

Nixon's High-Flying Literary Agent

Beverly Hills

It was not through luck that Irving (Swiftly) Lazar became Richard Nixon's literary agent, within five days sold the former President's memoirs for a reported \$2.5 million advance, and walked off with a neat \$250,000 commission and invitations to dinner at San Clemente.

It was inevitable. If Lazar had not been hired, he most likely would have sold Nixon's book anyway.

Lazar, 68, the reigning wizard of literary agents, has been doing things like that since 1930. He will sell properties he doesn't represent and then notify the startled but delighted writer that he's just closed a multimillion-dollar deal for him. He will sign clients' names to contracts if they're not around to do it themselves. He will hammer out huge advances by summarizing books to publishers and producers that he may or may not have read. He will pursue hesitant but naked studio heads into and out of showers to get their signatures.

There are also those who suggest he loses interest if he can't close the deal right away for large figures. And Alan J. Lerner, it is said, once gave Lazar a copy of "An American in Paris" with the pages taped together to test whether he had read his clients' work. Lazar blithely called days later to say it was "an absolutely rare work of art."

He is a rascal.

He is at best 5-foot-3, bald as a cue ball, immaculately and nattily clad in custom-made suits, monogrammed underwear and thick-rimmed glasses. His manner is regal. He booked bands in Depression nightclubs, then went around to collect each night from the mobster owners. He has a manic concern for germs.

He starts taking sleeping pills three hours before his scheduled bedtime, so he can fall asleep without wasting time — a practice that once led him, groggy in pajamas, to tumble 20 feet out an open door into the snow when his London-bound airplane stopped briefly in Greenland. He tools around town in a monogrammed black and tan Rolls and a Mercedes 280 SL two-seater. He lies in bed every morning until 11, devoting two hours to "thinking and collecting myself."

He flew all over Spain in a private plane one summer with Ernest Hemingway hopping from

bullfight to bullfight.

He watched Humphrey Bogart — who coined the nickname Swiftly when Lazar lined up five deals for him in 24 hours — smash a glass of Scotch to pieces after Lazar told him he was "an actor who could only handle dialogue with a trenchcoat on."

Bogart called him the most unforgettable character he'd ever met. Lauren Bacall has called him a figment of someone's imagination. Others insist Moss Hart wrote him.

Of course, any number of writers would be proud to claim that accomplishment. It is undoubtedly one reason they all hire him.

But Lazar provides an extra motivation: money. Lots of it.

Working alone, with offices and secretaries here and in New York, London and Paris, he has, in the past 15 years, sold literary properties to publishers and movie studios worth \$100 million, more than any of the giant agencies and enough to provide him an average annual commission of just under \$700,000.

The names of clients for whom he's wrangled record payments and percentages decorate his conversation: Cole Porter, Hart, Neil Simon, Truman Capote, Hemingway, Noel Coward, Herman Wouk, Garson Kanin, Ruth Gordon, Billy Wilder, Richard Brooks, Edna Ferber, Orson Welles, Lerner and Lowe, George S. Kaufman, Brendan Behan.

He grew up in Stamford, Conn., the son of German-Jewish immigrants who ran a butter-and-egg business, was admitted to the bar in 1929, served as an assistant district attorney briefly, then practiced law.

"I did some work for the MCA agency. When I found out I was doing all the work and the agents were getting all the money, I decided to become an agent," he begins.

So when a nightclub owner mentioned he needed a Hawaiian musician and Lazar knew one, but couldn't remember his name, he quickly promised "I can get you Johnny Pineapple." He tracked the guy down, told him his new name and booked him on the spot.

After the war, Lazar pulled what remains a legend in agents' folklore. Learning that the Army Air Corps wanted to produce a Broadway play, he sent bogus letters to General (Han) Arnold and

Moss Hart, convincing each that the other desperately wanted to see him. They met. The result: "Winged Victory," which made \$5 million for the Army and reportedly earned Lazar his captain's rank.

Hart then asked Lazar what he wanted for Christmas. "Cole Porter," Lazar answered. He got him and began adding all the others. "They just liked me," Lazar shrugs.

How did Lazar, who worked for John Kennedy's 1960 campaign, get hired by Nixon?

"I never knew the President, but I did know Ron Ziegler from Sinatra's house. I was recommended by Walter Annenberg and some others.

"Nixon, quite obviously, is a man who has suffered a great deal, but he was in complete command and I found him very responsive.

"They've had us to dinner since then. And I can say he's dictating the book now and Frank Gannon is putting it together. It will be finished by September of next year."

Stories about Lazar, no matter how they're told, make him seem an elfin cutup. This is not so. He doesn't mind people poking fun at his eccentricities — he knows it only helps business — but his manner, in fact, is unwaveringly dignified.

Given an opening, he talks thoughtfully about his work. Selling a book or play for a high price before it is a recognized property makes him happiest.

"Some agents are not deal-closers. They negotiate but can't close it. I don't like to negotiate — I like to make a deal. Give a little, take a lot, convince the other fellow he's getting a fair deal, then run and catch the train."

Lazar's success comes from getting innumerable different types to like him.

"I think it's because if there's nothing going on, I try to create something.

"Once we were in Switzerland and decided to give Noel Coward a birthday party in London. We sent out 125 invitations to a formal dinner party in the grand ballroom of Claridge's. Burt Bacharach sang a new score of his, Lerner and Lowe sang 'We've Grown Accustomed to Your Face' while looking at Cow-

ard, and then Coward, for the last time in his life, performed. For an hour, he sang all his songs. He was 72 and died soon after that."

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