

How  
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**Barrels  
of laughs**

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ARTHUR SZYK

DER WITZ

ZUM UNBEWUSSTEN

ABSURDITIES

# Barrels of laughs

## S.F. library safeguards voluminous Schmulowitz humor collection

dan pine | j. staff

He didn't exactly look like a cut-up.

Bespectacled, hairline receding, attired in a double-breasted suit, he appears in old photos every bit the gray flannel attorney he was.

But if one judges wit by the pound, then Nat Schmulowitz was the funniest guy in the world, about 14,000 volumes worth.

Schmulowitz (1889-1966) was the original benefactor of the Schmulowitz Collection of Wit and Humor, housed at the main branch of the San Francisco Public Library.

Every year since 1954, starting on April Fools' Day, the library has displayed choice items from the collection. The 2013 exhibition is up now through May 31; its theme is jobs, employment and the drudgery of the working life.

Titles under glass include "50 Jobs Worse than Yours," "Yoga for Chickens," "Around the World in 80 Martinis," "How to Cook Husbands," "The Official Fart Book" (complete with whoopee cushion) and first-edition volumes by Rube Goldberg, he of those crazy contraption designs.

And that's just a tease.

The full collection has swelled considerably since Schmulowitz donated its first 93 volumes in 1947.

By the time of his death, he had bequeathed 14,000 to the city. It didn't stop there. Today the total tops 22,000 volumes and 250 periodical titles, covering a span of more than 450 years and including at least 35 different languages and dialects.

"He had a wonderful outlook on life," says special collections librarian Andrea Grimes, who oversees all things Schmulowitz. "He believed in humor being able to combat evil. His motto was, 'Without humor, we are doomed.'"

Though Jewish, and an avid fan of Jewish humor, Schmulowitz took a decidedly ecumenical approach to collecting. He amassed books and other materials from around the world in many languages, including French, German, Dutch and Latin.

They include rarities going back centuries. Among the oldest items is a series of political satires from Britain dating from the mid-18th century, and a book from the same time and place called "Anecdotes of the Learned Pig." One Dutch book dates from 1661.

There's a copy of Sigmund Freud's seminal treatise "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious" in the original German, and the subversive "Moffenspiegel" anti-Nazi cartoons printed by the Dutch underground.

In the years after Schmulowitz's death, the collection expanded to include contemporary works, including the graphic novels of Art Spiegelman ("Maus"), DVDs by George Carlin, essays by Woody Allen and plenty of copies of Mad Magazine.

Anything for a laugh.

Also included are many of Schmulowitz's own papers

and notes, though a significant portion of that material is also housed at the Tauber Holocaust Library in San Francisco. He wrote prolifically on legal topics as well as issues of his day, including the fight against anti-Semitism, the Holocaust and the Adolf Eichmann trial in Israel.

The Schmulowitz collection is kept under climate-controlled conditions in the Marjorie G. and Carl W. Stern Book Arts & Special Collections Center, in the library at Larkin and Grove streets. The English-language materials are on the sixth floor. Everything else is in the basement.

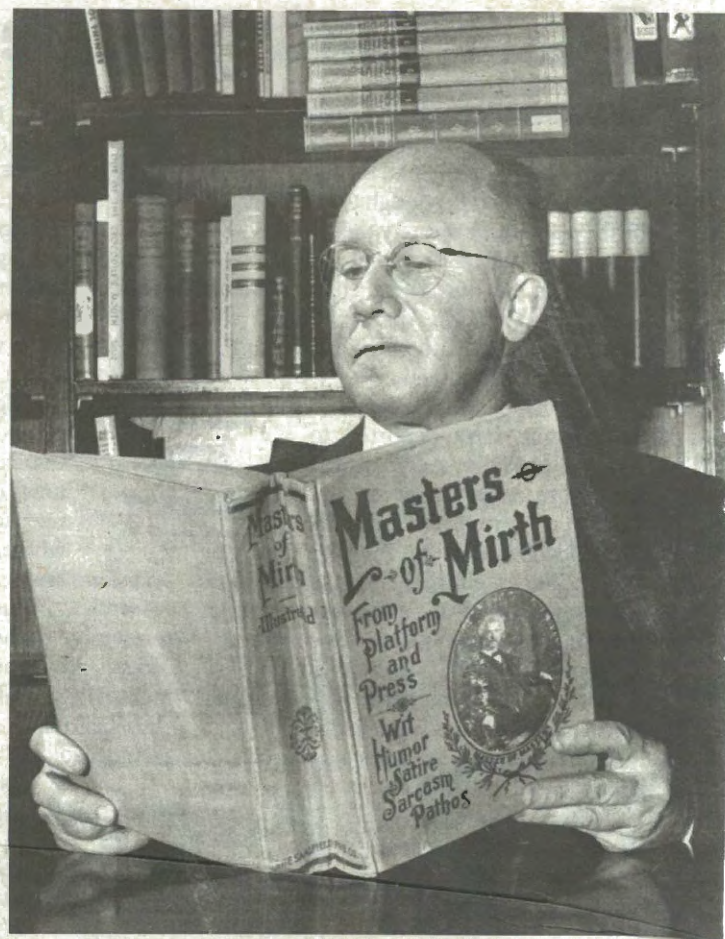
Work on the Schmulowitz Collection of Wit and Humor never ceases. The French-language materials have just recently been catalogued thanks to a crew of eager Stanford University graduate students.

Everything in this noncirculating collection is available for study, but in order to handle some rare items, visitors must wear white gloves.

"This was his vision," Grimes said as she cradled a



Caricature of Nat on a catalog of the collection



photo/courtesy of s.f. public library

Nat Schmulowitz reading "Masters of Mirth," a rare anthology

1951 newsletter that included the text of a speech Schmulowitz delivered the year before upon the dedication of his collection. He subtitled that speech "Shun the Man Who Never Laughs."

