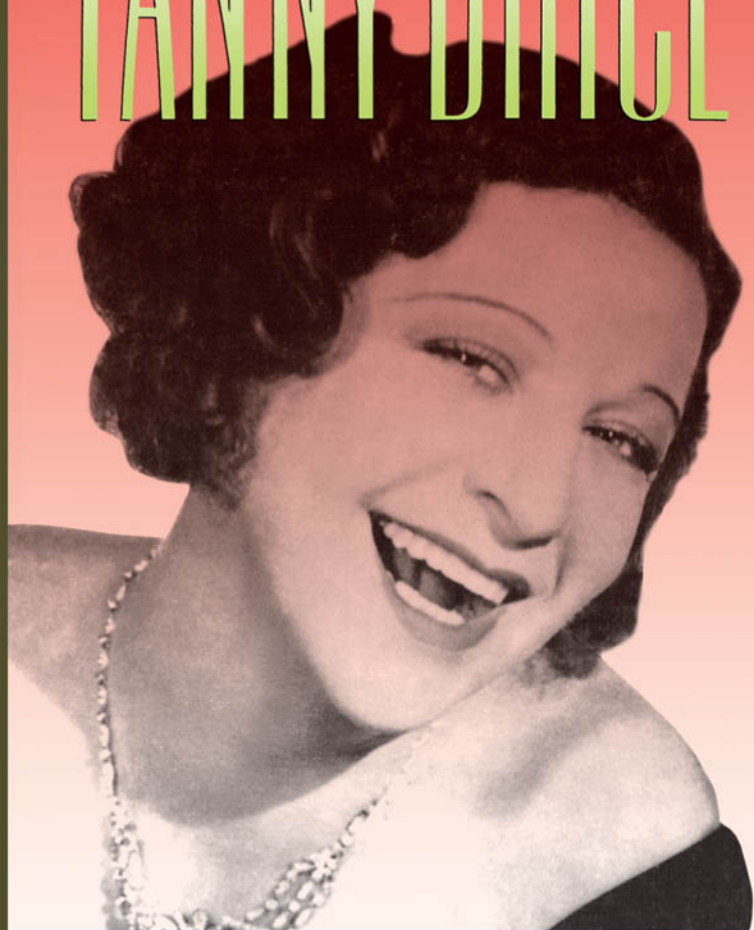


HERBERT G. GOLDMAN

# FANNY BRICE



THE ORIGINAL FUNNY GIRL

*Fanny Brice*



Herbert G. Goldman

# *Fanny Brice*



*The Original Funny Girl*

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To  
META SUSAN SCHECHTER GOLDMAN  
*my sister-in-law*  
*a real mensch*

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## Preface

**T**his is the first attempt at anything approaching a definitive biography of Fanny Brice. *The Fabulous Fanny*, Norman Katkov's 1952 book based on Fanny's otherwise unpublished memoirs, did not attempt to cover Brice's show-business career, and bore the marks of censorship by her family. That family is headed by Ray Stark, the phenomenally successful producer and former Hollywood agent, married to Fan's daughter, Frances.

Anyone attempting a biography of Brice is beset by problems. Fanny died at fifty-nine after having been in virtual retirement for fourteen years. This declaration may sound strange to those who recall her as "Baby Snooks," the *enfant terrible* of radio's Golden Age. However, *Baby Snooks*, which went through several incarnations from 1937 to 1951, took her but three days a week to rehearse and then perform. This was in marked contrast to her stage career (1906–1937), which saw her travel and do eight shows weekly. Brice's life in those days was a matter of public record, especially when her second husband, Nick Arnstein, was a fugitive from the law in 1920. Brice's private life was seldom news once the professional Fanny "disappeared" into her mischievous baby. Her social life was likewise centered around family and friends, whose homes she decorated with a taste and feeling for decor unrivaled by the greatest of professionals.

Then there is the surprising nature of Fan's stage career itself. She was a Yiddish dialect comedienne for whom vehicles were hard to find. Fanny Brice, despite her popularity and talent, was never a full-fledged Broadway star who had her name above the title. (Ironically, her first film, *My Man*, gave her that star vehicle and billing. Movies never were Miss Brice's medium.) Interviews, articles, and news items exist, but not

in the great numbers they do for Al Jolson, Ed Wynn, Eddie Cantor, or other male contemporaries.

The number of old-timers along Broadway who remember the “good old days” before World War II (and, specifically, before the Depression), has dwindled to a handful in the past ten years. My great thanks, then, to Mae Clarke, Jerry Hausner, the late Tish Lee, Judy Altman, Gary Stevens, Barbara Barondess, and Vyola Vonn.

Thanks must also go to Miles M. Kreuger, president of the Institute of the American Musical; Jim Curtis; Richard Halpern; Audrey Kupferburg; Lillian (Libby) Tudiver; and, of course, Sheldon Meyer, senior vice-president of Oxford University Press; Gail Cooper, my line editor; and Karen Wolny, my photo editor.

Special thanks go to Larry F. Kiner and Peter Tatchell, who provided valuable audio and research assistance for the “Baby Snooks” years of Miss Brice’s life. A very special thanks is due to Bonnie Corso, whose encouragement and feeling for the subject were important in the final months of writing.

And my great thanks to George Russell of *Variety* for allowing me to use quotes from the “old show business Bible.”

My greatest debt, however, is to Sime Silverman, Joshua Lowe, Hobe Morrison, and numerous, sometimes unnamed correspondents on *Variety*, the *New York Clipper*, *Dramatic Mirror*, *Billboard*, and other show-business trade periodicals who covered Fanny’s stage career—and, sometimes, her private life—for more than forty years.

The spelling of Miss Brice’s first name has vexed theatrical historians for decades. Early programs spell it “Fannie,” but Brice herself, as years rolled on, gave it as “Fanny.” The truth is that name derivatives like “Jimmy” were usually spelled “Jimmie” before 1930. This biography uses the more modern “Fanny” spelling throughout. (“Fanny” is simply a diminutive of “Fania,” a common Jewish female name.)

