

RADIO'S BELOVED GOLDBERGS

The Rise of Gertrude Berg

BY CARY O'DELL

Though she looked nothing like the stereotypical show business executive, Gertrude Berg — with her doe-like eyes and plumpish figure — was, in every sense of the term, a media mogul. A prolific writer/producer, a smart, savvy, and sometimes very tough business woman, she was the creator of a multi-media entertainment empire, the Goldberg dynasty.

Gertrude Berg was one of television's first sitcom moms, and the star and creator of one of the medium's earliest hits. Writer Gilbert Seldes in 1956, in *Saturday Review*, remembered how it all began on the small screen, "The first time I saw Mrs. Gertrude Berg on television was with a group, none of the half-dozen people watching the show expected too much and none of us expected the sudden excitement when an excerpt from 'The Rise of the Goldbergs' came on — and everyone of us knew that this was *it!* This was television and nothing else."

But before Berg could make it big in TV, and on Broadway, she had made it big in radio, where the Molly Goldberg character, her make-believe family and opening show cry of "Yoohoo, Mrs. Bloom!" were already a national institution. And so was she.

Gertrude Edelstein was born on October 3, 1899, the only child of Jacob and Diana Edelstein in the then fashionable

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district of Harlem. She was raised surrounded by a large group of assorted family. "We didn't have Tennessee Williams problems," she once said, "It was more George Kaufman." Especially close to her was her Grandfather Mordecai who told her repeatedly as a little girl, "This is your America." Gertrude's father divided his career between theater owner and, in the summer, running hotels in the Catskill Mountains. She began her writing career as a teenager writing skits to amuse the hotel guests on rainy days and to keep the children of the guests busy. Some later scripts for "The Goldbergs" had their idea origins in these sketches.

Berg attended Wadleigh High School but never graduated and her only college education consisted of playwriting and acting courses at Columbia University. Around this time, 1918, she met and married Lewis Berg, then an engineering student at Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute. Two weeks after his graduation he found work as a sugar technologist on a plantation in Reserve, Louisiana. While there Gertrude found little to do during the day but read. She also gave birth to two children. Cherney in 1922, and Harriet in 1926.

Life for the Bergs in the South, however, came to an end in 1929, after a fire destroyed the plantation and the family returned to New York City where the depression had left few opportunities for employment. In order to support her family, Gertrude, on the advice of a friend, decided to put her playwriting talents to work and sell scripts to local radio stations. Though the WMCA executive she auditioned for did not care for



THE GOLDBERGS: Jake (James Waters), Rosalie (Roslyn Silber), Molly (Gertrude Berg), and Sammy (Alfred Ryder).

her first script ("It has about as much entertainment value as the telephone book," he told her) he liked her voice well enough to pay her five dollars to translate a gasoline commercial in Yiddish. Thus, Gertrude Berg began her radio career. Afterward, she occasionally earned an extra five dollars by reading recipes in Yiddish. Since she did not speak the language herself, she read them with proper inflections from phonetic translations. Her first attempt at regular radio scriptwriting came when she created a show for CBS called "Effie and Laura," about two working class salesgirls. Berg played one of the two roles. Considered too advanced in their views on love and marriage, "Effie and Laura" lasted only one airing.

Not deterred, Berg drew on the inspiration of her Jewish grandmother and dialect comedian Milt Gross and drafted a gentle and warm family comedy. Titled "The Rise of the Goldbergs," it centered around daily life for a Jewish

family living in New York. Molly, the mother, was the center of the show, and she was joined by husband, Jake, (originally played by James R. Waters), children, Rosalie (Roslyn Siber) and Sammy (Alfred Ryder and later Everett Sloane) and live-in Uncle David (played by well-known Yiddish actor Menasha Skulnik). The show had a basic format. Mrs. Goldberg, though not really a busybody, did spend a lot of her time interfering in the lives of her family and friends and a lot of time learning out of her window *shmoosing* with her neighbors.

Gertrude persented the audition script for the show to NBC in an entirely illegible handwriting — knowing she would be forced to read aloud and therefore be able to add the tone and vocal inflection she thought it needed. The radio executive was so impressed he offered her a job of writing the show — and playing the lead. "The Rise of the Goldbergs" premiered on the air on November 20, 1929. The station paid her \$75 a week to write and star in the show. Out of that sum she was

also expected to pay the cast and crew. Program genres were less defined in those days, and Berg's daily serialized stories were considered soap opera (or, as they were also known, "washboard weepers"). Authors Madeline Edmondson and David Rounds believed that, despite humorous situations and character-led laughs, the show was a soap at heart: "Its subject matter was human relations, and its surface was resolutely realistic." Though the story was continuous and the show ran six times a week, it never dealt with such soap staples as amnesia, crime or "other women."

Whatever it was, it was popular. During its radio run, "The Goldbergs" picked up a sponsor, Pepsodent, and spawned several vaudeville skits and a comic strip. Once, when Gertrude had a sore throat and another actress filled in the role of Molly, the station received 30,000 letters of complaint. Fans were so loyal to the show that a group of nuns from Libertytown, Maryland, who had given the show up for lent, wrote Berg asking for the scripts of the shows they missed. A later letter came from a refugee: "Coming from Germany, I could not believe to hear such a program, but today I know that this country really means freedom."

