

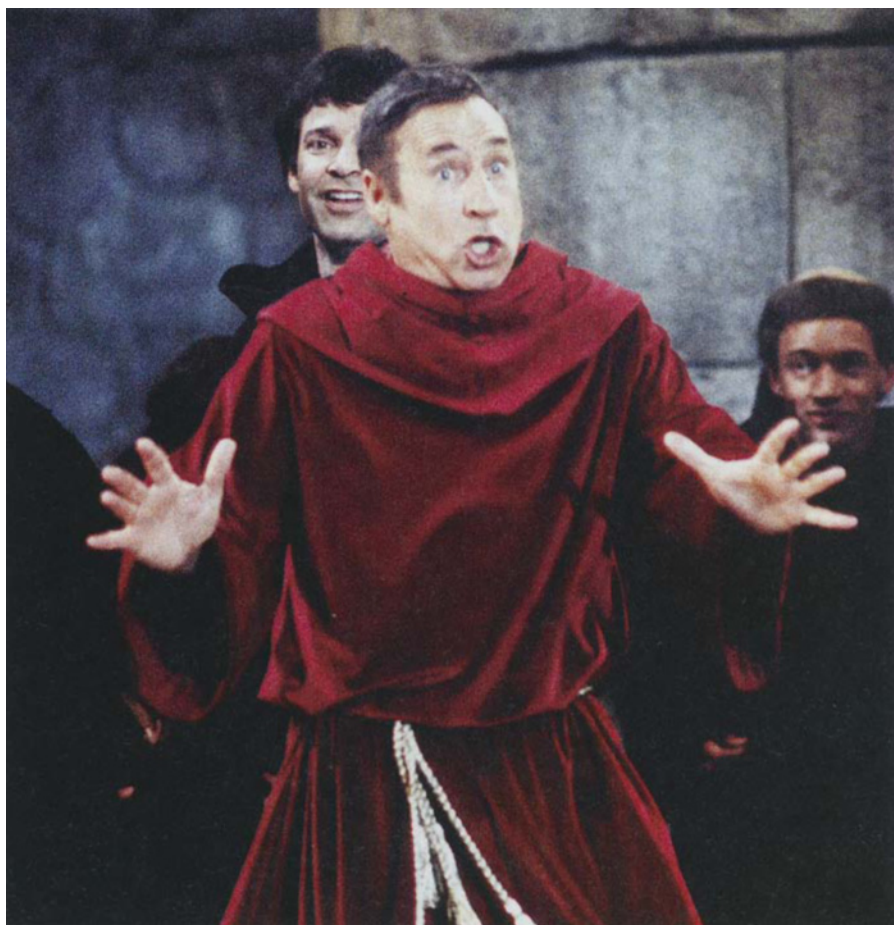


MEL BROOKS KING OF THE POLITICALLY INCORRECT

Mel Brooks, the unchallenged king of Jewish satire, was born Melvin Kaminsky in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. The 84-year-old funnyman, film director, songwriter and Broadway record-setter believes comedy has the power to transform ugly facts of life such as Jewish persecution into something understandable—and even beautiful. Coming from the man who brought the world a musical number about the Spanish Inquisition, the handy miniature guillotine for on-the-go circumcisions and the absurdist song, *Springtime for Hitler*, this view is no surprise. Brooks opens up to *Moment* about his shock upon discovering that most Americans were not Jewish, his experiences as a soldier in World War II (he serenaded German soldiers over a megaphone on the battlefield), and why he thinks Jewish humor is dead. 🤪

INTERVIEW BY LYNDA GOROV

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What were some formative experiences growing up that turned you into this funny guy?

I was the baby of the family, always ready to entertain. They always expected this cute baby to do a little dance or something for them, so I thought it was natural that I would perform. I was never shy like other kids about singing a song or telling a bad joke or just appearing as a—sometimes in school all you are is a snowflake in a snowstorm—but I made sure that my snowflake stood way out. I was an egotistical little child. Getting laughs was very important to me. I always wanted to rock the boat a little bit. It was all very natural. I never struggled to become a performer. I was just meant to do it.

Who were your childhood heroes? Were they funny people? Were any of them Jewish?

Actually, my first childhood heroes were not funny at all. My heroes were adventurers: Robin Hood, Flash Gordon and Jack Armstrong and a little later, Superman. I must have been 10 or 12 before the Three Stooges and the Marx Brothers or W.C. Fields or Eddie Cantor meant anything to me. Later radio shows, Jack Benny and Fred Allen, they were very, very important, just as shorts and movies with the Three Stooges and of course the Ritz Brothers. The Ritz Brothers were my favorite, followed closely by the Marx Brothers.

Were you aware growing up whether someone was Jewish?

