

His Clients Call Him 'The Best'

By Adam Shaw

He is a legend in a traditionally nameless trade, a man Fortune magazine once called one of America's five "peerless princes of pitch," whom his friends used to joke about saying, "he's immortal."

By acquiring the sole right to sell former President Richard Nixon's memoirs, Irving Paul (Swifty) Lazar, 67, may well become so.

He did it on Aug. 31 during a "pleasant" three-hour meeting with Nixon in San Clemente to which he had been invited while in Paris.

In New York this week, Lazar said he is talking to "publishers of every political persuasion" about the future Nixon book ("I don't know when he'll write it, probably when the dust settles") which he said Nixon assured him will be written "the way it was."

While many of his friends expressed surprise that Lazar would want to represent Nixon, none was surprised that the former President would want to be his client.

"Nixon went to Swifty because he's the best," said Lauren Bacall.

"The key to his career is that his company is so agreeable and his zest for life so contagious that he attracted people into his orbit, and, over a period of time his client list became so glittering that it reached a point where even an ex-President of the United States wants to be part of it," said actor Martin Gabel.

"It's perfectly all right for him to represent Nixon," chipped in lyricist Alan Jay Lerner, "but not for him to defend his morality or lack thereof."

Quipped Art Buchwald, "I guess he feels every guy deserves an agent."

"I've been called in by two other Presidents to advise them about their books," Lazar said. "Every President has had an opportunity to give his version of his contribution to history and it is very important that former



Irving Paul Lazar

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President Nixon, who is an extremely controversial figure, have the same opportunity."

Lazar, who has been known to advise balking clients "Take the money and run for the train," said Nixon "never talked about money (although \$2 million is rumored for the book). He never asked me how many copies the book (more likely to be in two volumes) might sell. He was very aloof from the commercial aspect of it."

Scott Meredith, Spiro Agnew's agent, said he had been contacted by the White House both before and after Nixon's resignation and that money had been a major topic. Meredith said he wasn't "too interested" in the book-to-be at present because he doubted Nixon could "deal honestly and openly about his presidency right now. It's too early."

Meredith called Lazar "the grand old man in this field," and predicted failure for this newest venture.

But this week Lazar is in New York with, he says, a signed letter from Nixon in his pocket assuring him he is the one and only agent authorized to sell the future book.

From Lazar's record, Nixon is in good hands and the most illustrious of company. Over the years, Lazar has built up a stable of clients and probably arranged more million-dollar deals than any single agent in the country.

In his time, Lazar has represented and sold the works of Ernest Hemingway, Maxwell Anderson, Moss Hart, Truman Capote, Vladimir Nabokov, Neil Simon, Theodore White, Irwin Shaw, James Jones, Edna Thurber, Françoise Sagan, George Kaufman, Richard Brooks, Alan Jay Lerner, Cole Porter and Noel Coward, among many. In some cases he was not the exclusive agent, his involvement often occurring, for example, in the sale of an already published work for stage or screen adaptation.

It didn't come easy, but when it began, it never stopped. Born to a small-time banker in Stamford, Conn., Lazar got his first view of New York from Brooklyn where he attended law school at night, paying for it by being Samuel Untermyer's secretary.

"Swifty was over 30 before he knew there was such a thing as day school," a friend of his, Harry Kurnitz, once said.

His show business career began by representing big bands and vaudeville acts for the Music Corporation of America in the '30s. It really took off when, as a second lieutenant in the Air Force during World War II, he brought together General "Hap" Arnold and playwright Moss Hart.

In typical Lazar fashion, he did it by wiring both that each wanted to meet

the other. The meeting resulted in the show, "Winged Victory" which Lazar produced and which netted him a captaincy and the Air Force relief fund a tidy \$4 million.

Shortly thereafter Hart asked Lazar what he wanted for Christmas.

"Cole Porter," said Lazar. And he had a new client.