Believing that the writing of a book should express the spirit of its subject, I have modified the racy, rather colloquial style I employed in *Jolson*, my last book. Fanny Brice was nonetheless a “show biz gal.” I have written accordingly. If this book invokes the spirit of her theatrical era at the same time it delineates the character, career, and art of Fanny, it will have served the wishes of its author.

*New York*  
*May 26, 1991*

Herbert G. Goldman

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*Fanny Brice*

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Listen, kid! I've done everything in the theatre except marry a property man. I've been a soubrette in burlesque and I've accompanied stereopticon slides. I've acted for Belasco and I've laid 'em out in the rows at the Palace. I've doubled as an alligator; I've worked for the Shuberts; and I've been joined to Billy Rose in the holy bonds. I've painted the house boards and I've sold tickets and I've been fired by George M. Cohan. I've played in London before the king and in Oil City before miners with lanterns in their caps.

FANNY BRICE

## Introduction

**T**housands of stagestruck girls know Fanny Brice as the subject of *Funny Girl*, the 1960s show and film that gave the world the hit song “People” and made a superstar of Barbra Streisand. Their aging parents and grandparents remember Fanny as “Baby Snooks,” the incorrigible tot of network radio from 1936 to 1951. A handful of old-timers and show biz aficionados know her as a great comedienne and Yiddish dialectician, laughing hit of the *Ziegfeld Follies* and other Broadway shows from 1910 to 1936. Fanny’s daughter, Frances Stark, remembers her mother as a polished lady with the manner of Queen Mary.

She was, indeed, a lady, one who dressed in perfect taste, knew antiques and fabrics, entertained with lavish dinner parties, and lived like a nineteenth-century duchess. But to describe her only as a lady is like describing Boss Tweed as a statesman. She also cussed like a sailor, called everybody “kid,” and was honest to the point of sheer brutality. She fell asleep—and snored—at Broadway shows that held no interest for her and once, at a Hollywood premiere, delivered a series of loud, critical remarks that drove her artist son out of the theatre. Fanny didn’t care where the “hell” the leading lady was sitting—which happened to be right in front of them. Yet withal, she never seemed offensive—perhaps the true mark of a lady.

Talking to Fanny was an experience. She walked around the room quite quickly as she spoke, and her comments—about people, rarely things and almost never abstractions—were amazingly accurate and devastatingly perceptive. As one of Broadway’s great performers, Fanny was an intelligent observer of the show world and a great judge of special material. Sylvia Fine, for one, would never give a song to husband Danny Kaye unless it first passed the Brice muster.

Fanny was a woman of amazing honesty—especially in show business, a field seldom known for its veracity and evenhanded dealings. She brought people up or down to her own social level, terming George Gershwin “a silk herring” when he started having ego problems and calling Ernest Hemingway a “schmendrick” when that great author was being lionized by the world. But if she liked you, doors would open. People of all backgrounds trusted Fanny’s judgment.

Like many show biz people from before the first World War, she hated “phonies.” A Broadway producer once insisted he would give her “my right arm.”

“Listen, kid,” Fan told him. “I happen to know you got a whole drawer full of right arms.”

The onstage Fanny Brice was a comedienne, a satirist, a woman who used her great powers of observation to detect the weaknesses and falsities of life and people to create both the most riotously ridiculous characterizations in Broadway history and the most pointedly barbed thrusts at Jewish pretension launched before the advent of Philip Roth. At the start of her career, she portrayed young, awkward Jewesses beset by problems ranging from catty friends, to worthless beaux, to people who objected to her improbable occupations as Salome dancer or nude model in Washington Square. Later, she included blasts at nouveau riche artistic affectations and pseudo-intellectual dissimulation. All were brought down to earth and reduced to absurdity.

Nor did she spare herself in that regard. Fanny belonged to that wave of immigrant and first-generation Americans who sought the “finer” things in life possessed by older, more established classes and tried to emulate them in every possible way. She was always flawlessly groomed, from her perfectly manicured fingernails to her slender figure, from her coiffed hair to her ankles. Fanny’s sense of comedy allowed her to direct a servant in the arrangement of the silverware for a big dinner, then turn to an intrigued house guest and belch. Self-satirization was a Bricean trademark, her method of acknowledging the roots of her success. She wanted—and obtained—all of the fine things, never forgot her origins, and saw the humor in the contrast between the two.

An amazingly strong person, Fanny had a sense of integrity that left her both unspoiled by her friendships with the cream of society and unsullied by her contacts with eccentric criminals like “Large Face the Safe-cracker.” Despite a lack of interest in political affairs—Fanny believed in people but not politics—she was a Renaissance woman who made efforts in a fairly wide variety of fields. Always an instinctive artist (she had virtually no formal education) Fanny flew by the seat of her pants when push came to the inevitable shove. That “seat” was invariably right.

She was about five-foot-seven in an era in which most women were under five-four, was surprisingly slender, and had a face that never seemed to look the same from one photograph to another. A pleasant-looking girl while in her twenties, Fanny let herself go “character” as soon as she reached forty. Yet she remained sexual and vibrant, a woman loved by some, admired by many, and respected by all.

Fanny belonged to that breed of “do as I say, not as I do” women who, while independent herself, thought most women’s recipe for happiness lay in being good wives and helpmates. “Because if a woman has a career, she misses an awful lot,” she said. “If you have a career, then the career is your life.” This attitude, which sounds at odds with current women’s rhetoric, is nonetheless in keeping with the Fanny who would shut her eyes on stage and sing “My Man.” Fanny Brice was the greatest comedienne America has ever known, as well as its first truly great “torch singer.” Her versatility was the marvel of Broadway fifteen years before the birth of “Baby Snooks.”

Fanny’s early years were spent in what was probably the most interesting epoch in the history of American entertainment. Fanny was aware of that, and intensely proud of the traditions that had spawned her.

