

Polly Adler

**Madam,
1900-1962**

by David Rosen

One evening in November 1930, Polly Alder, Gotham's most infamous madam, received an anonymous phone call, apparently from one of the city's Finest. As she later recounted in her celebrated 1953 memoir, A House is Not a Home, "the moment I picked up the receiver and even before I could say hello, a man's voice blurted out, 'Hurry, Polly, get out of your house.* They're on their way to serve you with a subpoena.' ... I never found out who called me."¹

Quickly packing an overnight bag, she skedaddled from her East Side apartment, not to return for four months. The subpoena demanded she appear before a New York State committee, the Seabury commission, investigating municipal corruption. It was one appointment she was not going to keep.²

"Polly," as everyone called her, was the talk-of-the-town, a celebrity that only the Roaring '20's twin Christian movements of alcohol temperance and sexual abstinence, with their corresponding vices of illegal drink and illicit sex, could produce. And Polly ran some of the city's most notorious brothels. To keep her houses of ill repute operating, she regularly offered pay-offs, whether in cash, drinks or sexual favors, to New York vice cops, politicians and gangsters – which they all gladly accepted. Adler began her

career during the Roaring '20s and now, with the onset of the Great Depression, she was still a media darling.

Her East Side phone number, LExington 2-1099, was a whispered secret among those in the know, whether cops, pols, playboys, gangsters or the Algonquin Round Table gang. Adler was a self-made woman who found fame and fortune following a path well trod by others, particularly Sophie Tucker and Mae West. Like them, she was a child of

the 20th century; men and women flooded the city, immigrants arriving in the new world or from the rural heartland migrating to the city. They matured to adulthood as part of an historical wave of "new women" who redefined acceptable sexuality and built

careers promoting female sexuality. But Adler, as distinguished from Tucker and West, sold the sexual favors of other women as opposed to selling herself, whether as raw talent or a suggestive fantasy. Tucker and West successfully pushed the limits of popular culture to establish a new female aesthetic; Adler's career promoted illegal commercial sexual exchange that, nearly a century later, still remains illegal, with the rare exception of parts of Nevada.



Photo: *New York Daily News*

* It was ghost written by Virginia Faulkner.

Pearl Adler was born the daughter of Gertrude (Koval) and Morris Adler in Yanow, Belorussia, near the Polish border in 1900. Just before World War I broke out, her parents sent their 14-year-old daughter to family friends in Holyoke, MA. He arrived aboard the *Naftar* and began a new life in a new world; she did not see her parents and siblings again until 1928 when they, too, immigrated to America.³

Looking for better opportunities, she moved to Brownsville, Brooklyn, living with cousins and working in a shirt factory. She was raped by the factory foreman at age 17. While rape may have been all-to-common in early-20th century New York (like it is today), Adler found herself pregnant and undertook the bold move of having an abortion. Her family and the tight-knit patriarchal Jewish community of Brownsville shunned her because she chose an abortion.

Adler, a small woman standing only 4'-11," was a spitfire who found her way into the prostitution racket by chance. Landing in Manhattan from the wilds of Brooklyn, good fortune enabled her to move in with a young woman living in an apartment on the Upper West Side's Riverside Drive. In 1922, a bootlegger hired her as a procurer of women and, a quick learner, Adler started to freelance. "Soon I was meeting a lot of money men and when I saw the way they flung dough around I thought to myself: Why shouldn't some of it be flung my way?," she reflected.⁴

During Prohibition, "Going to Polly's?" was a popular question among late-night partygoers in the know. Before his election as mayor, Jimmy "Beau James" Walker visited her sex salon. Many late-night partygoers from one of Texas Guinan's *speaks* came over after the last call. Other visitors included Robert Benchley, George S. Kaufman and even Dorothy Parker of

the Algonquin Round Table gang; Adler fondly recalled Benchley as "the kindest, warmest-hearted man in the world."⁵

One of the sex resorts Adler ran was on West 54th Street and it hosted early-morning live jazz performances by a young Edward "Duke" Ellington and his band. Duke, Sonny Greer, his drummer, and other band members played once or twice a month on Sunday mornings. "We'd show up around 5 o'clock," Greer recalled. "Polly would see we got breakfast, and we'd work until around nine in the morning. It was nothing to leave with fifty or sixty dollars in tips. One of the girls took such a liking to Duke, she started seeing him on the side."⁶ Adler even opened a brothel in Saratoga Springs, NY, the summer retreat for Gotham's sophisticated racetrack set.

