

The Uphill Fight That Was Won

By JOSEPH NORTH

ELIZABETH GURLEY FLYNN radiantly extracted the letter from her purse and handed it to me. It was truly a red letter day, for the envelope contained the notice, signed by the four commissioners of election who wrote "respectfully":

"Dear Sir or Madam: You are hereby notified that a petition has been filed in this office designating you as a candidate for the Peoples' Rights Party for the office of Councilman of the 24th Senatorial District to be voted for at the General Election, Nov. 5, 1957."

She laughed as she read the final sentence: "The last date for you to decline such designation is Sept. 26, 1957."

The candidate tossed her head, exclaiming humorously: "Decline? Good Lord, how could they even dream that I might decline!"

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NO, NOT after that campaign, that "beautiful, uphill campaign" she said as the two jubilant chairmen of her campaign joined her—

Evelyn Wiener and Dr. Albert E. Blumberg.

A bright autumn sun shone through the window transforming the bare headquarters into a place of victory the occupants felt it to be. The trio of crusaders conveyed grateful congratulations to all the men and women—and youngsters—who worked so hard through the breath-taking weeks. (And, the writer should add, to this newspaper "for its great help.") And to the 4,036 who signed.

The telephone frequently interrupted our interview as various callers expressed their congratulations and the neighborhood newspaper Town and Village called for an interview and a photograph of the candidate.

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THE CANDIDATE—as is just, had the first word—and the last. Before getting down to brass tacks, she mused on the unparalleled qualities of her district: "It contains Wall Street and the Bowery; Trinity Church and Governor's Island; Foley Square (where she was sen-

tenced to prison as a victim of the Smith Act) and the Statue of Liberty."

"And Miss Liberty," she said exuberantly. "will vote for me, I'm sure."

Nor is that all: The district includes the giant buildings of the La Guardia housing project; the Vladeck, the Al Smith, the ILGW, the Lillian Wald, the Baruch—as well as Knickerbocker Village and Stuyvesant Town.

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"JUST THINK," Miss Flynn declared, "I had absolutely no expectation of getting into this. There I was, preparing to write more memoirs, when Ben Davis and Doc Blumberg come along, hurl me into this campaign—which I love." They had come to ask—shortly after she served her term in the penitentiary—if she would "consider running."

"Consider? I was rarin' to go." All concerned with the campaign, members of the Communist Party and other progressives, decided finally to make a go of it

August 12, the first legal day to collect signatures, Dr. Blumberg pointed out.

Within four days the first canvassers began to climb the stairs. The tempo of the campaign picked up as time went along, and as Miss Weiner pointed out, the canvassers got the feel of it, and sensed its possibilities.

Some 495 signatures were collected in the sixteen days to Labor Day; but by that time word had gotten around—and folks had returned from their vacations. In the six days after Labor Day the canvassers returned with 750 signatures.

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AT THAT POINT the campaign committee—with only two weeks to go—stepped up their appeal for all and sundry to come on down. They urged that the total be doubled in a week—to 2,500. "And it was done," both the chairman and the chairlady said simultaneously. The legal target was 3,000 just to make sure, the goal chosen was 4,000. "And that was reached." Last Sunday was the banner day; 140 canvassers showed up, in addition to the many others who acted as dispatchers, did the important technical work, and all

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The Flynn Campaign

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other manifold details.

The candidate and the two chairmen made many principal points which included these: the signatures came from all sectors of the population of the Lower East Side—Italian, Jewish, Negro, Puerto Rican; "the response from the latter two groups was especially noteworthy."

Special leaflets were printed in Italian, Spanish and Yiddish, and thousands throughout the community received them respectfully, and read them carefully even when they declined to sign.

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THOSE WHO affixed their signatures did so primarily for the following reasons: 1. They responded to the issues which the candidate espoused especially that of improved housing, and an end to discrimination.

2. The sense of fair play—the right of minority parties to speak their piece. This was manifest even among individuals who had little use for politics.

3. The dissatisfaction with the performance of the two major parties expressed in the lively response to an independent candidate. "The people are waiting for answers," Miss Weiner interjected. "They may not be convinced that we have the answers, but they are willing to give us a try."

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THE CONSENSUS of the canvassers is that Communism was not a decisive issue with the majority. Red-baiting was minimal. But McCarthyism does not die easy: it lingers on in the fear of so many to take a stand, fear for their jobs, primarily. And many who did not sign declined regretfully.

Dr. Blumberg described the conflict that went on in many a mind, like that of the Negro father who told him, initially, "No, I won't sign, I've got to consider my children."

But as he read the leaflet on Arkansas, and listened to the facts of the campaign, and to the record of the candidate, he debated audibly with himself, and finally made his decision: "Here," he said abruptly, "I'll sign."

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SOME WERE ready to sign too quickly—sheerly on their conviction that the right to the ballot should be denied no one. They had not yet heard the full story, and the canvassers did not accept their names until they completed it.

Canvassers carefully explained—within the context of Miss Flynn's life-time record as a crusader for labor, civil liberties and civil

rights—that she is a leading figure of the Communist Party who had recently returned from a long term in prison as a Smith Act defendant.

A fundamental reason for the campaign's success is the quality of the candidate—her exemplary record. Add these factors together and you may get some idea of the campaign's ascendant course.

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TRUE, Miss Flynn said, no few canvassers were apprehensive at the outset, and doubted the practicability of the campaign. These exaggerated the difficulties and misgauged the electorate's mood. They feared failure.

Once the campaign got underway, the enthusiasm rose rapidly, and many, as Miss Weiner added, felt, as one woman said, "It was like getting out of a wheel-chair after an illness, and discovering you could walk." They were emerging from a long period of repression and difficulties, and discovered action once again. The discovery was exhilarating.

The three praised the contribution Benjamin J. Davis made in his street speeches: the former councilman's authoritative recital of the Communists' record in City Council was frequently cheered. Others, likewise, made a significant dent on the community, like Jesus Colon who spoke eloquently in Spanish to his fellow Puerto Ricans, explaining the worth to residents who knew semi-colonial oppression of a candidate like Miss Flynn.

And there were others, too, who caught the imagination of their audience: men like Louis Weinstock, Arnold Johnson, both of whom sat in prison for long terms under the Smith Act; Simon W. Gerson, the executive editor of this newspaper, and others.

And now on to the next stage—the all-too-brief period of time between now and election day—November 5. The three concluded confidently that it would be even more inspiring than the signature campaign; but that is another story and you can rest assured it will be told in these columns.

Teachers Threaten New Strike in Italy

ROME, Sept. 29 — Italy's secondary school teachers last week threatened a new strike unless the government accepts their claims for career benefits by the end of next month.

The Teachers Union served notice that it would call a strike of "adequate" length if the government fails to submit to Parliament an urgent bill reforming the teachers' career system.