Born in New York City in 1889, Nat Schmulowitz moved with his family to San Francisco at age 9. He survived the great earthquake and fire of 1906, living in a tent city for a time.

He went on to graduate from U.C. Berkeley in 1910 and San Francisco's Hastings College of the Law a few years later. Schmulowitz enjoyed a successful legal career, mostly as a specialist in probate and corporate law.

But he did have at least one Johnnie Cochran moment: defending silent film star Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, who stood trial for murder in 1921 and 1922. Accused of murdering a young woman at San Francisco's St. Francis Hotel, the actor was ultimately acquitted.

Schmulowitz, who in 1927 became senior partner in the firm of McNab, Schmulowitz, Sommer and Wyman, also represented other Hollywood royalty, including Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford and Maurice Chevalier.

That was just his day job. What he loved most was reading and collecting books.

His penchant for humor books began, so the legend goes, after pondering a few lines from Shakespeare's "As You Like It," when Beatrice says to Benedick, "I had my good wit out of the 100 Merry Tales" (Act II, scene 1); referring to a popular jest book from 1526. Schmulowitz decided he had to have a copy.

Eventually, in the 1920s, he found a 19th-century facsimile of "A Hundred Merry Tales" on one of his overseas trips, and that got him started. The lifelong bachelor took innumerable vacations accompanied by his sister, Kay, and together they would scour little shops for



photo/courtesy of s.f. public library

Nat and his sister, Kay, pose for a comic postcard in Paris in 1959.



A sampling from the collection's 22,000 volumes

books, pamphlets and journals.

His trips to Europe stopped abruptly in the years just prior to World War II. That's when he turned his attention to speaking out against Nazi tyranny as best he could from far away.

An indefatigable essayist published in a variety of professional journals, Schmulowitz wrote a 1943 treatise, "The Nazi Joke Courts," in which he decried German laws that restricted humor in the public square. For example, naming one's horse Adolf could result in a prison sentence.

"Jokes and laughter are usually merciless in their attacks upon the monstrous distortions of life caused by demagogues and tyrants," he wrote. "Jokes are often struck 'like sparks from the flint' of mental resistance to an unwelcome 'new order.'"

Thus he collected not only joke books, but also pointed political satire, including anti-Nazi materials and works by authors persecuted by the regime. One such author was German cartoonist Erich Ohser, whose lampooning of Nazi elites put him on trial in 1944 (he committed suicide before he could be sentenced and executed).

He also wrote some things himself that were published, and collaborated on others, including "The Gold Rush Elephant," a five-page pictorial history of the Gold Rush that came out in 1953.

As his collection grew, Schmulowitz concluded it ought to be shared. Having sat for years on the San Francisco Library Commission, in 1947 he donated 93 volumes to the institution, including that all-important copy of "A Hundred Merry Tales."

The Schmulowitz Collection of Wit and Humor officially was launched.

At a 1950 ceremony dedicating a room at the library for the collection, Schmulowitz said, "I reflected upon the fun and pleasure which had been

experienced in the acquisition of these jest books, and how selfish it was to keep them in a home library. How much better it would be if the whole community could somehow enjoy these books."

Said Grimes, "I believe it's the most unique collection in the library, and probably the largest collection of its kind in a public institution. There's nothing else like it." Schmulowitz lived long enough to publish the first catalog of his collection, a 370-page guide that came out in 1962, when the collection totaled 13,000 volumes. He

ing materials to the collection until her death in 1984.

The reputation of the Schmulowitz collection has spread far and wide. One admirer is Don Nilsen, a linguist and professor of humor studies at Arizona State University in Tempe, Ariz. He says the Schmulowitz collection has added immeasurably to his and others' academic pursuits, especially in its emphasis of what he calls marginalized groups, including Jews.

"What humor does is reverse the power," Nilsen said. "It makes the marginalized group more powerful than the mainstream group. One thing about all humor — whether parody, satire or any kind — is it requires a double vision, to see things from more than a single perspective, and that's what Jews are really good at."

In his research, Nilsen also noted the venerable talmudic principle of *pilpul*, or questioning a topic from every conceivable angle. He says this may be the source of the conventional wisdom that Jews often answer a question with a question.

"If you answer a question with an answer, you're finished," Nilsen said. "But if you answer with a question, then you're just beginning. I think that's a very important aspect of Jewish humor."

In conjunction with the exhibition, monologist Josh Kornbluth will give a free performance of "Haiku Tunnel" at 6 p.m. May 28 in the main library's Koret Auditorium.

Three days later, the items on display will head back for the vaults, awaiting some future April Fools' Day for temporary liberation. Meanwhile, the collection stands by, open to everyone, ready for study and, perhaps more importantly, to be enjoyed, preferably with laughter.

As Schmulowitz said in a 1947 speech: "A vain man, a frightened man, a bigoted man, or an angry man, cannot laugh at himself or be laughed at; but the man who can laugh at himself or be laughed at has taken another step towards the perfect sanity which brings peace on earth and goodwill to men." ■



One of the displays in this year's Schmulowitz Collection of Wit and Humor exhibit



photos/cathleen maclearie

Andrea Grimes

also wrote and edited essays for the American Journal of World Folklore, all of them pertaining to his collection.

After his death, Schmulowitz endowed a fund to maintain the collection. Kay Schmulowitz, who like her brother never married, carried on the tradition, donat-

**"On the Clock: A Playful Guide to Working Life."** Selections from the Schmulowitz Collection of Wit and Humor, through May 31 in the Skylight Gallery of the San Francisco Public Library, 100 Larkin St., S.F. Free. [www.sfpl.org](http://www.sfpl.org) or (415) 557-4277