Mortimer Matz, a Virtuoso New York P.R. Man, Is Dead at 100

He represented the lofty as well as the low. His credits included the Nathan's hot dog eating contest and the obligatory raincoat to keep a defendant's cuffed hands covered in a "perp walk."



By Sam Roberts

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Mortimer Matz, a New York public relations impresario who was credited with introducing the raincoat as an essential fashion accessory so that recently arrested defendants could hide their handcuffs from photographers, and who co-founded a gluttonous annual hot dog eating contest to promote Nathan's of Coney Island, died on Thursday at his home in Manhattan. He was 100.

The death was confirmed by his daughter Suzanne Matz.

Mr. Matz coupled street smarts, tabloid showmanship and the intellect of an Amherst English literature major to polish the profiles of politicians and other publicity seekers, as well as to advance the causes of corporate clients, protect the names of innocent victims of gossipmongers and salvage the reputations of the guilty.

He was not a conspicuous public presence. He had no swanky office suite and no fancy stationery. He was infrequently quoted by name.

He preferred, instead, to wield his image-making magic behind the scenes by feeding information to reporters, whose confidence he cultivated over decades through his uncommon candor.

His network of informants, combined with his native ingenuity and the equanimity of a former World War II bomber navigator, enabled him to transform potentially embarrassing adversities into small victories, and to elevate accused miscreants into Runyonesque rogues.

"I loved my background role as the go-to guy who knew where the bodies were buried (my clients buried some of them)," Mr. Matz told The Daily News in 2024, "and parlayed that knowledge as currency to help improve the image of the people I worked for by persuading reporters to give my clients the benefit of the doubt or, better yet in some cases, to disregard them altogether."

The catchphrase for the forsaken became "Better call Morty."

When William Morales, who had been charged with making bombs for the Puerto Rican terrorist group known as F.A.L.N., escaped from the prison ward at Bellevue Hospital in 1979, the city suspended a jail guard — a member of a union represented by Mr. Matz.

By informing reporters that the suspended guard had been responsible for supervising 17 prisoners, not just five as the city had claimed, and that red tape had delayed the opening of a more secure prison ward nearby, Mr. Matz recast the story from a tale of one guard's misconduct into a saga of municipal bureaucratic incompetence.

Early in 1979, he perpetrated a one-man subway crime wave. Representing the Transit Police, who were pressuring Mayor Edward I. Koch to hire more officers, Mr. Matz alerted the press to every reported infraction in the subway system. Their collective reporting suggested an undergroundswell of lawlessness.

Savvy reporters determined that the public panic wasn't justified by actual statistics, that it was fueled more by fear than felonies. Nonetheless, the mayor was pressured into assigning a cop to every train and platform at night, at a cost to the city (and a boon to the union in salaries, dues and overtime bonuses) of some $10 million.

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Were a reporter to inquire about the number of beachgoers at Coney Island on any given summer weekend in the 1970s and '80s, chances are that Mr. Matz, who represented the Coney Island Chamber of Commerce, would say there were a million.

But who's counting? Mr. Matz wasn't, but reporters welcomed his definitive false precision.

Mr. Matz and Max Rosey, a public relations colleague, created the annual Nathan's hot dog eating contest in the early 1970s, claiming that it was a Coney Island tradition dating to 1916. (Vexed that contestants were gobbling the hot dogs gratis, Nathan Handwerker, the company's founder, would let the contest last only 12 minutes.)

Mr. Matz founded Mortimer Matz Associates in 1953. Among his first clients was WINS, then a rock 'n' roll radio station. To promote it, he stooped to a level of literary license that some colleagues might have considered shameless, but which captivated his client.

"I bought a stone and had it inscribed with hieroglyphics by a curator at the Met," he told The New York Times in 2010. "It was left in a taxi, and the driver turned it in to the police, as planned. A Times reporter went to an Egyptologist from the Brooklyn Museum, who pronounced it unreadable, but Aswan granite."

