

## BOOKS

# Leo Rosten, a Writer Who Helped Yiddish Make Its Way Into English, Is Dead at 88

By MARGALIT FOX FEB. 20, 1997

Leo Rosten, the writer, scholar and language maven who introduced millions of Americans to the deep lexical pleasures of chutzpah and shlemiel and kibitz and nosh, died yesterday at his home in Manhattan. He was 88.

Mr. Rosten, who wrote dozens of works of fiction and nonfiction in a career that spanned more than six decades, was best known for his books celebrating Jewish language, humor and culture, including "The Education of H\*Y\*M\*A\*N K\*A\*P\*L\*A\*N" (1937) and "The Joys of Yiddish" (1968).

"The Joys of Yiddish" was a fat lexicon of expressions that had elbowed their way into ordinary English idioms, endearments, epithets and jokes. As Mr. Rosten described the book's purpose in his introduction: "It illustrates how beautifully a language reflects the variety and vitality of life itself; and how the special culture of the Jews, their distinctive style of thought, their subtleties of feeling, are reflected in Yiddish; and how this in turn has enhanced and enriched the English we use today."

Over the years, "The Joys of Yiddish" has become the de facto standard reference work on the language, serving as a bridge between the world of Mr. Rosten's forebears and that of the more assimilated readers of our own age. Although the book quickly became a best seller, the critic Irving Howe kibitzed Mr. Rosten in The New York Times Book Review for uprooting Yiddishisms from their

larger cultural context and for shlepping out Borscht Belt humor that was already old in his grandparents' day.

"Let Howe write 10 jokes and let me write 10 jokes, and you'll see the difference," Mr. Rosten countered.

But in the end, it was Mr. Rosten's mother -- who then? -- who had the last word. When "The Joys of Yiddish" was published, she telephoned her son the writer. "You have saved Yiddish," she told him. "A leben auf dein keppelch" -- a benediction that translates literally as "a life on your little head."

What united Mr. Rosten's output was his finely tuned ear for language in all its richness. In his books, he guided readers through the nuanced worlds of meaning that lie hidden beneath a joke, an idiom or a vocal inflection. And what he revealed was nearly always good for a laugh.

"Humor is an indication of a wholeness of character structure," Mr. Rosten said in a 1981 interview. "Indeed, I would say that one of the requirements for sanity is a sense of humor -- and its absence is crippling."

Mr. Rosten's delight in the comic possibilities of language was nowhere more evident than on the lips of his most famous creation, Hyman Kaplan, whom critics have compared to the comic characters of Dickens and Shakespeare. Inspired by a former night-school student from Mr. Rosten's own teaching days, Kaplan, a Mr. Malaprop by way of Ellis Island, embodied both the perils and the pride of the immigrant experience. Hyman Kaplan made his debut in 1935 in a series of New Yorker stories; the stories were later published in book form under the pseudonym Leonard Q. Ross.

Plump, middle-aged and possessed of a warped linguistic brilliance, the pompous Hyman Kaplan sat front and center in the beginners' class of the American Night Preparatory School for Adults, where he signed his name in a barrage of asterisks and ritually tortured his long-suffering teacher, Mr. Parkhill, with his compound fractures of English. The most famous "tree American wriders," Kaplan announced proudly in class, were "Jeck Laundon," "Valt Viterman" and

"Mocktvain" (the author, for the unenlightened, of "Hawk L. Barry-Feen").

Reviewing the book in The New York Times Book Review in 1937, Robert Van Gelder noted that Kaplan "overrides all conventions and even the laughter of enemies, twisting the language of Shakespeare and Milton to his will as casually as we might twist the language of Confucius -- if we knew enough about it to catch hold of it at all."

Leo Calvin Rosten was born on April 11, 1908, in Lodz, Poland, the son of Samuel and Ida Freundlich Rosten, and immigrated with his family to the United States in 1911. Reared in Chicago, he was the product of the immigrant, working-class Jewish milieu that was home to a generation of Hyman Kaplans. A voracious reader with a wide-ranging intellect, the young Mr. Rosten set out to be a political scientist. He received his bachelor's degree from the University of Chicago in 1930 and his doctorate from the same institution in 1937, followed by postgraduate study at the London School of Economics and Political Science.

In a 1981 interview, Mr. Rosten recalled the "passion for clarity" that first attracted him to the social sciences: "Sooner or later I would have been driven by the need to find out something . . . about how people act, why they do what they do, how society is organized, why there are wars and depressions, murders and prejudice and fanaticism." He added: "It wasn't enough to say, 'These are things I don't understand.' I had to try, at least, to understand them."

As a young doctorate in the teeth of the Depression, Mr. Rosten was forced to abandon his scholarly career temporarily and take a night job teaching English to new immigrants. There, he encountered a student -- a man named Kaplan -- who would inspire one of the most memorable comic figures of 20th-century fiction.

"I walked out of that first night's class in a daze," Mr. Rosten said in 1937. "That man Kaplan had taught me a great deal. I thought the conjugation of verbs meant saying, 'Drink, drank, drunk.' I asked Kaplan to conjugate 'fail,' and he said, 'Fail, failed, bankrupt.' I was stunned."

