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RADIO'S DIALECT QUEEN



Minerva Pious

BY EARL WILSON

ELEVEN years ago, when Fred Allen, then a vaudeville star, was just starting in radio, somebody urged him to hire—as a screwball character—a certain young girl who weighed about a hundred pounds, stood scarcely five feet tall, and had about as much glamour as a sack of cement.

Allen hesitated. His friend kept on urging, and argued that the girl was one of the sensations of the air. Allen knew little about radio actors in those days and had no time to investigate her. Otherwise he'd have known she was merely a young stenographer and secretary without real radio experience. But at length he assigned her to play a French woman lion tamer on one of his programs. She approached the first role with the usual nervousness. Afterward her friend went somewhat fearfully to Allen and asked him how he liked his new actress.

"She was fine," said Allen. "When she talked, I could practically smell the lion."

Thus started a wondrous radio career. The little stenographer and secretary up to then had been a nobody. She had been a full-time stenographer and a part-time eavesdropper. She had loved to eavesdrop on conversations around her and then mimic them at home. She had been a parlor comedian only.

But suddenly the many dialects spoken by the little eavesdropper became nationally known. She became the only woman inhabitant of that little crackpot world known as Allen's Alley. As Mrs. Pansy Nussbaum, she was always answering Fred Allen's knock and giving a familiar "Nu-u-u" reply. She became Gypsy Rose Rabinowitz, wife of a heel known as Tyrone Rabinowitz, and, to prove her versatility as a dialectician, she got to be Mrs. Boots Mulligan of Toity-toid Street, loving wife of Mr. Socrates Mulligan.

As you read this, she is Mrs. Blossom Rappaport on Jack Benny's program.

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Benny quickly grabbed her, at twice her salary, when Fred Allen couldn't decide whether he would continue on the air, due to illness. In Benny's first program this fall from New York, Mrs. Rappaport was dragged out to LaGuardia Field by her husband to welcome Benny back from a USO trip to Europe. Mrs. Rappaport couldn't quite get clear whom they were going to see.

"Jack Benny!" repeated Mr. Rappaport.

"Who?" demanded Blossom.

"Jack Benny—you know, the comedian who went to Europe for the USO."

"Oh-h, yes," said Blossom. "Bob Hope—he's so comical!"

Blossom kept complaining about meeting merely Jack Benny. "I thought at least I was going to meet Franklin D. Sinatra!" she protested. But finally she decided to do the decent thing and ask Jack Benny to give her his autograph.

"Sign it to Blossom Rappaport," she commanded. "'From Jack Benny to Blossom Rappaport.'"

A hilarious close-up of the dialectable Minerva Pious, the Mrs. Nussbaum of Fred Allen's show who is now with Jack Benny to bolster his program (says Mr. Allen)

"How do you spell it?" asked Benny.

"You dawrna how to spell it!" shrieked Blossom incredulously. "B-e-n-n-y!"

When Jack signed, Mrs. Rappaport said, "Hurry up. I'm vasted enoff time on you alreddy!"

Mrs. Blossom Rappaport went along to California with Jack Benny when he moved his program West, and she will undoubtedly be many more characters, just as she was on the Fred Allen program. She was Consuelo Warburton, debutante; she was the woman who sugars doughnuts in the window of a doughnut shop on Broadway; she was a younger member of the Rappaport family—Miss Bubbles Rappaport, valedictorian of Mrs. Rabinowitch's Finishing But Positively School. In her exaggerated dialects, she has been gun moll, burlesque queen, dance-hall hostess, and farmer's wife. Although Allen once described her as "short, dumpy, and repulsive"—actually, she's merely short—she has made love, on various programs, to such men as Bing Crosby and Charles Boyer.



Here shown as Mrs. Blossom Rappaport with Jack Benny, she was the unforgettable Mrs. Pansy Nussbaum, the Gypsy Rose Rabinowitz, and the Mrs. Mulligan of the Fred Allen show.

