Molly Goldberg frantically searches among the surging crowds in New York City’s Pennsylvania Station. She has ventured from the nearby Connecticut suburbs via bus, but it feels like another country, another world. She’s lost the commanding presence she has back in the home where she lives with her husband and children. Her voice wavers as she tells a woman, a stranger, that she’s not sure she’s in the right place. She’s trying to find her son, she explains, who is leaving today. “I wasn’t supposed to be here even,” she finally reveals. “It was decided not to come to the station.”

Molly was always very much in charge at home, whether the family lived in a Bronx tenement, as they did earlier in their fictional run on the radio show “The Goldbergs,” or in a house in Connecticut. This Penn Station scene is an arresting one because Molly is so out of her element. Her nervousness comes through in Gertrude Berg’s performance of her signature character, a radio staple for 13 years by the time of this 1942 episode, “Sammy Goes Into the Army,” which charges directly into the heart of World War II.

“The Goldbergs” was the first series to portray a Jewish-American family, and Berg--its creator, writer, and star--didn’t shy away from issues of the day like the war and the Holocaust. Berg’s work was many gentiles’ introduction to Jews, and she often received fan letters telling her she had shifted their prejudices with her warmth and relatability. She was so beloved that she was once voted America’s most trusted woman, second only to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt. Though “The Goldbergs” often portrayed the details of Jewish life like Passover celebrations, it also showed the family as distinctly all-American. “Sammy Goes Into the Army” perfectly exemplifies the latter, with a heartrending glimpse of an all-too-familiar scene at the time--seeing a son off to war--with the added subtext that a boy with Jewish heritage had even more at stake.

The series spanned a tumultuous time in American history, premiering as the Great Depression began in 1929 and running through World War II until peacetime in 1946. Three years later, it would find new life as TV’s first hit family sitcom, lasting until 1956. “The Goldbergs” was among several 15-minute radio comedies that were serialized, including “Amos ‘n’ Andy” and “Easy Aces.” Only “Amos ‘n’ Andy” ran longer than “The Goldbergs.” These programs--particularly the grounded, warm family of “The Goldbergs”--kept Americans’ spirits up through the worst of times. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, legend has it, once said that he didn’t get America out of the Depression, the Goldbergs did. Berg later repeated a version of this
statement to CBS network chief William Paley when she pitched him on the TV version of “The Goldbergs.” She had kept his network alive through the Depression and World War II, she reminded him. So she “didn’t believe it was fair that a woman who had been so successful with a show on radio, should be shut out from TV without so much as a chance,” she later wrote. She got her TV show.

“Sammy Goes Into the Army” displays Berg’s gift for what might best be described as the sweet hijinks of family life: After the family decides it’s best not to go to the train station to see Sammy off, they all, separately--Molly, husband Jake (James R. Waters), Uncle David (Menasha Skulnik), even a few friends and neighbors--decide to go anyway, hoping to sneak “a little peekaboo,” as Molly explains to the stranger she meets. As they all run into each other, and then try to figure out if they’re in the right place to catch Sammy (Alfred Ryder) before he leaves, overlapping conversational bits capture the historic moment: “Two wars in our lifetime,” one woman sighs repeatedly. “Ay, Hitler,” Uncle David sighs repeatedly.

When they finally find Sammy, he pulls his mother aside: “You write,” he tells her. “I don’t care if you don’t know how to spell, don’t let anybody write for you.”

It’s a moment that crystallizes so much unspeakable emotion, packed into a concise sitcom scene. Before the episode closes, Berg gives Molly a monologue, delivered to the distraught woman next to her, that serves as a pep talk for the nation: “This is no time for crying,” she says, even as her voice breaks a little. “Today we have to stand like rocks in the sea. We all have to face the same way until our bodies become a wall that locks the fascists in their holes. Our sons go to the front, our husbands and our daughters make guns and tanks and bullets.”

By this point in the series, we have seen the Goldbergs through a lot, including a move from their Bronx tenement to the fictional Connecticut suburb of Lastenbury. The immigrant parents have moved up in the world, made good, and produced two fully-assimilated children, one of whom can now proudly march off to serve America. The series embodied the American Dream that at the time seemed so possible, and very much worth defending at war--upward mobility and democracy for all.

Berg had fashioned for herself an even more spectacular ascent than that of her characters. The daughter of Jewish immigrants, she had--thanks to an intense work ethic, a great deal of talent, and chutzpah--become one of the first women to create, produce, and star in her own show. “The Goldbergs” had made her one of the most famous women in America, eventually allowing her to expand her empire to include an advice column, a line of housedresses, and a successful book of recipes (even though she, herself, did not cook).

Her radio work stands the test of time. In an age when we are overwhelmed with excellent streaming television and podcasts, “Sammy Goes Into the Army” exemplifies Berg’s gift for concise, topical, emotional storytelling. “We mothers should make a promise,” she tells her fellow mother at the station. “We should swear to each other not to cry until the war is won. Because unless we win there won’t be enough tears in the world to sweeten the bitterness of our defeat.” In times that feel just as tumultuous as those the Goldbergs radio family lived through, her sentiments feel not a drop too strong. The Goldbergs are as relatable as they ever were, their legacy reverberating through the decades.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.