For some reason we all knew it. We all knew that Jack Benny was Jewish. We all knew that the Marx Brothers were Jewish. We all knew that the Ritz Brothers were Jewish. The Three Stooges were certainly Jewish, too, with names like Shemp. I think except for W.C. Fields and Fred Allen, 99 percent of the comics that I loved and reveled in were Jewish. I just thought comedy was Jewish. I didn’t think there was anything else. I was amazed if someone was funny and they weren’t Jewish.

What is it that makes your humor recognizably Jewish?

Philosophically, I’d say Jews are a long-



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suffering people. We have suffered many pogroms, many anti-Semitic periods, and I try to remind the world of this in a funny way. In *History of the World, Part I*, I have a whole middle section devoted to the Inquisition. It's not in good taste, but it's a good reminder that the Jews were tortured. I do the same thing in *The Producers* with *Springtime for Hitler*. You gotta keep it funny no matter what. I once said that there's got to be one meshugenah for every 10 Jews to keep them laughing so they won't sink into total depression. Comedy was very important for the Jewish people. Otherwise it could be just dark clouds over your head all the time, and that's no good.

What makes Jewish humor funny?

I don't know. I think sometimes the Jews are very cruel and I'm very cruel because we make fun of cripples and misfits. *Hickadicka*, I think that means hunchback. The Ritz Brothers had this guy Harry Ritz who would do misfortunates. This tradition may have come from Ukraine, where Jews had fun making fun of stutterers and doubletalkers and missteps. Anyway, Harry Ritz was very funny, and following in his footsteps were Sid Caesar and Jerry Lewis and people who did funny faces and physical comedy. Strangely enough, Jerry Lewis's crazy funny walk stems from this. This tradition comes from Yiddish theater too.

Have you ever encountered anti-Semitism?

I felt sorry for anybody who wasn't Jewish when I was a little kid. When there was a Polish Catholic kid or a German or Italian in my neighborhood, I really felt sorry for them, these minorities. I thought Christians were a minority, I really did. Morning, noon and night all I ran into were Jews. It's true. Then when I grew up and was in the army, I was amazed at how many people were not Jewish, I just couldn't get over it. My sergeant isn't Jewish, my captain isn't Jewish, my colonel, what the hell is going on here? It was a rude awakening. I was sent down from Brooklyn to Virginia Military Institute, part of



MEL BROOKS BONUS ROUND QUESTIONS

Favorite comedian today?

Seth MacFarlane, the creator of *Family Guy*. I think *Family Guy* is really very good. *Cleveland* is a brand new show he's done. Very little makes me laugh out loud, but that makes me laugh out loud.

Favorite Jewish holiday?

Tisha B'Av. Jews will get a kick out of that. I'm just saying that because I like the sound of it. Shavuos comes in second because I like the sound of Shavuos. But Tisha B'Av is my favorite. I don't even know what the holiday means but I like the sound of it.

Favorite Jewish saying?

I have a few, I'm just trying to think what's my favorite. I think, *a gezunt dere in pipuk*. Bless your belly button. It just means have good health. It's a cute Jewish expression.

Best Jewish tradition?

As far as I'm concerned, the best Jewish tradition has always been Passover. Except for the wine, which is horrible, everything else is delicious. You get a good meal and more important, you get the family bonding and loving each other across the dinner table.

Worst Jewish tradition?

I would say *tsimmes*. I'm not crazy about prunes, especially mixed with onions and sweet potatoes.

Favorite anti-Semite?

It's always been Hitler who's made a very good living for me.

Favorite Biblical Character? Moses. I love him.

the Army specialized training program. Everybody in Virginia was gentile, I couldn't believe it. Finally I went to Richmond and there was a synagogue and I said, "Oh my God, there's some sanity here."

Did people treat you differently because you were Jewish?

Some did. There wasn't so much anti-Semitism in Virginia, strangely enough, because they just didn't experience Jews, so therefore not know-

ing them they didn't have to hate them. Nobody asked, "Hey, are you Jewish?" because they didn't know there was such a thing. But I found anti-Semitism in places like New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

BEEN THERE DONE THAT

When I see a young woman strolling down the street
With her gleaming hair, glowing skin, and impeccable thighs,
Evoking from the passing male population
Some appreciative glances, some longing sighs,
Some politically incorrect but rave reviews,
And when I notice that none of these fellows is taking notice of me

In my elasticized-waistband pants and my comfortable shoes,
I mobilize the wisdom of a lifetime
And tell my envious heart, Been there, done that,
Calling upon my memory's rich store.
To which my envious heart replies,
Recalcitrantly, unreasonably,
But I want to be there again
And do that some more.

—Judith Viorst

What form did anti-Semitism take?

You'd hear things like "You dirty Jew," "You kike." One time I had just finished putting my mess kit in hot water and soap when this guy behind me said, "Come on, you dirty Jew, move it." Without thinking I turned around— I'm lucky he was wearing his helmet liner— I smashed him over the head with all my might with my mess kit and I knocked him out. I was brought up on charges, but when the lieutenant heard what had happened, he said, "OK, forget about it." No one bothered me after that. I was a tough Jew from Brooklyn.

