

Leona Helmsley

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Leona Mindy Roberts Helmsley (July 4, 1920 – August 20, 2007) was an American businesswoman. She was known for her flamboyant personality and had a reputation for tyrannical behavior that earned her the nickname **Queen of Mean**. She was promoted by the Beber Silverstein Group and its co-founder Joyce Beber who persuaded her to call herself **Queen of the Palace Hotel**.^[2]

Following allegations by unpaid contractors that work done on her home had been charged to her company, she was investigated and convicted of federal income tax evasion and other crimes in 1989. Although having initially received a sentence of 16 years, Helmsley was required to serve only 19 months in prison and two months under house arrest. During the trial, a former housekeeper testified that she had heard Helmsley say: "We don't pay taxes. Only the little people pay taxes", a saying that became notorious and was identified with her for the rest of her life.

Leona Helmsley



Leona Helmsley, NYC, 1988

Born	Lena Mindy Rosenthal July 4, 1920 Marbletown, New York, U.S.
Died	August 20, 2007 (aged 87) Greenwich, Connecticut, U.S.
Occupation	Hotelier, real estate investor
Net worth	▲ US\$8 billion ^[1]
Spouse(s)	Leo Panzirer (m. 1938, div. 1952) Joseph Lubin (Twice divorced) Harry Helmsley (m. April 8, 1972 – d. 1997)

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Early life

Leona Helmsley was born **Lena Mindy Rosenthal** in Marbletown, New York, to Polish Jewish immigrants, Ida (née Popkin), a homemaker, and Morris Rosenthal, a hatmaker.^{[3][4]} Her family moved to Brooklyn while she was still a girl, and moved six more times before settling in Manhattan. She dropped out of Abraham Lincoln High School to seek her fortune.^[5] In a short time, she changed her name several times—from Lee Roberts, Mindy Roberts and Leni Roberts. Eventually, she decided on Leona Mindy Roberts.^[6] She legally changed her surname to Roberts.^[7] She was a chain smoker, consuming several packs a day. Helmsley would later claim that she appeared in billboard ads for Chesterfield cigarettes, but her claim remains entirely unsubstantiated.

Her first husband was attorney Leo Panzirer, whom she divorced in 1952. Their only son was Jay (1940–1982), who had four children with his wife, Mimi. Leona was twice married to and divorced from her second husband, garment industry executive Joseph Lubin. After a brief stint at a sewing factory, she joined a New York real estate firm, where she eventually became vice-president.

Career as a hotelier

Leona Roberts was a real estate salesperson in 1964 when Abe Hirschfeld hired her to sit in the lobby and sell co-ops at 925 Park Avenue in New York.^[*citation needed*] Leona was a condominium broker in 1968 when she met and began her involvement with the then-married multi-millionaire real estate entrepreneur Harry Helmsley. In 1970, she joined one of Harry Helmsley's brokerage firms—Brown, Harris, Stevens—as a senior vice-president. At that time, she was already a millionaire in her own right. Harry Helmsley divorced his wife of 33 years and married Leona on April 8, 1972. Leona's marriage to Harry may well have saved her career. Late in 1971, several of Leona's tenants sued her for forcing the tenants of one of the apartments she managed to buy condominiums. They won, and Leona was forced not only to compensate the tenants, but to give them three-year leases. Her real estate license was also suspended, but she focused on running Harry's growing hotel empire.

Supposedly under her influence, Harry Helmsley began a program of conversion of apartment buildings into condos. He later concentrated on the hotel industry, building The Helmsley Palace on Madison Avenue. Together the Helmsleys built a real estate empire in New York City including 230 Park Avenue, the Empire State Building, the Tudor City apartment complex on the East Side of Manhattan, and Helmsley-Spear, their management and leasing business. The couple also developed properties that included the Park Lane Hotel, the New York Helmsley Hotel, the Helmsley Palace Hotel, and hotels in Florida and other states. By the beginning of 1989, twenty-three hotels in the chain were directly controlled by Leona Helmsley.^[8]

Leona Helmsley was featured in an advertising campaign portraying her as a demanding "queen" who wanted nothing but the best for her guests.



Leona and Harry B. Helmsley Medical Building, the main building of Greenwich Hospital in Greenwich, Connecticut

The slightest mistake was usually grounds for firing, and Helmsley was known to shout insults and obscenities at targeted employees just before they were terminated.

On March 31, 1982, Leona's only child, Jay Panzirer, died of a heart attack resulting from arrhythmia.^[9] Mimi, her son's widow who lived in a property Leona owned, received an eviction notice shortly after Jay's funeral.^[10] Leona successfully sued her son's estate for money and property that she claimed he had borrowed, and was ultimately awarded \$146,092.^[11] Mimi later said the legal expenses wiped her out, and stated, "To this day I don't know why they did it."^[11]

Tax evasion conviction

Despite the Helmsleys' tremendous wealth (net worth over a billion dollars), they were known for disputing payments to contractors and vendors. One of these disputes would prove to be their undoing.