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The woman who has done all this merely because of her passion for eavesdropping is Miss Minerva Pious, thirty-odd years old, a native of Odesa, Russia, who was brought to the States as an infant and grew up in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Raucous, mouthy, and hilarious on the radio, she's personally a retiring little woman who enjoys good books and good music and things generally classed as cultural. She emerged from Bridgeport High School with a good clear American voice, but now, as the possessor of eighteen dialects, she has made some people forget that she can speak like an average American. Once when a radio program needed somebody to play a straight American role, her name was suggested. A radio executive who should have known better said in great surprise: "Why, she can't play that part. She speaks English with a foreign accent!"

True, she usually does, when on the air. The "Nu-u-u" that she used so often when Fred Allen knocked at her door was a rib tickler to millions who thought she was saying "No-o-o." Actually she was using a Jewish or German expression meaning, "Well, what do you want?" She was an extremely earthy soul, this Mrs. Nussbaum. Once, plodding home through a blizzard, she climbed into what she thought was her cellar apartment, but got into a second-floor apartment by mistake. Suddenly, as she was preparing supper for her husband, Rensselaer, a man came in and threw his arms around her. Whirling about, she discovered it wasn't her husband but a stranger.

"What happened, Mrs. Nussbaum?" asked Fred Allen, drawing this story out of her.

"Lokkily," replied Mrs. Nussbaum, "the strenger is liking coal kotts."

Mrs. Pious has the ability to make people laugh merely by maneuvering her voice into strange keys. She doesn't need a gag to get laughs. When she played the woman who sugared doughnuts in a Times Square window, she only had to say, "I was standin' in the window shakin' my sugar," and the audience howled. As the Toity-toid Street goil, she also gets "yaks," as the comedians call belly laughs. Experts on New York dialects differ as to whether anybody in New York actually says "Toidy-toid Street." Some contend this is a gross exaggeration. Others will assure you that New Yorkers do say it—especially in Brooklyn. Miss Pious shrugs off such arguments. She confesses trying to do satirical versions only. On the Sammy Kaye program last summer she had a lot of fun kidding the Brooklyn Dodgers. Once she asked baseball broadcaster Red Barber, "If you'll be so kindly, Mr. Barber, for why is the Dodgers in thoid place?" Another time, a man stopped Mrs. Socrates Mulligan and asked how to get to the Dodgers' home park, Eb-bets Field.

"How dya get to Ebbisfeel?" he inquired.

"Ebbisfeel?" she replied. "Go down to Toity-toid and Toid and take a subway tillya git to de erstabar."

"Erstabar? What's that?"

"Erstabar!" she said, loudly and impatiently. "Whereya git ersters. Right across from da moompitcher!"

Minnie Pious, as her friends call her, feels she has accomplished something when she gets laughs out of lines like those, whereas she gives the gag writer the principal credit when there is a punch line at the end of a lot of gibberish. However, the gag writers give

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her the credit, because they do not even try to write dialect for her. They say it's really her dialect that gets the laughs. "You give her a dead script, and it becomes alive in her hands," one writer said in admiration.

She has often demonstrated this in her role as Gypsy Rose Rabinowitz. She was on one occasion complaining of the treatment she got from her lug of a husband, Tyrone. She described the stinker's conduct in this language:

"We was comin' from da moompitcher, and Tyrone says, 'Gypsella, dahling, let's go by the ice cream parlor like we useta.' So we venn in and had a chawclutt sodah like we useta, with two straws, like we useta. Then whadya think the schlemiel does? He drank it all down in one gulp, like he useta!"

Curiously, Minnie Pious' New Yorkese and her Jewish dialects are howled over throughout North America, although neither her brand of Jewish nor the New Yorkese is to be heard much outside of New York City. In Bridgeport she never heard the dialects she speaks now. Out-of-town visitors to New York are constantly betraying their innocence of the special language she speaks. Visiting her backstage after she has reeled off some Jewish dialect, they will often say, "You were awfully funny in that Swedish dialect," or "You were hilarious in that Scotch dialect."