“The performer is different today,” she said in 1946. “Years ago we had a school. The school was vaudeville and burlesque. You knocked around. So it seasoned you. Made a mensch of you. So it gave you an interesting background before you clicked. Today, they go into pictures from nowheres. Somebody sees a girl flipping hamburgers in a drive-in joint, so right away she gets a screen test and she photographs good so they develop her and give her a face and clothes. But they can’t give you a real personality or give you a natural technique of acting to hold an audience or your own school. If they had put me in front of a camera thirty-five years ago when I was starting out, I had such a kisser the camera would have stood up and walked away in disgust.”

She began her stage career as a stagestruck and ambitious girl who buttonholed producers and ran errands for a burlesque queen in 1908. By 1920, she was tough enough to stand up to police and prosecutors when “her man,” Nick Arnstein, was one of the most wanted fugitives in the United States. By the age of forty-seven, she was independent enough to give her third husband a divorce, announce her intention never to marry again, and spend the rest of her years as a five-thousand-dollar-a-week radio star, interior decorator, and grandmother—supremely independent in both mind and pocketbook.

Fanny was a strange mixture of elegance and earthiness—a woman women admired who could hold her own with any man. She laughed

loudly, and was one of the few comedy performers who would rather hear others tell a good funny story than tell one herself. She told some tales of dubious veracity, but never said anything she did not believe *represented* the truth. Extroverted on the surface, she was private with regard to her own feelings—which were deeply hurt by the men in her life. There were certain subjects, like her sex life, that she simply would not talk about.

She almost never spoke about her father.

Self-aware and self-perceptive, Fanny once said she had always been aware of “two people within me. Almost like a mother and child. I have felt like I was my own mother, and when I would think about Fanny, I would always think about myself as a child.”

Fanny’s great-niece, Judy Altman, said she was a typical Hungarian Jewess—interested in the occult, very wise, and able to detach from herself. Fanny had a fascination with kineticism, hypnotism, and the spirit world that might have been unhealthy in a woman less earthy and sensible. She may have been among the most sensible women who ever lived—except where it concerned her life with men. Fanny always went for what she called “the bastards,” and her ultimately unhappy experiences paved the way for the maturity, and loneliness, that graced her later years.

Fanny’s story is to some extent that of a loss of innocence. There is some sadness in the stagestruck girl’s loss of awe and wonder, and the disillusionment of the woman in love. If Fanny really was two people—Fanny the child and Fanny the mother—it seems quite clear the “mother” really won.

Fanny’s mother was named Rose; coincidentally, since the girl in many of her songs, “Rose of Washington Square,” Rosie Rosenstein in “I’m an Indian,” “Second Hand Rose,” and others, had the same name. Rose Borach was Hungarian, the watchful, practical, hard, and cynical matriarch whom her daughter partially identified with but never truly admired. Her father was Charles Borach—“French Charlie,” the elegant, mustachioed romantic who would rather play pinochle and listen to his daughter sing than work and pay the bills. The “child” Fanny loved French Charlie and the romance he embodied.

This is the story of those two Fannys—the wise mother and the romantic child—along with the stage world and times in which “both” women lived.

## CHAPTER I

### *A Borach*

**T**he Jewish family has been called a patriarchy in theory and a matriarchy in practice. Fanny Brice's family was matriarchal in the extreme, and Fanny, independent woman though she was, somehow never really liked it.

Fanny's mother, Rose, was born in Hungary on June 14, 1867, the daughter of Philip Stern, a poor Jewish villager who died when she was still a little girl. Philip's destitute widow sent their ten-year-old daughter to America with an aunt in 1877. The aunt was the mother's own sister, to whom she gave three feather beds as payment.

Rosie's mother wanted her to have more than a hut with a leaky roof, dirt floors, and a cow in the kitchen. That had been her home in Hungary. What Rosie found in America, however, was not wealth, but work: constant, low-paying labor as a nurse for the two-year-old child of an Irish family on New York's East Side, and, later, as a needle worker in a fur factory—the sort of sweatshop Fanny would sing of in “The Song of the Sewing Machine.”

Rosie's best friend there was Bertha, a girl of her own age who married an Irishman named John Brice. Rose boarded with the Brices until she caught John in a restaurant with a young woman. She hastened to tell Bertha, and John, who knew that a best defense was a good offense, turned on his accuser. Either Rosie went, John told his wife, or he did. Rosie had to move.

Rose now met a tailor by the name of Seymour Cohen, a short, thin, ungainly youth who still lived with his mother. Rose and Seymour went for walks through the East Side and talked of marriage. Their major

obstacle was money. Seymour only made two dollars weekly, and even in the 1880s that was not enough to marry and have kids.

While waiting for her boyfriend to advance himself, Rose continued working in the fur factory and took a room in the apartment dwelling of Frank Grant and his wife, Selma Borach, an Alsatian immigrant with a brother known as “Pinochle” Charlie.

Charles Borach had been in the French Army until a letter from his sister offered him the promise of an easier life in New York City. Whether he was discharged or (as Fanny once maintained) deserted, matters little. By 1885, however, he was living with his sister on New York’s Lower East Side.

Rose was no romantic. She came from a poor background, worked a hard job, and had few illusions about happy endings. When a year had passed, and Cohen’s fortunes had not prospered, the eighteen-year-old Rose told Seymour she was sorry and left him in the middle of a walk on New York’s Houston Street.

Charlie Borach, in the meantime, had become her other suitor. He was now a bartender making eighty dollars a week in the largest saloon on the Bowery. When Charlie wasn’t working, he was playing pinochle or sitting in the kitchen of the Grants’ apartment drinking beer with Frank and Selma. He was a good-natured, rather dreamy sort of sot—completely unlike Rose, the girl he wished to marry.

There was no real courtship, and no love on Rosie’s part. Charlie proposed through his sister, Selma, and Rose, who took a week to think it over, finally accepted. She had broken up with Seymour and, at nineteen, had no time to lose. Eighty dollars a week was nothing to sneeze at in 1886.

