately for Katherine, only a union readership was destined to see the picture during her lifetime. *Time-Life* editors saw the photo in *Justice* and did their best to obtain permission to publish it in *Time* magazine, but presidential press secretary Steve Early quashed the idea. Historians attribute Early's refusal to the White House's aversion to national exposure of the president cozying up too closely with the left wing of the labor movement, but cast member Millie Weitz had a different take on what happened. According to Millie, it was Mrs. Roosevelt who suppressed publication because she was furious that cast member Lynn Jaffe had draped her hand so familiarly on the president's shoulder. Evidence to support Millie's assertion is—not surprisingly—absent in the correspondence between Steve Early and *Justice* editor Max Danish, which concludes with Danish's April 6, 1938, letter to Early promising that the ILGWU would "faithfully abide by White House stipulations governing publication of this photographic material."

Ironically, the contested photograph subsequently became an iconic image of Roosevelt-era labor history and now appears prominently in books, articles, and academic papers on the topic. Nevertheless, Katherine's work that night marked a turning point in her career. The photos she took in the White House bore the stamp, "Photo by H. Rubenstein and K. Joseph." From that time forward, her photos were stamped with her name alone: "Photo by Katherine Joseph."



Franklin D. Roosevelt and David Dubinsky with *Pins and Needles* cast members. Left to right: Ruth Rubenstein, Rose Newmark, Lynn Jaffe, Millie Weitz, Ann Brown, and Nettie Harari, the White House, March 3, 1938