Miss Pious smiles politely and doesn't tell them the truth.

Her multi-voiced dialects now earn her \$20,000 to \$25,000 a year. Not long ago it appeared that she would add to this queenly figure by becoming a movie star. Bing Crosby liked her work so much that he summoned her to Hollywood to play a part in *The Road to Zanzibar*. He wanted her to scold Dorothy Lamour. She was quite willing to. She hustled to Hollywood by plane, was quickly fitted for sixteen costumes, and then was introduced to the director. After one look at her, he said, "You're too short for the part."

So she didn't go into the movies. But she learned some other peculiarities of American speech. She was already master of Jewish, French, Russian, Italian, Danish, Swedish, Irish, Scotch, British (both high and cockney), German, Greek, and Spanish. To her American repertory she now added Middle Western, Southern, and Western. She observed, for example, that in California, when somebody said "Thanks," the answer usually wasn't "You're welcome," but "You bet." She was fascinated to discover that Nebraskans said "injun" for "engine." Farmers of the Middle West were inclined to say "Much obliged" for "Thanks" and had a habit of putting an "a" or an "uh" in front of their verbs.

She heard a farmer in Ohio say, "Jim was a-cussin' and a-swearin' and a-sweatin.'" She'd noticed that the farmers of her own New England also used that "a" or "uh," although in New England they might say, "He was a-cussin' of his wife," sounding almost like "He was a cousin of his wife." Miss Pious also enjoyed the way Middle Westerners pronounce "thing." She contends that they pronounce it as though it were spelled "theng," differing slightly from the Southern pronunciation, which is "thang." She reported hearing a farmer explaining why he didn't want to take his wife to town to see a movie—this in the Middle West.

"A theng eeiz thet omm too blaummed tyuhd to go," the farmer said—according to the eavesdropping Miss Pious.

She eavesdrops without any special

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system. She hears people talking in theater lobbies, and on trains, buses, and subways, and absorbs almost unconsciously what they say. Later she can extract their voices and speeches from her memory.

INVARIABLY, when she is introduced to some radio listener who knows her work, Miss Pious is greeted with an astonished voice that says, "Why, I thought you were a great big fat dame!"

That's probably due to her stout, commanding voice, which is that of a fearless woman who is ready to tell the whole world off. As Mrs. Willkie Snipe, wife of a Clay County, Kentucky, farmer, she was just the person to tell about a woman who had given birth to twins weighing twenty-two pounds. "You've actually seen them?" asked Fred Allen. "Yep," she said, "I was there when the stork come."

"And the twins weighed twenty-two pounds?"

"Yep. The stork had four eagles and a sparrow helpin' him."

"A sparrow?"

"Yep. The sparrow was carryin' the safety pins."

So sharp is Minerva Pious' ear that in an emergency she can do almost any dialect without ever having practiced it. Once she was down to do an Irish dialect, which is one of her specialties. Just as the program was ready to go on the air, the producer decided the part was to be played by a Scotch voice instead of an Irish voice. Miss Pious, without time even to try out the Scotch burr on anybody, played the role perfectly. "I learned to speak Scotch dialect just as I learned to swim the time I was thrown out of a rowboat," she says now.

Her ear has also caught the exaggerated inflections of some of New York's upper classes. Her Consuelo Warburton, debutante, was "the first woman to have a victory garden in a Park Avenue penthouse."

The proud Consuelo did her gardening in mink overalls with ermine tails. Nor would she use just any old dirt for her victory garden. She had to get a special soil through a fancy sporting-goods store.

Miss Pious discovered that these fine ladies use a lot of "sh" sounds, in addition to extreme artificiality, when they talk. Consuelo's sister, telling about Consuelo's victory garden, said, "Shaze gahtt this speshally tillud saw-yill." Consuelo overuses the word divine, which she pronounces "divawoin." To her almost everything is "divawoin," whether it's a herring, a hat, or a hernia. And when a sister debutante asks if she is dressed and ready to go, she says, "Not quait." She is a poetess who composes her best work on Stork Club tablecloths, and when she finishes a sonnet, Sherman Billingsley removes the tablecloth and rushes it to her publisher. Whereas the lower classes might pronounce Thirty-third as "Toidy-toid," Consuelo's set would say "Theyty-theyd."