Romantic love had lost by seventy-eight dollars. Fanny’s mother was a very practical woman.

The Borachs set up housekeeping at 179 Second Avenue, a respectable address in a not-too-run-down section of the Lower East Side that would become a hub of Jewish culture in the early 1900s. Four children followed in the next six years: Philip (named for Rose’s father, 1887); Carolyn, or “Carrie” (1889); Fania (1891); and Louis, or “Lew” (1893). They were living at 102 Forsyth Street at the time of Fanny’s birth on October 29, 1891, a far-from-Orthodox Jewish family in what was then an Irish neighborhood.

Fanny’s first vivid memories were not of the East Side, but of Europe. In the summer of 1896, when she was four and a half, the family

went to visit her paternal grandfather in Alsace, a French province ceded to Germany by the Treaty of Frankfurt in 1871.

Charles Borach's father was then a white-haired gentleman easily unnerved by his grandchildren's runny noses. Fanny recalled that he spoke no English, but had done well enough in the wine business to give the family a substantial gift of money before the end of their visit. The elder Borach gave the cash to Rosie, who seemed much more responsible than Charlie, his own son.

The Borachs did not travel first-class, and Fanny remembered a staircase that went up to a different level of their ocean liner. She saw a lady sitting in a deck chair there, and found that looking sad could make the woman give her a piece of orange. She started going up there every day, getting oranges from the woman, watching other people, and wearing the same sad expression. One first-class passenger gave her something like an ice cream soda.

That was how Fanny discovered performing—the key to a kinder and better life than the one she knew at home with a loveless marriage between a cold mother and an increasingly ineffectual father.

Back from Europe, the Borachs moved across the Hudson River to Newark, where Rosie opened a cigar, candy, and stationery store with the money received from her French father-in-law. The family lived upstairs from the store, and Fanny remembered a huge glass sliding showcase containing chewing gum. One night, she crept down, stole several packages of gum, and proceeded to chew it in bed. When the sweetness passed from one small packet, she would open up another and stuff that into her mouth as well. In the morning, Rose discovered her with gum stuck in her hair.

The store drove Pinochle Charlie into a short-lived early retirement—playing cards in the back room while his wife took care of business in the front. This arrangement endured for two years, until Rose took her hard-won profits and purchased a bar at 26 Lafayette Street—partly for the increased income a saloon offered and partly to entice her husband back to work.

She was, however, badly disillusioned. Charlie just refused to work, leaving it to Rose to tap the kegs, make the “free lunches” that accompanied the nickel beers, and keep tabs on expenses. “Mom was very good in business,” Carrie recalled. “Once we had seven saloons in Newark. Mom would go from one to the other.”

That statement gives the wrong impression; the Borachs only paid rent for the one saloon on Lafayette Street. “In those days,” Fanny said,

“a saloon keeper bought his beer and other liquors from one company, and the brewers paid the rent.” Rose Borach simply hired enough bartenders and bouncers to run each place. Then she dropped in to each bar to count the till.

And while Rose counted, Charlie played pinochle and drank. They rarely slept together anymore, as Charley, an asthmatic, often choked if he laid down in bed. Fanny remembered him putting a pillow on the table and sleeping on his arm. Charlie claimed that whisky “let him breathe,” and let his drinking and card playing make up for his absent sex life. Rose, increasingly resentful, had only her work.

The summer of 1900 saw Charles and Rose Borach go to Europe with Lew, the youngest child, leaving Fanny and her two other siblings with the Klein family on Jones Street. What impressed, and infuriated, Fanny most about them was the way Mrs. Klein doted on her husband—waiting on him hand and foot when he got home from work. If the family had hamburger for dinner, Mr. Klein got steak. He was the master of the house, and Mrs. Klein saw to it that the children spoke in whispers while he ate, or read, or napped before their bedtime. The patriarchy angered and bewildered the young Fanny, whose own home, of course, was nothing like the Kleins’.

Fanny’s early feeling for women’s rights was only one vivid memory of Jones Street. Her penchant for going through garbage cans for things that she could fashion into toys and other items led the kids in that neighborhood to call her “The Hogan’s Alley Rag Picker.” Her other nickname there was “Shit Behind the Coal Box.” The coal box in question was in front of Stafford’s Grocery. It was simply a matter of expediency; Fanny had to go but was “too lazy” to return to the Klein home.

The Borach family moved uptown to Camden Street when Charlie, Rose, and Lew returned from Europe. It was in this new neighborhood that Fan met Hattie Levy, her “first chum.”

Hattie had what Fanny remembered as “seven or eight brothers and sisters. She was born the same year, the same day, and almost the same hour that I was. We felt like twins. She didn’t like school any more than I did. We played hooky from the first year on.”

One of their big hooky occupations was Blaney’s Theatre, Newark’s home of “ten-twenty-thirty” melodrama. In a world without radio, television, or even movies, the stage was more a center for mass entertainment than a citadel of art. Theaters devoted to plays, musicals, melodramas, vaudeville, burlesque, and other live forms of popular amusement were a part of daily life in every city, and the top stars spent more time

on tour than on Broadway. Fanny first became aware of Blaney's when her parents, who allowed bill posters for it to be hung in their saloons, began to get two tickets for each play. She wanted to go, too, along with Lew and Hattie, but Rose Borach was not overly indulgent. Fanny and Hattie finally contrived to sneak in at nine o'clock in the morning while the theatre was being aired, and stay hidden in the balcony until the afternoon performance. By themselves or with young Lew, the girls saw all the old-time thrillers every week for months until they were discovered. Neither child pulled the stunt again.

Fanny was not sheltered. In her childhood, her best friends were from poorer families, and Fanny never hesitated to raise their standard of living with items from the Borach family kitchen.

