

 **The Schmooze**  
**Stories with a Yiddish Twist**

**A YIDDISH GUIDE TO PHYLLIS DILLER**  
**1917 - 2012**

Phyllis Diller was the grand dame of comedy. She was a pop culture icon for her jokes about looks, cooking, and fictional husband, “Fang.” She paved the way for Joan Rivers, Chelsea Handler, Roseanne Barr, Ellen Degeneres, and others.

*by*  
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**Syosset, New York**

Because of her last name and profession, people often assume she’s Jewish. Most Dillers are Jewish. (Think American businessman, Barry Diller, a second generation Austrian Jewish kid brought up in Beverly Hills. Diller served for 10 years as the Chairman and CEO of Paramount Pictures.) She is NOT Jewish!

Diller had six children with her first husband, Sherwood Diller, who she married in 1939. She divorced him in 1965 and married Warde Donovan a month later. They divorced after 9 weeks. Diller said, “I was so busy getting a divorce I didn’t have time to open my wedding gifts.” She had a 10-year affair with “the love of her life,” lawyer, Robert Hastings.

She was trained as a classical pianist, but never pursued music as a career. She worked as a copywriter for a northern California newspaper, the San Leandro News-Leader, in the early 1950s.

She took the stage (“di bine”) at San Francisco’s Purple Onion Club on March 7, 1955, for her first stand-up comedy performance. She appeared as a contestant on roucho Marx’s show, “You Bet Your Life” in 1957, and appeared on “The Love Boat.”

“der man” (husband)

Phyllis often joked about her husband, “Fang.” “Fang is so unmechanical. Have you ever seen anyone try to look at the engine through the ignition hole?”

“His finest hour lasted a minute and a half.”

“Fang was so dumb he was stranded for six hours on a broken escalator.”

“He’s [Fang] so dumb, he went up to the thermostat. He said, “Seventy! My God! I’ve lost 90 pounds!”

“Fang’s idea of a seven-course dinner is a six-pack and a bologna sandwich.”

“Fang is permanent in my act of course. But don’t confuse him with my real husbands. They are temporary.”

“I realized on our first wedding anniversary that our marriage was in trouble. Fang gave me luggage. It was packed.”

“kosmetik” (cosmetic) SURGERY

Diller openly copped to her numerous facelifts, nose jobs, and tummy-tucks, becoming a defacto pitchwoman for the cosmetic surgery profession. She said, “I used to be young and ugly. Now, I’m old and gorgeous.”

“der vits” (the joke)

Joan Rivers wrote about the time Phyllis Diller hosted and did a monologue. She flew in from the coast just in time to go onstage, arriving in a big mink coat and followed by a skinny guy with thinning hair. A caddy carried her book of jokes. It was as big as ten phone books, She would say, “I need a joke on doors” and he would turn to D. (Rivers was very impressed.)

“der birger-maysger” (mayor)

Diller briefly served as honorary mayor in the affluent town of Brentwood, California.

[about Burt Reynolds]

“Burt Reynolds once asked me out. I was in his room.”

“varem kayt” (warmth)

“kheyn” (charm)

Joan Rivers writes about Diller’s warmth and charm. “She made it her business to know everybody’s name and go over and say to them with no condescension in her

voice. She treated me as an equal, as a peer, as a professional in show business-- NOT A NON PERSON."

Source: "Enter Laughing" by Joan Rivers

"esnvarg" (food)

"maykhl" (tasty food)

Phyllis's unique philosophy of food can be learned by reading the chapter called "Old Food vs. Young Food" in her book titled, "The Joys of Aging & How to Avoid Them." The idea is that an older person, when food shopping, should select only young foods, i.e., pop tarts and strawberry margaritas, and stay away from old foods such as saccharine, skim milk, baked flounder, and a 'poached egg on whole wheat...Nothing sounds worse than going to the checkout counter and the checker yelling: 'How much for the melba toast and the stewed prunes?'"

"oysgeputst" (dressed up)

Diller's accessories included a signature cigarette holder and shoes chosen to make her legs look bony and unattractive. Diller just went for the awful.

"paruk" (wig)

Phyllis Diller's 22-room home in LA was listed at 12.9 million [2012]. She devoted a room to storing the many wigs she wore. She called her living room the Bob Hope Salon. A large oil painting ("gemel") of Hope is featured prominently in the room, a gift from the comedian.