Unquestionably, though, it's when she's doing her New Yorkese of Toidy-toid Street, and her Jewish, that Miss Pious is most popular. Scores of times she has been asked to repeat her famous valedictory poem which she uttered when she was playing Bubbles Rappaport of Mrs. Rabinowitch's Finishing But Positively School. It goes like this:

Was willst du, goils of 1940,

As out into the woild you go,

Some to Cleveland, some to Oakland,

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Some to Dayton, O-hi-o?

Goils, vill you go into business,
Vill you trevell, take a tour,
Or will you toin to monkeh business,
T'inking only of *l'amour toujours*?

Was willst du, goils of 1940?

Facing life, don't play the fool.
Let our motto be EUREKA!

Goils of Mrs. Rabinowitch's Finishing
But Positively School.

As Mrs. Nussbaum, she did her part in building morale. She accomplished some of it right in her kitchen in Allen's Alley by giving patriotic names to some of her dishes. For example, she said, "Spaghetti I am calling Liberteh Noodills; sauerkraut I am calling Victory Cabbich; hamburger I am calling meat balls Kosher Blanca; Saturdays I am cooking bundles for Blintsess, also Free French Fried Potatoes. And," she added, with extreme pride, "Herring I am calling Uncle Salmon."

Much of her best eavesdropping was done, she says now, while she was working as a secretary in Ohrbach's department store in Union Square, the great New York melting pot. Earlier she had been secretary to a judge in Bridgeport, and then had done secretarial work at various places around New York. She hadn't thought much about radio until 1932, when a friend, Harry Tugend, a singer, got a program on a small station. She merely accompanied him at the piano and didn't do any dialects. Presently Fred Allen asked Harry Tugend to write some material for his first program. Tugend dragged Miss Pious over and gave her a build-up, and she got the lion-tamer role. Tugend later became a leading producer for Paramount Pictures.

TODAY Miss Pious has more offers for work than she can accept. At rehearsals she sits hunched at the head of a table, wearing a business suit and smoking one cigarette after another, kidding the script writers to relieve the tension. She reads her lines with gestures, rolling her eyes or shrugging her shoulders to get into the character. She hops from studio to studio on a strict schedule on busy days, being due at one broadcast the instant she is finished with another. She has spoken a half dozen different dialects coast-to-coast in one day and never once been confused about which one she was using. Frequently her day starts at ten and continues until 1 A. M. the following day.

"It just about exhausts you," she says.

Once married, and then divorced, Miss Pious now lives alone except for a housemaid. She has brown hair and wears it in a feather bob. Calm about her career, she doesn't let it interfere with her desire to live a normal life. She isn't the nervous type and has avoided ulcers and nervous disorders. Unlike some radio artists who have special appetites, she can eat any old time, either before or after the broadcast. She is chairman of the Red Cross Donor Committee of the American Federation of Radio Actors, but when she went to the Red Cross to give her blood, she was turned down as a blood donor because her hemoglobin count was only 75. The Red Cross required 80. She insists she isn't sick or anemic.

Miss Pious occasionally has friends in for a few drinks or to listen to records, of which she has a large collection. She has warmth for almost

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everybody. She has spent some money on antique furniture, but she is not lavish or extravagant. She got the surprise of her life once when she was called upon to play a fishwife role on a Helen Hayes radio show. Completely in awe of Miss Hayes, whom she regards as one of the greatest of actresses, she was nervous. Later, when Miss Hayes congratulated her on her handling of the part, she said, "Why, I'd have played the role for nothing just to have been in the same show with you." Miss Hayes then confessed: "Why, I'd have done the same. I've admired your work on the radio for years!"



Minerva Pious

Liberty

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