Early in her career, Alder was busted in a police raid for running a "disorderly house." This, her first arrest, shook her up and she tried to go straight, opening a lingerie shop that failed. Reluctantly, she returned to her "calling." Her operations were ostensibly "protected" by the police and gangsters, and she provided the required kickbacks of hospitality, cash and sex services. Nevertheless, Adler was busted 13 times, a casualty of what she called "quota raids." These were the formal prostitution arrests that cops had to have to prove they were doing their job, not unlike stop-and-frisk busts today. Known to the local fuzz, Adler was a perfect catch when they couldn't make their quota.⁷

Adler enjoyed uptown city life, a regular in the Harlem party scene. She visited jazz clubs as well as the more, private, intimate buffet parties, a unique part of Prohibition-era late-night entertainment scene. She visited a party run by the celebrated Sewing Machine Bertha at which

upper-class white visitors out for a night of slumming "would be shown lewd pictures as a preview to the performance of the same tableaux by live actors, white and colored." She reports "money also supplied reefers and cocaine and morphine so that the 'upper classes' could have themselves a real low-down time."⁸

In 1930, Adler had been ordered to appear before special state inquiry, the Seabury commission, investigating municipal corruption. Her appearance came amidst front-page stories about the murder of one of the commission's other star witnesses, Vivian Gordon (aka Benita Franklin Bischoff). She was a 31-year-old divorcée who was, as Adler admits, "in the same business as I." Shortly after Gordon's strangled body was found in the Bronx's Van Cortlandt Park, her 16-year-old daughter committed suicide. Gordon, a former stripper who'd worked for the Minskys, had already provided background testimony about the police vice squad's "framing ring," a scheme that set up women for alleged prostitution, and was about to go public.* Rumors circulated that cops had killed her. Polly's name was found in Gordon's phonebook.⁹

"I had to get out of town because I wasn't going to talk," Polly explained. Adler knew she could not testify, could not face a judge, a state commission and the public. She could not have the most intimate aspects of her life splattered across tabloid headlines. Nor could she be put under oath and reveal the workings of her racket, a racket as old as recorded history yet involving some of the city's leading politicians, police and celebrities. In true Hollywood style, she skipped town, hopping from Newark to Pittsburgh before landing on the sunny sands of Miami. "I am not an informer," she insisted.¹⁰

After four months on the lam, Adler finally returned to Gotham and agreed to appear before the commission. In May '31, the *Times* reported, "... Polly Adler, alleged keeper of a disorderly house, was enabled, by the system of bribery and corruption in Women's Court, to escape punishment time after time while other innocent women were sent to prison on fabricated evidence covering fifty-five printed pages." Her appearance was anticlimactic: she refused to name names and the commissioners didn't really push her. The *Times* noted, she "has been defiant under questioning."¹¹

"... Thanks to Judge Seabury and his not-very-merry men," Adler reflected, "I was able to operate for three years without breaking the lease." Following the hearing, she reopened her parlor house, free from police harassment, quota raids and endless pay-offs. During the few gray years, she lived in an elegant 12-room apartment in the heart of "cafe society country," the fashionable East Side, at 35 East 55th Street, between Fifth and Madison Avenues. The bordello had four bedrooms painted in peach and apple green with accompanying baths. "The living room," she later wrote, "was Louis XVI, but not arbitrarily so." It was painted a soft grey, had pale green satin drapes and was decorated with jade lamps. Her apartment even had a taproom sporting a masculine, "military motif" in red, white and blue, with red leather bar stools. She was especially proud of a "cozy paneled library, the walls were lined with shelves displaying my fine collection of books." However, as she admitted, "... it was one of those Pyrrhic victories. Emotionally, physically and financially I was on the ropes."¹²

"Strangely enough," she found, "the notoriety I had received during the Seabury investigation, instead of alienating my uppercrust clientele, acted as a magnet." New York and the

nation, she swooned, were "Polly-conscious," with "money people" flocking to her door for entertainment. Perhaps most surprising, she began to receive women as guests, notably women "who were so rich or so famous or so intellectual or so uninhibited that they could go anywhere." She found herself operating a "coeducational bordello."¹³

Her bordello welcomed "a truly notable assortment of celebrities, among them a U.S. Senator who was much in the news just then, a famous woman writer, a movie idol, a prominent and lovely member of the fast fox-huntin' set, and a career girl, well-known in Washington and New York, and very close to a member of the White House inner circle." And they came for more than sex. One night, after hosting a grand dinner party, Adler brought on the night's entertainment that included "three queer boys who were completely in drag, with wigs, false eyelashes, high-heeled pumps and beautiful evening gowns." The follow up act "was their opposite number, 'Mabel,' a big fat colored girl clad in white tie and tails" ¹⁴

In 1935, things began to change. Under pressure from yet another state corruption investigation, this one headed by future governor, Thomas Dewey, Adler was an easy target. In early March, Adler – using the alias "Joan Martin" -- was busted as part of a new anti-vice campaign. The *Times* describer "the Adler woman" as "short, stocky, with heavily rouged lips and cheeks and brightly tinted finger nails" who, when released, wore "an expensive fur coat." The police claimed her brothel "had a notorious reputation." In her classic tongue-and-cheek fashion, Adler brushed off the charges: "[I've been the] the fall guy in so many investigations I'm beginning to feel like a rubber ball."¹⁵