"I hate to think what a pest I was to my mother," Fanny said in later years. "Cans of coffee, loaves of bread, dozens of eggs, even bottles of beer used to disappear from our kitchen. I took them over to Hattie's. I took the bottles of beer because I had heard someone say that beer was good for nursing mothers and Hattie's mother always had a new baby." The loaves of bread were usually days old and stale. Fanny would tell Hattie that her mother had bought too much "by mistake."

Fanny and Hattie shared much more than simply the same birthdate. Both girls' fathers were French Jews who liked to drink and gamble. The difference was in the mothers. Where Rose Borach was strong—they called her "Tiger" in the neighborhood—Hattie's mother was weak, and there finally came a time when Fanny noticed Mrs. Levy putting clothes out on the line to dry, taking them off, and putting them out again.

Mrs. Levy's relatives had her put in "Ward Eight" of a local hospital, where Fanny often visited with Hattie. Mrs. Levy never remembered Fanny, but seemed to recall the name "Rose Borach."

"Yes," she'd say. "She sent me stale bread."

The Borach home was certainly never high on the social ladder, although Rose liked to dress well and enjoyed entertaining. Fine food was especially important, and her recipe for Hungarian goulash was a family treasure.

Despite the press yarns spun by Broadway PR people, Fanny Brice did not have a poor childhood. Her family was actually middle-class, and the Borachs' two annual trips to Coney Island were made, not by street-car, but by horse-drawn cab. Fanny always felt sorry for the poor horse, which struggled pulling seven people.

The Borach household usually had servants, immigrants Rosie would hire fresh from Ellis Island. For eight dollars monthly and room and board, they worked all day and well into the night, got no day off, and

were content with an occasional new dress or suit of clothes. Their rooms were on the top floor, and Fanny, ever curious about all sorts of people, got them to tell her, in very broken English, of their life in the “old country,” often Poland.

The Polish words she learned from the servants complemented the German and Hungarian she picked up in the neighborhoods. Irish had predominated on the Lower East Side, but the most common dialect on Rankin Street in Newark was one from western Germany called *bleu-Deutsch*.

The Borachs lived among few Jews, and Fanny never knew more than a hundred words of Yiddish.

Fanny had little in common with Phil and Carrie, her two elder siblings. She remembered Phil as a terrible tease. She once threw a pair of scissors at him, and they stuck into his neck as he went running through the house.

Carrie was “Miss Prim,” the well-behaved “class” of the family whom Rosie took along on vacations. She never dared take Fanny, who had graduated from swiping groceries for poor friends to stealing change from Rosie’s pocketbook. Like Baby Snooks, the character she would immortalize in hundreds of radio broadcasts, Fanny the child was good-hearted but mischievous—a school truant and, it must be noted, an incorrigible thief.

And just as Snooks would make her baby brother, Robspierre, the victim of her mischief, Fanny commandeered her brother Lew for her pilfering—and trouble. If Rose took them to somebody’s house at night, they sneaked into the kitchen and raided the sugar bowl, a frequent depository for household money. The punishment for any such offense was swift and sure: Rosie beat the living daylights out of them.

Fanny always remembered her mother throwing Lew up so he crashed against the ceiling. They rarely were repeat offenders after being caught. But there always was new mischief to get into. One scheme involved selling the same stolen music box to different people in the neighborhood, stealing it back, and selling it again.

The only thing Lew had in common with Phil and Carrie was the asthma they inherited from Charlie. Fanny, of all the siblings, did not suffer from it.

Fanny was always, as she later put it, “scheming”—opening a sewing school for her girlfriends or, with Lew, selling lemonade on the sidewalk at a penny a glass. Rosie never figured out where all the sugar went, and

a nail driven through a stick was an effective way of spearing lemons off a local fruitstand.

Fanny's frequent truancy resulted in low grades—twos and threes, the lowest marks possible—in everything but drawing. Paint sets, crayons, pencils, pads, and other art supplies were readily available in Newark's leading department store. Shoplifting hence became the new phase of Fan's childhood thievery.

Fan dressed Lew in one of Carrie's outfits, thinking that the department stores would not suspect two girls. When they were caught, the guilty and scared Lew blamed Fanny for "making me do it." Fanny then proceeded to blame Lew.

They were finally released, but told to stay out of the store. It was the closest Fanny ever came to actual arrest, and wrote *finis* to her career of theft.

Childhood thievery, while certainly illegal and regularly punished, was nonetheless quite commonplace in cities of the era. Its roots are quite discernible in Fanny's case, however—a mother too preoccupied with business and two older children (Phil, the oldest and a boy, was Rose's pride, joy, and hope for the future) to give her attention, and a father who loved her, but was weak—a fool for alcohol, endless pinochle games, and Fanny's own theatrics.

Fanny was a "ham" (so called after the non-kosher meat that actors used to remove greasepaint), meaning, not necessarily a lack of talent, but a built-in need to get up and perform. But if the instinct, first discovered on that voyage back from France and further sparked by plays she saw at Blaney's, was there to begin with, Fanny's father nourished it, and, quite unknowingly, set his daughter's life on a firm course.

On Sundays, when all the bars were closed, the Borach family would gather in their Lafayette Street saloon after breakfast. Fanny could not resist getting up on the bar and performing, the mirror in back adding to the "show" atmosphere. She sang, she "danced," and she acted little playlets based on fairy tales or melodramas she had seen at Blaney's.

Rosie was usually annoyed by Fanny's efforts, but French Charlie encouraged his daughter to perform. At the close of Fanny's song or playlet, he would applaud and toss her a dime or nickel. Rosie, who earned every penny, seethed.

A much more cynical Fanny, hurt by men and speaking from a vantage point of fifty years, might take her mother's side. But Fanny at the age of nine saw "Daddy" as a handsome, gallant knight in shining armor who loved life and little princesses and theatre.

Fanny's mother found French Charlie less of a white knight each day.

Their marriage fell further apart with every newly acquired saloon and every pinochle game, and if Charlie's drinking irritated Rosie, it was her husband's growing refusal to do any work that finally wrecked their marriage. Rose had married Charlie chiefly for his income. Now it was her own work that brought in the money, and her lack of feeling for him was replaced by sheer contempt.