## HOUSEWORK

"bale-boste" (housewife)

"Housework can kill you, but why take a chance?"

(quote)

## HOUSEKEEPING HINTS

"If your house is really a mess and a stranger comes to the door, greet him with, 'Who could have done this? We have no enemies.'"

Source: "Phyllis Diller's housekeeping hints," 1966

Her other hints:

- Discuss religion ("religye") and politics at a dinner party so people get into heated arguments and don't notice what they're eating. They may also think the arguing caused their indigestion ("nit-fardayung")
- Run the vacuum ("shtoybzoyger") often. Not to clean--to drown out the kids.

- If you are single (“neet khasene gehat”), get married on Thanksgiving Day so you can insist upon eating out on your anniversary (“yortog”).
- Never serve meals on time. The starving eat anything.”

“Cleaning your house while your kids are still growing up is like shoveling the walk before it stops snowing.” (quote)

“kinder” (children)

“Be nice to your children because they are the ones who will choose your rest home.” (quote)

“We spend the first twelve months of our children’s lives teaching them to walk and talk and the next twelve telling them to sit down and shut up.”

“fusbal” (football)

“The reason women don’t play football is because 11 of them would never wear the same outfit in public.” (quote)

“beysbol” (baseball)

“If it weren’t for baseball, many kids wouldn’t know what a millionaire looked like.” (quote)

“gazlen” (robber)

“Any time three New Yorkers get into a cab without an argument a bank has just been robbed.” (quote)

“shmeykhl” (smile)

“A smile is a curve that sets everything straight.” (quote)

“bokher” (bachelor)

A bachelor is a guy who never made the same mistake once.” (quote)

“oyesen” (to eat out)

“Best way to get rid of kitchen odors: Eat out.” (quote)

“geshlekt” (sex)

“I admit, I have a tremendous sex drive. My boyfriend lives forty miles away.” (quote)

“shviger” (mother-in-law)

“My mother-in-law had a pain beneath her left breast. Turned out to be a trick knee.”  
(quote)

“presayzn” (iron/pressing)

“I’m eighteen years behind in my ironing.”

“kaas” (anger)

“My recipe for dealing with anger and frustration: set the kitchen timer for twenty minutes, cry, rant, and rave, and at the sound of the bell, simmer down and go about business as usual.” (quote)

“tate-mame” (parents)

“Most children threaten at times to run away from home. This is the only thing that keeps some parents going.” (quote)

“konkurs” (contest)

“sheynkayt” (beauty)

“Would you believe that I once entered a beauty contest? I must have been out of my mind. I not only came in last, I got 361 get-well cards.”

“teyater” (theater)

Diller had a run on B’way in 1970, starring as Dolly Levi in “Hello Dolly.”  
She had a one-woman show at New York’s Carnegie Hall in 1962.

[about Bon Soir in Greenwich Village]--a club so sophisticated, Diller cracked that “a nine-year-old came in here the other night, and when he left he was thirty eight.”

“der nekrolog” (the obituary)

Jim Cheng (USA Today) reported on Diller’s death. He wrote that 1985 was a particularly busy year. Diller had a brow lift, nose job (the second), under-eye lift, cheek implants, eye-liner tattoo, and she had her teeth bonded.

As Diller has said, “When I die, God won’t know me.”

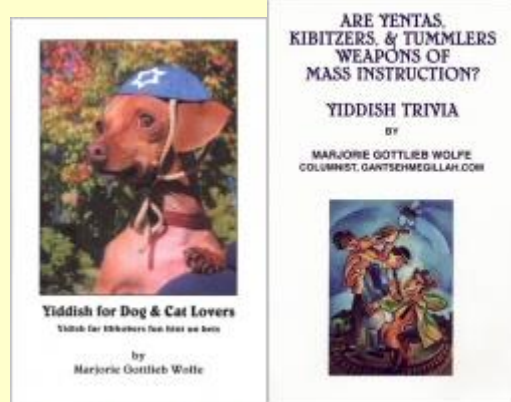
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**Marjorie Gottlieb Wolfe is the author of  
two books:**



**"Yiddish for Dog & Cat Lovers" and  
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