Five-foot-four, gleamingly bald and natty in English suits, Italian shirts and monogrammed underwear, Lazar was described by Alan Lerne as having "the nerve of a one-armed paperhanger" and by Irwin Shaw as looking like "an expensive beach toy from Abercrombie and Fitch."

He has been known to

pave hotel room floors with bath towels for fear of germs, and most of his friends and clients have endless "Swifty stories."

Few of them however, have ever complained that Lazar hasn't earned every penny of his "10 per cent" or that he is anything but the most loyal of friends and generous of hosts.

For years a confirmed bachelor, Lazar married Mary Van Nuys, a model some years his junior, in 1963.

Lauren Bacall called him a "totally loyal and devoted friend. He was terrific through Bogie's illness." She echoed an old joke that Lazar never reads the books he sells by saying, "The saving grace is that he'll never have to read Nixon's book."

She said Bogart "always used to say Swifty was the most unforgettable character he'd ever met," and recalled a typically grand party Lazar gave in California some years back.

"It was the end of the evening. We'd all been teasing him a lot about being the 'Wash and Dry' king, and finally he had to get up and make a speech. I could see he was choking up, he was very moved because he knew we all loved him so. Finally, he rose and said, 'I made you and I can break you.'"

Lazar even tells stories about himself, the most famous illustrating his belief that he never stopped believing in the value of representation with or without authorization (that is not the case at all with Mr. Nixon, he said. "We have a written understanding.").

One day, Lazar said, he met a producer who asked him, "Whom do you represent in this \$3 million deal of 'West Side Story'?" Lazar, looking straight up above his half-rimmed glasses replied, "I represent you." He got his 10 per cent.

Constantly on the move ("the original jet-setter," said Buchwald), between his Beverly Hills, New York, Paris and London offices, Lazar admitted that he once stepped off a plane in Newfoundland before the ramp was brought forward.

Despite his size, his physical courage is legend. He's fought a bull on the ranch owned by friend and bull-fighter Luis Miguel Dominguin, ridden the surf off Malibu, played tennis with men 40 years his junior and skied at least one of the Swiss Alps. He did have to be carried down on a friend's shoulders, but he tried.

When it comes to selling books or someone's share in musicals ("The Sound of Music," "Camelot," "My Fair Lady," "Man of La Mancha," "How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying," and "Golden Boy" to name a few), he needs no one to carry him.

He has always represented writers, directors, producers, lyricists and composers, never actors. "He saw them as a much more stable commodity," said Lerner.

Lazar has never signed a contract with his clients, most of whom have been with him 20 years, nearly all of whom are close friends despite the ups and downs of their talents and fortunes. His fortune never ceased growing.

He lives surrounded by the comforts and possessions of the very rich. Picasos, Redons, Degas', Soutines and Modigliani paintings and sculptures adorn the walls of his Beverly Hills villa. More hang on

the walls of his New York apartment. His taste in restaurants is of the same caliber and the headwaiters in Maxim's, La Cote Basque and Sans Souci know that when *Monsieur* Lazar is coming to dine, there will be constant telephone interruptions and a princely tip.

Recently Lazar has been making frequent trips to Washington, talking books and money with the most prominent figures both in and out of the past three administrations. He said he plans to open a Washington office sometime soon.

Anne Buchwald, who for the last year has been Lazar's partner in Washington, said she no longer was associated with him.

"There was a conflict of interests," she said, "I had to choose between Nixon's literary agent and my husband. I love them both dearly. I decided to choose my husband."

Said columnist Buchwald, "The whole thing is wild. For the last five years I've made my living writing about Nixon and the title of my next book is 'I'm not a crook.' I'm not losing an agent, I'm gaining a wife."

Lazar said he had been approached by "all the Watergate figures, and I turned them all down."

"I think Swifty has probably achieved everything he's wanted to," said Lerner. "He's become the name to be dropped."



Illustration by Joseph Scopin