As her mother turned from Charlie, Fanny's own love for him deepened. In a way, she worshipped the French immigrant who coupled the ambitions of a barroom loafer-dreamer with the soul of a Lord Byron.

Fanny got a job as a wrapper in Newark's leading department store during the Christmas season in 1901. It seemed a good way to get money for theatre tickets, but the boredom of wrapping scores of packages drove the ten-year-old Fanny into her now-common flights of fantasy. Before two days had passed, she told her fellow workers a fantastic yarn in which her mother was dead, her father was blind and needed false teeth, her older brother Phil needed a brace for his crippled leg, Carrie was epileptic, and she was their sole support.

The next day, when Fanny came to work and opened her assigned locker, she found old clothes, stale rolls, and other items her co-workers had brought for her to take back home to her poor blind father, crippled brother, and epileptic sister.

Fanny now felt guilty for probably the first time in her life. The following day, she showed up in her best clothes and two sets of little diamond earrings. Fanny told her gaping fellow workers she had just been "saying" that her family was poor. In fact, she almost bragged, they were quite well-to-do—as they could surely see.

One of the astonished, rather angry wrappers went to the floor manager, who reported the incident to the main office, which knew Rose Borach as one of the store's best customers. A phone call to the bar on Lafayette Street brought Rose running to the store.

Fanny's outraged mother almost slapped her silly. It was the end of Fanny's job in the department store, and Rose even refused to give her the \$2.50 that the store sent for the time she worked.

Rosie simply never understood.

Rosie took her children to see her family in Hungary the following summer, leaving Charlie to run things in Newark. Fanny found Budapest interesting, but was saddened when Rose took her brood to her native Migletz, a village with straw roofs and naked gypsy children. Fanny's most memorable experience was helping her mother's 102-year-old blind aunt to the outhouse.

That vacation, that return to her old roots, spurred Fanny's mother to take action. Shortly after their return to Newark, Rosie sold the bar without her husband's knowledge, bought a house on St. Mark's Avenue in Brooklyn, and moved there with the children. Later, she obtained a separation. The Borachs never were divorced; Rosie had simply decided to end sixteen years of unhappy marriage and become the "head of household" in name as well as fact.

Charles Borach followed his family to Brooklyn, taking a room in the Graveside section, next to the famed racetrack where the Brooklyn Handicap was run, and becoming a bookmaker, a perfectly legal occupation in New York State until a new anti-gambling law was passed in 1908. Rosie went into the real estate business, leaving her children in the nominal care of a housekeeper during the day.

Pinochle Charlie visited his children often—always in the daytime, when his wife was not near their house on St. Mark's Avenue, and always with presents. Carrie remembered him as tall, gallant, and handsome. She and her two brothers always asked him not to leave, but Fanny would invariably vanish with her present. Seeing him for only a few minutes was too painful.

The removal of her father, Fanny's one-man audience, might have turned a less adventurous girl into a very frustrated actress. Fanny solved her problem by putting on plays for her friends in the cellar of the Borach home. A penny or an orange or some other piece of fruit was the admission price kids paid to see Fan re-create the melodramas she had seen at Blaney's. She would always be the heroine, usually on a bridge with a shawl over her shoulders, pretending she had a child and nothing to eat. Fanny found that she could actually weep, not just look sad, and she liked crying even better than making the ten or twenty cents her performances netted. Fanny was astounded to find that she could weep easily while acting, and the spellbound reactions of her young audience soon became her triumph and delight. If the performances allowed her to shed tears over the loss of her father, tears she could not bear to shed before Rose or French Charlie, Fanny never knew it.

Fanny also found a way to make the trips to Coney Island without either of her parents. Filling a handkerchief with rocks, she would get on the Vanderbilt Avenue trolley with Lew—her invariable accomplice—and "accidentally" drop the hankie out the window. The handkerchief supposedly contained their fare, and Fanny would cry real tears until a fellow passenger offered to give them the necessary money.

From then on, Fanny would get cash enough for cotton candy, ice

cream, hot dogs, rides, and every other thing available at Coney Island by walking up to selected fat men, asking for directions, and then breaking into tears. For some reason, she found, fat men stuffing their faces with hot dogs seemed to be the most sympathetic.

Fanny and Lew made that trip to Coney many times during the summer of 1903—until they met a fat man who was also a detective. That ended their excursions.

Fanny's success with Coney Island fat men had convinced her she was as good an actress as most of the professionals she saw on Brooklyn stages. Her visits to the theatre were continual, and she saw some of the greatest actors and performers of the day at theaters like the Montauk, the Amphion, and the Gayety—E. H. Sothorn and Julia Marlowe in Shakespearean repertory; Frank Daniels, Eddie Foy, and Anna Held in popular musical comedies. Her truancy was continual as well. At one point, she answered an advertisement calling for an errand girl in a dress-making shop. She got the job and made six dollars a week until her mother found out and made her return to school.

Such vigilance on Rosie's part, however, was occasional at best. Like most people of her age and background, she saw education as important for boys but a mere nicety for girls. Fanny very may well have agreed. She hated school, and would invariably show up with her nose painted red and, never one to pass a dare, draw pictures of the teacher on the blackboard. At thirteen, Fanny was in Grade 4B, along with kids of nine. And the older she got, the more she played hooky, earning money for her own use with a run of short-lived jobs.

She worked as a receptionist in a chiroprapist's office, but quit after one day because she could not stand having to remove a fat woman's stockings. (Fanny took a pair of manicuring scissors as her "payment" for the day.) Then she got a job in a candy store, ostensibly so she could "eat candy all day." The store had a supply of penny sticks of peppermint that had gone unsold for months because the kids did not think they were worth the money. Fanny cut each stick in sixteen pieces, wrapped each piece in tissue paper, and put them in the window with a sign, "Sixteen Pieces For One Cent." All were sold within a day.