Summoning baffled reporters, Mr. Matz cheekily admitted that the hieroglyphics had been faked. To nearly everyone's amusement, he revealed that they could be roughly translated as "Everybody's mummy listens to WINS."



Mr. Matz with his favorite Nova lox on a fresh bagel at Sable's, near his home on the Upper East Side. Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Mortimer Matz was born in Manhattan on July 23, 1924, to Bernard and Lillian (Lewis) Matz. His father was a pharmacist who owned two East Harlem drugstores.

Morty graduated from the highly selective Stuyvesant High School in Manhattan. While attending and later graduating from Amherst College, he worked part time chauffeuring the poet Robert Frost, who taught there.

After serving in the Army Air Forces on a B-29 Superfortress during World War II, Mr. Matz was hired by The Daily News as a $23-a-week copy boy. He was later elevated to picture assignment editor.

His marriage to Joyce Arnstam ended in divorce. In addition to his daughter Suzanne, he is survived by another daughter, Linda Matz; a son, John; three granddaughters; and two great-grandchildren.

Mr. Matz continued to represent clients well into his 90s. He might list his profession somewhat loftily as public relations consultant but also, in more down-to-earth terms, as press agent, conjuring up a predigital era and a more principled version of the unsavory character Sidney Falco in the 1957 film "Sweet Smell of Success."

Mr. Matz savored the sweet smell of his own success more benignly — smoking hand-rolled Rocky Patels at the Cigar Inn on the Upper East Side; partaking in the fresh bagels with hand-sliced Nova lox that he had delivered from Sable's, on Third Avenue, a few blocks from his apartment; and enjoying his role as a grandfather.

“I may not have dinner with Punch Sulzberger and Bill Paley, but there aren’t too many working newsmen whom I don’t know,” he told New York magazine in 1979, referring to the titans of The New York Times and CBS.

While Mr. Matz contrived his share of audacious stunts, he also influenced policy debates and epochal events.

At various times, he worked for Mario M. Cuomo (who became governor), Paul O’Dwyer (who became City Council president) and Harrison J. Goldin (a state senator whom Mr. Matz promoted as “the young dynamo” in his campaign for city comptroller, a job he eventually won).

In 1975, while publicizing the fledgling New York City Marathon, held in Central Park at the time, Mr. Matz suggested to Percy E. Sutton, the Manhattan borough president, that the race be broadened to all five boroughs in 1976 for the nation’s bicentennial celebration. It was.

“He was the master of subtle and spectacular at the same time,” Mark Liff, a former Daily News reporter, said in an interview. “And he always was in the room where it happened. Because he made it happen.”

Nick Pileggi, the screenwriter and author, met Mr. Matz in 1953, when Mr. Pileggi was a reporter for The Associated Press.

“He was trusted in a world where there’s very little trust,” Mr. Pileggi said. “The good guys trusted him, but, amazingly, so did the bad.”

The most enduring rapscallions among Mr. Matz’s clients were Representative Mario Biaggi of the Bronx and Meade H. Esposito, the Brooklyn Democratic boss, both of whom were later convicted in influence-peddling cases.

The New York columnist Jimmy Breslin credited Mr. Matz as a trendsetter in the 1980s for providing a raincoat as a prop to arrested clients to hide their handcuffs when they were paraded by prosecutors on the proverbial “perp walk” for the benefit of news photographers.

When Stanley M. Friedman, a former deputy mayor and Bronx Democratic boss, was indicted, he asked Mr. Matz for advice. “Bring a raincoat,” Mr. Matz replied.

He also represented some notorious landlords and a number of other odious characters. Sometimes he did it for the money. At other times it was because he was unfailingly loyal, even if his heart wasn’t in it.

“We used to duel furiously,” said Tom Robbins, a hard-boiled investigative reporter, formerly for The Village Voice, who wrote about those very same landlords decades ago. “It wasn’t until later,” said Mr. Robbins, who died in May, “that I found out he thought less of his clients than I did.”

Sam Roberts is an obituaries reporter for The Times, writing mini-biographies about the lives of remarkable people.

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