Besides making Gertrude popular, the series also eventually made her rich. During "The Goldbergs" radio heydays, Gertrude was receiving a weekly salary of \$7,500 a week, making her the highest paid woman in the medium. Soap opera writer Irna Phillips came in a very close second. At this time, "The Goldbergs" ran on three different networks at once: NBC at 11:30 a.m., CBS in the afternoon and WOR-Mutual early the next morning. Part of Berg's salary also came from writing the daily radio serial "Kate Hopkins," the "exciting story of a visiting nurse."

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After the demise of the first incarnation of "The Goldbergs" in 1934, to take the show on a national tour, Gertrude Berg returned to regular radio comedy in 1935, in a second, self-written, self-starring vehicle for the NBC network, "House of Glass." Set in a Catskill Mountain resort hotel — all drawn from memories of her childhood — Berg played Sophie the cook. The show never caught on and lasted less than a year.

"The Goldbergs," show and family, were revived for radio in 1937 when Berg was offered a contract worth one million dollars to come back to New York and pick up where she left off. "The Goldbergs" ran once again on both NBC and CBS until 1945. All told, "The Goldbergs" (in one form or another) ran on radio for seventeen years, more than 4,500 episodes, second only to "Amos and Andy" in terms of longevity.

To write so many scripts, Berg relied on working habits which were both rigid and legendary. She often rose at 6:00 a.m. to write scripts (usually three weeks in advance) in a longhand cursive which was only legible to her and her daughter, who usually typed the finished product. Gradually her scripts grew more detailed, but in the beginning they were often little more than outlines which Berg and cast improvised live on the air. Once, when a key actress failed to show up for the show, Berg devised a new script in eight minutes. At ten, her morning writing done, she would leave for the studio to rehearse the day's program.

By the end of her career, Gertrude had written more than 10,000 Goldberg scripts, more than fifteen million words. Her scripts, though funny, never leaned towards silly. Like many other modern day sitcoms, her stories often dealt with exaggerated circumstances — crash diets, problems with income tax. Still, the majority of their humor came straight out of



GERTRUDE BERG

character and, more often than not, out of Molly's mouth. Though Berg was American-born and spoke unaccented, perfect English, she gave Molly such a troubled tongue that her frequent misconstrued statements became known as "Mollyisms" or Goldbergisms". Some of the best remembered: "Enter, whoever!," "If it's nobody, I'll call back later," and "I'm putting on my bathrobe and condescending the stairs." Often, Molly also offered up some friendly, motherly advice (sometimes ad-libbed): "Better a crust of bread and enjoy it than a cake that gives you indigestion."

Gertrude Berg said, "Molly's humor comes out of life. Ours was never a show that made jokes about people. The humor came from the love and warmth of the characters. Molly was never a joke."

Once the script was written, Gertrude took to the task of putting the show on the air. She called the shots there too. She was devout stickler for details and accuracy, Berg allowed no "faked" sound effects on radio. For the sound of eggs breaking into a frying pan, she broke two eggs into a frying pan. When

the script required Molly to give daughter Rosalie a shampoo, Berg lathered up the hair of actress Roslyn Siber. And when son Sammy Goldberg (and the actor playing him) was drafted into the Army, Gertrude arranged for the family good-bye scene to be played in the middle of Grand Central Station.

Gertrude did the same for casting. Local elevator operators, grocery clerks and delivery boys were often recruited by Gertrude to play like-job character parts on her show. She also had a good eye — or ear — for talent. Performers like Eartha Kitt, Joseph Cotten, Van Heflin and Anne Bancroft all had early roles on radio's "Goldbergs."

In 1948, Berg moved the Goldbergs to a new venue: the Broadway stage. On February 26, her play "Me and Molly" opened at the Belasco Theater and received good to mixed reviews. The family's radio popularity allowed for a strong Broadway run of 156 performances.

It was while appearing in the play that Gertrude struck upon the idea of moving the family into the then new medium of television. Television, though still very new, was nevertheless all the rage; Gertrude decided "The Goldbergs" should be part of the newest trend. After setting her mind to it, she went about trying to sell the show to the networks. It took a little work. NBC-TV turned her down, not believing the show would translate well to the small screen. On her second attempt, this time at CBS, Berg, after meeting with opposition from lower executives, arranged a meeting with William Paley, head of CBS. He set up an audition for her and the show in front of a group of CBS executives and possible sponsors. The audition went so well that immediately afterward, Berg and crew received a Monday night, half-hour timeslot and General Foods as its first sponsor. (Sanka coffee took over the

program in late 1949; Mrs. Goldberg's windowsill was thereafter graced with a flower growing out of an empty Sanka coffee can.)