Fanny lost that job when she told the proprietor his wife was "sweet on the corner policeman." As in Newark, she was always telling stories, making up little dramas that invariably boomeranged.

Fanny's closest friend in Brooklyn was an Irish girl named Hannah Ryan. Together with Lew, they spent their summer evenings in impromptu entertainments on the front stoops of neighborhood homes. Hannah did an Irish jig, Lew danced (he had natural talent) and Fanny sang the verses of popular songs. The other kids would join her in the

choruses, but Fanny's strong and plaintive voice rang out above the others on last lines.

Fanny had once thought of being a designer, but her need to perform grew as she reached puberty—and, not incidentally, lost her father. She could sing, her friends admitted, but she was a ham. Both points were quite true.

Fanny Borach—her friends called her “Borax,” “Twenty Mule Team Borax,” and, in “tribute” to her stage ambitions, “Bore Act”—was still fourteen years old in the summer of 1906. She stood five feet six inches tall, almost her adult height, and weighed about one hundred pounds. Her light brown, naturally curly hair came down to her waist, though Fanny tied it at her neck with an enormous ribbon. Her green eyes were easily her most attractive feature.

She was not terribly unlike the ungainly girl in Noël Coward's “Don't Put Your Daughter on the Stage, Mrs. Worthington.” In Fanny's case, however, it was she and not her mother who had stage ambitions. Rosie was not against her younger daughter's going on the stage—acting was not quite the totally unfeasible profession it would later be—nor was she in favor of it. Fanny was fourteen, still too young to get married, and Rose was too busy selling real estate and setting Phil up in the dairy business to bother much with her one way or another. (Phil, Rose had determined, would be quite the opposite of Charlie. Named for her own father, he was looked upon by her as the “important one.”)

Nor was physical beauty a prerequisite for a career in theater. With the exception of several male matinee idols and some leading actresses, stage people of the early 1900s were not particularly gorgeous. Talent, dedication, and native intelligence were the essentials then demanded in the theater. Fanny Borach had all three.

Fanny's career started when Jo Hennessey, one of her neighborhood friends, mentioned something about amateur night at Keeney's Theatre. “Amateur Night”—which, ironically, paid money to the winners—was a good way to break into show business in 1906, and Thursday was amateur night at Keeney's Theatre on Fulton Street in Brooklyn. Fanny became curious about these shows, and decided to see one with Hannah Ryan.

Keeney's Theatre, owned and managed by Frank Keeney, was Brooklyn's leading vaudeville theatre in the early 1900s. The inimitable Al Jolson, certainly the leading male musical variety performer of the 1910s and '20s, had made his first blackface appearance there in late 1904. Now, about a year and a half later, it would be the site of the debut of Fanny Brice, the leading female musical variety performer of the first quarter of the twentieth century. Neither appearance was considered historically

noteworthy at the time. Fanny's debut, in fact, was completely unexpected—by the audience, by Keeney, and by Fanny.

Economic necessity provided the scenario. Fanny and Hannah had a quarter each when they arrived at Keeney's, but found the only tickets left were fifty cents apiece. Fanny, though, was nothing if not street-smart. Sizing up the situation, she said that her friend and she were putting on an act in that night's show. The girls were then directed to the stage door, where they got in free.

Fanny planned to see the show and leave before their turn came. But Frank Keeney never followed an order of entrance on amateur nights, and Fanny never knew when she and Hannah would be thrust onstage. She kept on asking when their turn would come, but got no satisfactory reply.

Finally, without much warning, the stage manager pushed Fanny out onstage. The laughing Hannah did not follow.

Fanny was terrified, and almost started weeping when someone in the gallery yelled, "Come on, Fanny." It was someone from around St. Mark's Place.

What saved Fanny—and began, not incidentally, her career—were the orchestrations then available from publishers at ten cents a song. It was not uncommon for performers at amateur nights, or patrons at restaurants, to go up to an orchestra conductor and request a certain well-known number. Out would come the simple orchestration, and the request would be granted.

Fanny asked the orchestra at Keeney's to play "When You Know You're Not Forgotten by the Girl You Can't Forget," a popular ballad by Fred Helf and Ed Gardenier. Fanny swayed throughout the introduction until one of the kids in the balcony hollered, "If you're going to jump, jump." Fanny laughed and sang, her voice filling the theatre. She had one of those clear, vibrant voices that the early 1900s cherished. Fanny made a few of the exaggerated gestures that had sometimes brought laughter from the front stoop loungers. At Keeney's, though, they brought approval, and several well-to-do patrons in the front rows threw coins up on the stage. She sang the ballad very sadly, stooping down to pick up the money and say "Thank you" without missing a beat. This half intentionally funny gesture got big laughs, and Fan, who got a huge ovation when her song was over, picked up a total of four dollars in change by the time she left the stage. She also won first prize—ten dollars—at the end of the evening.

"It took me three-quarters of an hour to get to the theater," she told Charles Darnton of the *New York Herald Tribune* some years later. "But

going back I made it in ten minutes—zip!” Fanny bought a pair of white canvas shoes and a willow plume the next day.

Frank Keeney now told Fanny about other amateur contests, some at theaters in which he had a part interest. He also told her not to pick her money up until she finished singing.

Fanny’s life as a performer had begun, although French Charlie had not seen the launching. The *bon vivant* French Jew who nurtured Fanny’s stage ambitions would live several more years. His effect on Fanny, however, would last decades, shaping both her stage work and her preference in men. Fanny, thanks to Charlie, was an artist. Unlike him, however, she was practical and strong. The talent would enable her to triumph on the stage. The strength, though, would allow her to survive.

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## CHAPTER 2

### *Enter Miss Brice*

**F**rank Keeney had interests in two other Brooklyn theaters besides the one he owned on Fulton Street, and Fanny's next amateur night appearance was at one on Flatbush Avenue. This time, she did not pick her money up until she finished singing. The result was that she missed the laughs she had gotten at Keeney's. Fanny soon went back to picking up the money.