The indomitable Kaplan reappeared for two sequels, "The Return of

H\*Y\*M\*A\*N K\*A\*P\*L\*A\*N" (1959) and "O K\*A\*P\*L\*A\*N! My K\*A\*P\*L\*A\*N!" (1976). In 1968, "The Education of H\*Y\*M\*A\*N K\*A\*P\*L\*A\*N" was briefly reincarnated as a Broadway musical, staged by George Abbott and starring Tom Bosley, which opened to pleasant if unspectacular notices.

Mr. Rosten's other books include "The Washington Correspondents" (1937), a study of the Capitol press corps; "Hollywood: The Movie Colony, the Movie Makers" (1941), one of the first sociological examinations of the film industry; the mystery novels "Silky" (1979) and "King Silky" (1980), and "The Joys of Yinglish" (1989). Mr. Rosten was also the author of numerous screenplays, including "All Through the Night" and "Sleep, My Love."

During World War II, Mr. Rosten held a variety of Government positions, including deputy director of the Office of War Information and chief of the Office of War Information's motion pictures division, and in the late 1940's worked for the Rand Corporation. He also taught at Yale, Columbia and the New School for Social Research, and in 1960 was a Ford visiting professor of political science at the University of California at Berkeley.

Mr. Rosten's first marriage, to Priscilla Ann Mead, ended in divorce. He is survived by two daughters from that marriage, Margaret Muir of Bowdoinham, Me., and Madeline Lee of New York City, and six grandchildren. Mr. Rosten's second wife, the former Gertrude Zimi, died in 1995; a son from his first marriage, Philip, died last year.

Surveying his career in 1981, Mr. Rosten seemed untroubled by the inability of critics to find a single literary pigeonhole that would contain his ecumenical interests: "I remember a literary agent once scolding me, saying that I was foolish to spread myself over so many fields. He said, 'The critics don't know what to call you: a novelist, a social scientist, an essayist, a humorist, a social commentator.' I said, 'That's their problem.' "

From a Language Maven, the Wry Wisdom of a Culture

Leo Rosten described "The Joys of Yiddish" (McGraw-Hill) as "A relaxed

lexicon of Yiddish, Hebrew and Yinglish words often encountered in English, plus dozens that ought to be, with serendipitous excursions into Jewish humor, habits, holidays, history, religion, ceremonies, folklore and cuisine; the whole generously garnished with stories, anecdotes, epigrams, Talmudic quotations, folk sayings and jokes -- from the days of the Bible to those of the beatnik." Some abbreviated entries follow:

**GOTTENYU!** "Dear God," "Oh dear God" or "How-else-can-I-describe my feelings!" Gottenyu! is an exclamation that is uttered with affection, despair or irony, to lend force to a sentence by adding fervor to sentiment.

It is a warm, informal, personal way of enlisting God's attention, not invoking his aid. Nor does it describe the Lord in any way.

It is a colloquial epithet used, for the most part, without really meaning God, per Se (I guess I must capitalize Se here). "Were we happy! Gottenyu!" "Gottenyu! - you never saw such a mess!" "Was I scared? Miserable? Oh, Gottenyu!" A common phrase is "Zeeser Gottenyu," "Sweet God."

A charming dictum has it that, under stress, Jews explain, 'Oy, Mamanyu!' When stress becomes fear they cry, "Oy, Tatenyu!" ("tata" being father). And when things really get tough, Jews cry, "Oy, Gottenyu!" Note the realistic stratification of power.

**SHLEP 1.** To drag or pull or lag behind. "Don't shlep all those packages; let the store deliver them." Pick up your feet; don't shlep."

**2.** To stall, drag one's heels, delay; to move or perform slowly, lazily, inefficiently. "At the rate you're shlepping along, we'll never finish."

Mrs. Hoffenstein, visiting London, went shopping at the famous confectioners, Fortnum & Mason. She brought jars of marmalade, biscuits, tins of cookies and candies, to take back to her hotel.

"And where," asked the striped-trousered salesman, "shall we deliver these,

madam?"

"Don't bother. I'll carry them."

"But madam, we'll be happy to deliver this order --"

"I know, but I don't mind, I'm from the Bronx."

"I understand, madam," said the clerk, "but still -- why shlep?"

YENTA Pronounced YEN-ta, to rhyme with "bent a." Yenta, I am told, was a perfectly acceptable name for a lady, derived from the Italian gentile -- until some ungracious yenta gave it a bad name.

1. A woman of low origins or vulgar manners; a shrew; a shallow, coarse termagant. "She is the biggest yenta on the block."

2. A gossipy woman, a scandal-spreader; a rumormonger; one unable to keep a secret or respect a confidence. In this sense, men are sometimes described as yentas.

Two yentas meet in Miami.

"So tell me, Molly, have you been through the menopause?"

"The menopause? I haven't even been through the Fontainebleau yet."

One of the more amusing buttons worn by the button-happy hippie young reads: MARCEL PROUST IS A YENTA.