Did your time in the army form or change your sense of humor?

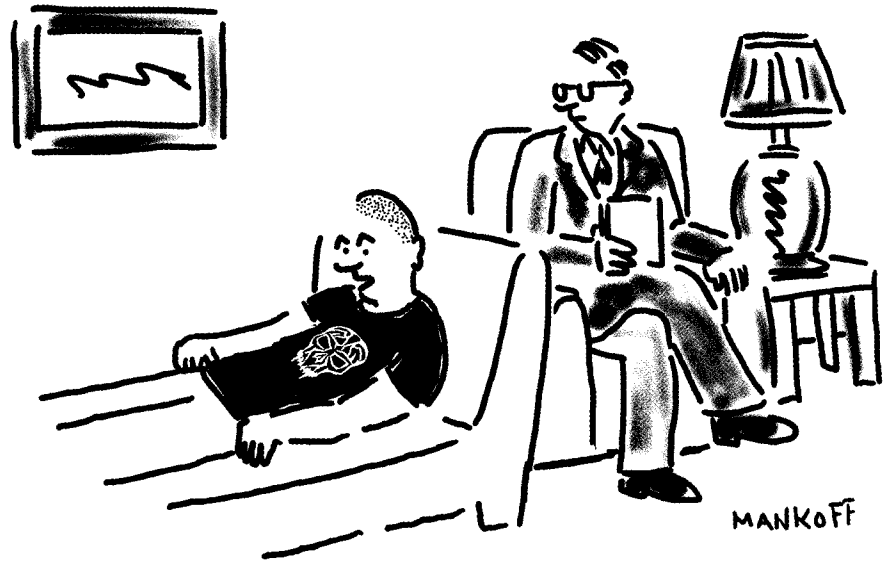
No, no, I still entertained the troops. One time we heard Germans just across the river and their loudspeaker was on. They were singing in their camp. I got on a megaphone and started singing *Toot Toot Tootsie Goodbye*. I think I heard applause from the other side, I think they liked it. My guys went crazy. They loved me serenading the Germans.

Was being in the Army your first time entertaining non-Jews?

Of course, I had a wide audience from all over the country, so I had to find enough ubiquitous stuff to make them all laugh, enough universal ideas. It helped me a lot in forming my kind of humor. When I began writing for *Your Show of Shows*, human frailty was the basis of my humor or the human condition or what humans have to go through and suffer. So that was how we wrote sketches for Sid Caesar. We never wrote jokes. When he did a stand-up, he would do an impression of a person and a situation. He never just said, "I met a girl who was so skinny, the waiter said check your umbrella."

Did your comedic obsession with Hitler grow out of your time in the Army?

It must have been a lot of conscious and unconscious frustration and hatred. If you'd said to me, Mel, you've just turned 84, you've lived a long time, what is the most significant item or phenomenon in all of history? Immediately I would say the Holocaust. It's unbelievable and unforgettable. During my life the most significant historical fact is that there was such a thing. This unholy and unbelievable thing. I could make some sense out of everything else, but I couldn't make any sense out of that. That there was a meeting and they coldly said, these people, women, children, should be exterminated. I think that started my hatred,



I want to be cured of my Islamophobia so I have more time for my anti-Semitism."

that molten ball of hatred for Nazis and Hitler. Instead of just screaming, I used my talents to make it at least enjoyable so the world could get a look at it. If you don't make it interesting or funny, then who cares? You're just a bore if you're going to complain.

What was the first time you incorporated Hitler into your comedy?

I was in the Army and they asked me to do a sketch. I found a German uniform with a cap and I got a Hitler mustache and I just made fun. I did a lot of physical stupid things, screaming, blowing my head off. My hat would fly off, my mustache would fly off. I knew I could get a lot of laughs making fun of Hitler.

Do you think you can go too far in comedy? Is there a subject that's just off limits?

Yes, you can go too far if you make a comedy about the Holocaust. You could make a comedy about the Germans, you could make a comedy about the Nazis. But not the Holocaust.

Some things, no matter what you do, just ain't funny... Look, I'm the original politically incorrect, but I would never.

What about *Springtime for Hitler*?

It's not about the Holocaust. *Springtime for Hitler* is making fun of Hitler and his dreams of conquering the world, and the genius of *Springtime for Hitler* was that the producers wanted to put on the worst show in the world so it would flop in one night and they could collect their money and go to Rio. It was a good excuse for a bad show about Nazis.

Does Jewish humor still exist?

No, I think humor is now regional. I think what people talk about as Jewish humor should be called New York humor because it isn't particularly Jewish in terms of *yiddishkeit*. I don't know if there is anything anymore like Jewish humor because third- and fourth-generation Jews have become totally integrated. We don't live in ghettos anymore. Therefore, no Jewish humor. ☺