The next six months saw Fanny enter one Brooklyn amateur night after another, usually, though certainly not always, walking home with the first prize. "I started getting smug about it, and I finally let it carry over on the stage. You could cut the audience resentment with a knife. I never let myself get smug again."

Fanny's songs included "Cheer Up, Mary," "Once in a While," and three or four other equally forgotten numbers. As her confidence grew, she expanded her act and did an imitation of Joe Welch, the Yiddish-dialect comedian, when she sensed the mood was right.

Fanny's bent for comedy was nurtured, not by just the Jewish need for humor, but the very nature of popular theatre. That nature was, of course, pure entertainment, with comedy its backbone. In vaudeville, a medium built around individual performers, anything was "okay if it made them laugh"—providing one did not offend. Sex and religion were officially taboo, but ethnic and racial humor was accepted. So was born the blackface, the green-bearded Irish comic, and the dialectician. Fanny, with her multi-ethnic background, ready ear, and natural curiosity about all sorts of people, was naturally inclined toward dialects—not only Yiddish, but the hybrid Irish-German dialect heard so often in the greater New York area in the early 1900s. In 1906, however, she was principally a singer, singing mostly ballads, with brief forays into novelties and com-

edy songs like “In My Merry Oldsmobile,” “Will You Love Me in December As You Do in May?” and “If The Man in the Moon Was a Coon.”

“The amateur night audience is primitive,” Fanny said years later. “It is a thing of large proportions. It is either terribly cruel or vastly appreciative, leaping like a wild animal on the weak, praising to the skies those who please it, and always admiring a fighter. I learned to watch its every move and to beat it to that move. When it wanted sentiment, I gave it tears by the bucketful. When it wanted funny stuff, I clowning to the best of my ability.”

In contrast to the world of New York theater in the late twentieth century, in which skilled, professional union actors work for nothing in “showcase” productions that lead nowhere, some “amateurs” of Fanny Brice’s girlhood managed to make comfortable livings off cash prizes and the coins thrown by appreciative patrons. Fanny sometimes netted more than thirty dollars weekly, a respectable wage for a white-collar worker and a fortune for a girl of fourteen and a half in 1906—even if she gave most of her earnings to her mother.

When the master of ceremonies at one amateur show introduced her as “the Brooklyn favorite, Miss Fanny Borach,” Fanny thought she’d gone as far as possible in Brooklyn. Rose was no stage mother, but she thought a singer who could make thirty dollars a week in Brooklyn would probably make fifty in New York. “My mother couldn’t read or write,” remembered Fanny, “but she could count like a bugger.”

Phil, now nineteen and the owner of a fledgling dairy business, stayed in the house on St. Mark’s Avenue in Brooklyn. Rose and the rest of her children moved to an apartment at 147 East Eighty-second Street in the Yorkville section of Manhattan.

Charlie, who still visited his children, moved to New York, too. Unsuccessful as a bookie, he had gone into the real estate business and moved to 300 West 130th Street in the city’s newest “boom” neighborhood, Harlem. (The boom eventually went bust, and Harlem apartments were increasingly offered to poor black families fleeing the revived Ku Klux Klan in the South.)

Rose would sometimes visit Charlie there along with Carrie, Fanny, and Lew. One time, late at night, Fan overheard her parents discuss sex, a subject she had learned about from girlfriends, but had not discussed at home.

The more that Fanny heard that night, the more she knew that sex—not just French Charlie’s laziness—had wrecked her parents’ marriage.

Fanny loved French Charlie but did not respect him. She conversely respected but did not like Rosie. This curious dual ambivalence toward

both her parents was an important part of Fanny's inner makeup. The necessity of seeing herself as her own role model built her confidence and forced her to make her life with outside friends.

Fanny, now completely self-reliant, pursued show business with a vengeance once the Borachs moved into Manhattan. All her love, ambition, energy, and hopes, previously scattered among charities and money-making schemes, now were channelled into learning songs and making contacts. Fanny's gung-ho attitude about her new career seemed downright funny to many, and her single-minded purpose behind making social contacts might have seemed quite boorish had it not been tempered by a genuine interest in people.

Fanny did not *like* people as much as she was fascinated by them. What made them act and think in different ways, their diverse personal dislikes and different skills, intrigued her by the hour. Show biz people, with their egos, intense jealousies, and childlike insecurities, seemed to be most interesting of all.

One of Fanny's friends among the "amateurs" was a pretty Irish girl named Kitty Flynn. Fan and Kitty started buying the theatrical trade papers—*Dramatic Mirror*, *Clipper*, and a new one called *Variety*—and haunting the offices of Tin Pan Alley music publishers on Twenty-eighth Street. Becoming friendly with professional performers, they heard about *A Millionaire's Revenge*, a new melodrama being produced by the Mitten-thal Brothers Amusement Company. Fan and Kit went to their office and were hired.

Their parts, of course, were merely "bits." The idea of two untrained teen-aged girls with no agents or professional experience landing acting jobs within a few short weeks may seem remarkable today. One must bear in mind, however, that the theatre of the early 1900s was a thriving business. In a world without television, and where the motion picture had not yet begun to toddle, the stage had the task of supplying entertainment for the masses. The 1906–07 season would prove to be the most active in the history of the American theatre, with hundreds of professional touring shows, more than a thousand active vaudeville theatres, minstrelsty, burlesque, stock companies, and a dozen circuses. More than thirty thousand people made their livings as performers.

*A Millionaire's Revenge* was a four-act melodrama by Hal Reid, a successful and prolific hack whose other plays had launched Gladys Smith (later known as Mary Pickford) as a child actress. Clumsily exploiting the then-recent shooting murder of famed architect Stanford White by Harry K. Thaw, jealous husband of Evelyn Nesbit, *A Millionaire's Revenge* featured characters named "Harold Daw," "Stanford Black," and "Emeline Hudspeth Daw," and sought to make a hero of the deranged Thaw by