

"The Goldbergs": Sammy Goes Into the Army (July 9, 1942)

Added to the National Registry: 2013

Essay by Cary O'Dell



Gertrude Berg

Legend has it that President Franklin D. Roosevelt once said, he didn't get America out of the Great Depression, it was "The Goldbergs."

Such was the power, influence, and importance of the famous and long-running radio (and, later, TV) series, originally known as "The Rise of the Goldbergs."

"The Goldbergs" began on the national radio airwaves, over NBC, on November 20, 1929. It would remain on the radio airwaves until 1945. It then came to the nascent world of television in January, 1949, and became one of the young medium's first major "hits."

In any incarnation, over any media, "The Goldbergs" was the tale of a Jewish immigrant family residing (most of the time) in a New York City tenement. In the series, the family consisted of an amalgamation of relatives all living under one roof—father Jake, kids Rosalie and Sammy, and elderly Uncle David. Overseeing them all, however, was the show's benevolent matriarch—Molly, i.e. Molly Goldberg.

Molly—and, indeed, the whole series—was the creation of Gertrude Berg (b. 1899). Berg was the program's producer, writer and, throughout its multi-media life, its central star.

Nee Gertrude Edelstein, Berg was the daughter of immigrants and was raised in Harlem. Growing up, her father divided the family's time between the city (where he ran a theater) and the Catskills (where he ran a resort hotel). It was at the hotel, that the young Gertrude first took pen to paper to write scripts; it was something she did to give the children of guests something to do on rainy days.

Years later, though by this time a married mother of two, Berg returned to writing. To earn extra money, she began selling short scripts to local radio stations. Berg also began to earn money by occasionally appearing on radio; she got her first on-air exposure when she was hired to read a Yiddish recipe, complete with proper inflections, over the local airwaves.

Soon, Berg began to delve deeper into radio. She created her first radio program, "Effie and Laura," the story of two savvy salesgirls, for the CBS network in 1928. Berg played one of the

two leading roles. But her two female lead characters were considered a little too sophisticated for the time and “Effie and Laura” ended after only one episode.

Still, Berg was not deterred. Drawing on her own upbringing, Berg fashioned the script for “The Goldbergs.” She presented the script to NBC in 1929, and even played one of the leading roles herself. Networks execs were impressed and picked up the series—and offered Berg the starring role in it.

Even before she became visibly known to audiences thanks to “The Goldbergs” TV series (and its 1950 spin-off movie), Gertrude Berg looked very much like the character she was playing. Molly Goldberg (a name and character that, with time, began to override Berg’s own identity), was, in many ways, the stereotypical Jewish mother: round-faced, pleasantly plump, and filled with handy bromides to live your life by. The foreign-born Molly also had many malapropisms (“Enter whoever!”), the source of much of the show’s gentle humor.

Originally, as “The Goldbergs” was serialized and ran daily in 15-minute installments, the show has often been labeled a soap opera. But while the show did focus on relationships, it was free of the *sturm und drang* conflicts more typical of radio soaps. Instead, the program’s more or less equal mix of family dynamics and home-spun humor has more correctly gotten the show labeled one of the airwaves’s first “dramedies.”

Regardless of what it is or was labeled, as the saying goes, Whatever it was, it was popular. A case in point: when Berg missed one broadcast and another actress performed her role, the network got 30,000 letters of complaint! “The Goldbergs” would soon acquire an on-air sponsor (Pepsodent), inspire vaudeville skits and a daily comic strip, along with becoming a listening staple in homes all across America. In time, Berg, as the show’s owner, head writer and star, would pull in a weekly salary of \$7,500 (this during the Great Depression) and began being heralded in the press as radio’s “First Lady.”

Though, today, “The Goldbergs” is largely remembered as a comedy--one of the formulators of the sitcom format--just as often Berg was willing to tackle weighty and meaningful topics and ideas. One notable installment, aired in April of 1939, has the proudly Jewish Goldberg family sitting down for their Passover Seder dinner only to have a rock thrown in through their window.

As the war escalated in Europe, Berg began to make more and more mention in the program of anti-Semitism and the plight of Jews abroad.

Another episode that also dared to tackle heavy subject matter is the episode that was added to the National Recording Registry in 2013. Known (unofficially) as “Sammy Goes Into the Draft,” the episode was originally aired July 9, 1942. For many listeners, the plotline and subject matter of this particular program, no doubt, hit disturbingly close to home.

In it, Molly Goldberg’s son, Sammy (and, in real life, the actor playing him), has received his draft notice and, like so many of his young fellow countrymen at that time, is about to ship out.

Famously, Berg disliked “faked” sound effects. If the script called for Molly to fry an egg, then they fried an egg in the studio. Hence, in this episode, when it was time for radio’s most famous fictional family to send their son off to war, Berg arranged for the scene to be played in the middle of New York’s Grand Central Station.

The Grand Central location adds further authenticity to the emotions of this episode. The ambient hustle and bustle of New York’s most famous terminal seems to heighten the nervousness, fear and cautious optimism that was so much typical of the time.

In the installment, Molly, though the family has said their good-byes, the night before, sneaks away to the station the next day, wanting to get one last glimpse of Sammy before he goes. Unbeknownst to her, Molly's husband Jake, and the rest of the Goldberg family, have also decided to do the same. As they run into each other, they also frantically search for Sammy and each of the Goldbergs voice their weary concerns about another war arriving so soon after the conclusion of the other, about Hitler, and about the unknown that awaits them and so many other families.

After Sammy departs, Molly spies another mother also saying good-bye to her son. Molly says to the woman:

Your son, my son, too. No time for crying. Today we have to stand like rocks in the sea. We must all face the same way, until our bodies become a wall....

In victory, we will have time to cry. Not to cry until the war is won. Because unless we win, there won't be enough tears in the whole world....

For the "Goldbergs's" extraordinary lifespan (it ran on radio until 1945 and then on television from 1949 to 1954), Gertrude Berg would author thousands upon thousands of scripts. Her massive output has somehow served to dull the recognition she deserves for the quality and potency of so many of her efforts. Certainly the humanity and emotion she conveys—as both author and actress—within the scant 15 minutes of this particular installment (and, indeed, in so many others) positions her not only as one of the medium's most popular and graceful performers, but, in fact, one of its greatest writers and visionaries as well, fully on par with any other acknowledged luminary.

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