"The Goldbergs" began on television on January 10, 1949. The show's cast consisted of Gertrude Berg as Molly, Philip Loeb as Jake, Larry Robinson as Sammy, Arlene McQuade as Rosalie, and Eli Mintz as Uncle David. From its earliest broadcast, the show was a hit. Over the course of its run, it attracted an average weekly TV audience of forty million. Usually, it ranked second in the ratings, between Milton Berle and Arthur Godfrey. Berg was soon being showered with awards from various groups including the U.S. Treasury Department, for helping the sales of Savings Bonds; the Girls Clubs of America, for "setting an outstanding example of motherhood"; and from the National Conference of Christian and Jews. In 1950, Berg received an Emmy Award for Best Actress in a continuing performance, the first ever winner of that award.

The love of the Molly Goldberg character, and "The Goldbergs," was easy for Gertrude to explain, "The answer always comes out that it's because we are the same. There are surface differences but these surface differences only serve to emphasize how much alike most people are." The show was praised by critics and religious leaders at the time for its portrayal of Jewish culture and gentle home life, and for being a tool for interracial understanding; it was said of Berg, "she speaks a universal language with a Yiddish accent." On television, conflicts in the Goldberg household (played out at the imaginary address of 1038 East Tremont Avenue, Apt. 3-B, the Bronx) were relatively minor and easily fixed by

mother Molly; off screen though things could not have been more different. In June 1950, *Red Channels*, a paperback book with lists of names of entertainment figures with alleged Communist ties, came out. One of the names on the Lists belonged to actor Philip Loeb, husband Jake to Berg's Molly.

Boss and friend, Gertrude Berg, refused to fire him and came to his defense, "Philip Loeb has stated categorically that he is not a Communist. I believe him." Nevertheless, she was later forced by the show's sponsor to fire him. Though he was no longer on the show, Gertrude kept Loeb on salary at a personal cost of \$85,000 for two years. Later, unable to find work or support himself, Loeb committed suicide by overdose on September 1, 1955. A new Jake, actor Harold Stone, was hired, but no sponsor could be found for the show and "The Goldbergs" was off the air from June 1951 to February 1952.

"The Goldbergs" came back to TV in 1952, and ran until October 1954. In 1955, they returned once more in an off-network syndicated form. For thirty-nine more episodes, Molly/Gertrude and her brood lived again, this time in suburban bliss. Gertrude said, "I felt the series needed a change, so I moved the family out of the city to the mythical Haverville. And from live television to film. Of course, the money from repeat showings was no small consideration."

In 1963, after a triumphant Broadway bow in the play "A Majority of One," Gertrude returned to weekly television in a series titled "Mrs. G. Goes to College" (also known as "The Gertrude Berg Show"). Though her character's last name was Green and a widow, she was still basically Molly Goldberg. Berg created the self-explanatory show herself which co-starred her former "Majority



MOLLY AND JAKE ON TV: Gertrude Berg and Philip Loeb

of One” stage companion Cedric Hardwicke. He played a visiting British professor. Though the majority of the writing was handled by others, there was little doubt about who was boss. As the *Los Angeles Examiner* reported “nothing leaves the set on film without her considered approval.” The show failed, however, to gain an audience. It lasted only a year.

That same year, Gertrude wrote her bestselling autobiography, with her son Cherney. The book’s title continued Berg’s association with her world famous and much-loved alter ego by being titled *Molly and Me*.

Gertrude Berg worked until the very end of her life, in guest spots on television, in the dramatic anthologies of the period. She was preparing for a return to the Broadway stage in “The Play Girls,” a play based on one of her ideas, when she died of heart failure in New York City on September 14, 1966. She was sixty-six. Berg was survived by her husband, her two children, and an assortment of grandchildren.

The appeal of Gertrude Berg (and therefore Molly Goldberg) has often been approached as a subject. William Leonard in a 1961 article for the *Chicago Tribune* saw her this way, “She can be herself and in being herself she pleases individuals who find comfort in seeing in her old fashioned common sense and serenity.”

Gertrude also had the luck of totally looking her most famous part: five feet four inches tall and admittedly overweight (she often said she started a diet every Monday and quit every Tuesday). All together, Gertrude Berg looked just like everyone thought Molly sounded. Besides looking the part — she lived it. Fans addressed her only as “Molly” and finally so did friends and co-workers. Frequently her “autographs” were inscribed “Molly Goldberg.”

Basically, though, Gertrude Berg was an actress. Gilbert Seldes in 1956 considered her one of the nation’s finest, “She never plays to us and never to the camera. She is a great force in whatever she does and in this, the primary business of giving life to imagined people, she is incomparable.”

And she was also incomparable in her creative drive. Few other individuals (male or female) in radio, and no one in television, ever took upon the task of writing, producing and starring in their own series. Gertrude did it, did it first, and did it very well. Before Diane English dreamed up “Murphy Brown” and before Linda Bloodworth-Thomason came up with those defining “Designing Women,” one woman made success and control behind the camera and in front of it all look easy: Gertrude the Great. ■

(ED. NOTE — Two consecutive episodes of *The Goldbergs* will be presented on *Those Were The Days*, Saturday, October 23 on WNIB.