Police Commissioner Lewis Valentine did not pull any punches as to the significance of the bust. "I am very much elated over the arrest of the notorious Polly Adler. She is one woman I wanted to see brought in," he opined. "The police who have been working on her case have been doing so for the past four months, but they could never get her in the place until this morning. We wanted her as the keeper of a disorderly house."¹⁶

Adler received unexpected support from *The Daily News*. In an editorial, the paper demanded:

"Here is a woman who keeps an expensive house of ill fame, conducting it on the quiet, without complaints from the neighbors, and with every regard for outward decency. ...

The police tap the woman's wires, set spies on her and in other ways keep her under surveillance as if they suspected her being the Lindbergh kidnapper. ...

It is this crusading against personnel and private habits and instincts – the sex instinct, the deed-rooted human fondness for gambling as shown by the prevalence of policy gamblers – which is futile and sickening, just as the prohibition of drinking liquor was.¹⁷

The editorial didn't keep Adler from a 30-day jail term.¹⁸

In 1939, *Forbes* magazine published a special issue on the World's Fair spotlighting some of Gotham's great pleasures. Adler was one of them. Feeling redeemed, she gloated, "I entered the Valhalla of the American executive."¹⁹ *Fortune* noted that Adler's parlor was "on Central Park West in the Sixties," probably her place at 69th Street and Columbus Avenue.

During World War II, Adler, as American as the next person, was patriotic, but in her own way. "As a result of the shortage of hotel

accommodation," she admitted, "men who had previously engaged hotel suites in which to entertain now brought their parties to my house, and my bar did a thriving business." However, in '43, she was yet again busted. She was warned not to entertain enlisted men and, she admitted, "I resented the police warning and ignored it." When the cops raided her apartment, she was bedridden with pleurisy and ended up in Bellevue Hospital's psychiatric ward from which she escaped. Later, her case was dismissed.²⁰

With the war's end, it all seemed so unexciting, so over. The edge that had kept Adler *in the life* for a quarter-century seemed to be spent. In an era before the popular adoption of psychotherapy, she turned for advice to one of the few people she trusted, her lawyer, Mrs. Gottlieb. Her next stop was Los Angeles and a new life in the sun. Adler attended college at age 50 and published her popular memoir in 1953. The book inspired a 1964 movie starring Shirley Winters and a '64 hit song written by Burt Bacharach and Hal David and sung by Dionne Warwick. She wisely opined, "Prostitution exists because men are willing to pay for sexual gratification, and whatever men are willing to pay for, someone will provide." Polly Adler died in 1962.

For more information:

Polly Adler, *A House Is Not a Home* (New York: Popular Library, 1953).

¹ Polly Adler, *A House is Not a Home* (New York: Rinehart & Company, 1953.), pp. 129-30.

²

<http://www.nytimes.com/1986/09/24/nyregion/police-corruption-a-look-at-history.html>

³ Adler/113, 273

⁴ Adler/34

⁵ Adler/223

⁶ Lawrence/q-72, 135

⁷ Adler/118;

<http://blogs.smithsonianmag.com/history/2012/04/the-house-that-polly-adler-built/#ixzz2EIPggOg>

http://articles.nydailynews.com/2012-03-18/news/31205900_1_star-witness-police-officers-investigation

⁸ Adler/57

* Billy Holiday may well have been ensared in the framing racket. At age 16, she was busted for soliciting. In her autobiography, *Lady Sings the Blues*, she assails the "dirty grafting cop" who busted her and Judge Jean Norris, the city's first female judge, as "a tough hard-faced old dame with hair bobbed almost like a man's ..." who sentenced her to four weeks in a Brooklyn hospital. As a result of the Seabury investigations, Norris was forced from office due to alleged corruption. [Perrtti/q-128]

⁹ Adler/173; Mitgang/119-20; Shteir/142

¹⁰ Adler/130

¹¹ NYT/ May 30/31; NYT/May 24/31; NYT/June 23/31; Adler/150

¹² Adler/154, 151

¹³ Adler/175-76

* Adler was likely referring to Gladys Bentley, know affectionately as "La Bentley," a 250-pound lesbian performer who dressed in top hat and tuxedo and sang her famous song, "My Subway Man," at the Clam House in Harlem.

¹⁴ Adler/177-78

¹⁵ NYT/Mar 20/35; May 13/35

¹⁶ NYT/Mar 6/35

¹⁷ Adler/197

¹⁸ Adler/200-14

¹⁹ Adler/257

²⁰ Adler/263, 264-65