In 1983 the Helmsleys bought Dunnellen Hall, a 21-room mansion in Greenwich, Connecticut, to use as a weekend retreat. The property cost \$11 million, but the Helmsleys wanted to make it even more luxurious than it had been before. Jeremiah McCarthy, a Helmsley executive engineer, was initially put in charge of the operation. McCarthy claims that Leona repeatedly demanded that he sign illegal invoices designed to illegally bill personal expenses to the estate. According to Ransdell Peirson's "The Queen of Mean", when McCarthy declined to do so she exploded with tyrannical outbursts claiming, "You're not my fucking partner! You'll sign what I tell you to sign."^[12]

The remodeling bill came to \$8 million, which the Helmsleys were loath to pay - as well as taxes written off the project. A group of contractors went to court to get most of the money; the Helmsleys eventually paid off most of the debt. In 1985, during these proceedings, the contractors revealed that most of their work was being illegally billed to the Helmsleys' hotels as business expenses. The work included a million-dollar dance floor, a silver clock and a mahogany card table.^[13] Enraged, the contractors sent a stack of invoices to the *New York Post* to prove that the Helmsleys were trying to write their work off in this manner. The resulting *Post* story led to a federal criminal investigation. In 1988, then United States Attorney Rudy Giuliani indicted the Helmsleys and two of their associates on several tax-related charges, as well as extortion.^[6]

The trial was delayed until the summer of 1989 due to numerous motions by the Helmsleys' attorneys—most of them related to Harry's health. He had begun to appear enfeebled shortly after the beginning of his relationship with Leona Helmsley years before, and had recently suffered a stroke on top of a pre-existing heart condition. Ultimately, he was ruled mentally and physically unfit to stand trial, and Leona had to face the charges alone.^[6]

At trial, a former Helmsley-Spear executive, Paul Ruffino, said that he refused to sign phony invoices illegally billing the company for work done on the Helmsely's Connecticut mansion. Ruffino, originally engaged to assist Helmsley through the

Hospitality Management Services arm, said that Leona fired him on several different occasions for refusing to sign the bills, but Harry would usually tell him to ignore her and to come back to work. Another one of the key witnesses was a former housekeeper at the Helmsley home, Elizabeth Baum, who recounted having the following exchange with Leona Helmsley four to six weeks after being hired in September 1983:

I said: "You must pay a lot of taxes". She said: "We don't pay taxes. Only the little people pay taxes."^[14]

–Elizabeth Baum, former housekeeper to Helmsley (October 1983)

Helmsley denied saying this. Helmsley's former employees testified at trial "about how they feared her, with one recalling how she casually fired him while she was being fitted for a dress".^[15] Most legal observers felt that Helmsley's hostile personality, arrogance, and "naked greed" alienated the jurors.^[16]

On August 30, Helmsley was convicted and sentenced of one count of conspiracy to defraud the United States,^[17] three counts of tax evasion,^[18] three counts of filing false personal tax returns,^[19] sixteen counts of assisting in the filing of false corporate and partnership tax returns,^[19] and ten counts of mail fraud.^{[20][21]}

She was, however, acquitted of extortion—a charge that could have sent her to prison for the rest of her life. She was sentenced to 16 years in prison, but eventually had that sentence significantly reduced when all but eight of the charges were dropped.^[6] Nonetheless, when it was clear she was going to jail, she collapsed outside the courthouse, later diagnosed with a heart irregularity and hypertension.^[citation needed]

Helmsley's new lawyer, retained to appeal the judgment, was Alan Dershowitz.

Following the appeal, which resulted in a reduced sentence,^[22] she was ordered to report to prison on tax day, April 15, 1992.^[23] Her Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) Register number was 15113-054, and she was released from BOP custody on January 26, 1994.^[24]

After prison

Helmsley served 18 months in federal prison. Her later years were apparently spent in isolation, especially after Harry died in 1997, leaving Leona his entire fortune (including the Helmsley hotels, the Helmsley Palace and the Empire State Building), estimated to be worth well in excess of \$5 billion.

Her few friends included Patrick Ward, Imelda Marcos, Rodrigo Handall, the Noriega family, and Kathy and Rick Hilton.^[25] A 2001 *Chicago Sun-Times* article depicted her as estranged from her grandchildren and with few friends, living alone in a lavish apartment with her dog.^[26] In 2002, Helmsley was sued by Charles Bell, a former employee who alleged that he was discharged solely for being homosexual. A jury agreed and ordered Mrs. Helmsley to pay Bell \$11,200,000 in damages. A judge subsequently reduced this amount to \$554,000.^[27]

She was forced to give up control of her hotel empire, since most of her hotels had bars and New York does not allow convicted felons to hold alcohol licenses. Mrs. Helmsley lived her final year at her luxurious penthouse atop the Park Lane hotel with views of Central Park.

Although Helmsley's reputation as the "Queen of Mean" is famous, she became generous in her charitable contributions after her prison term. After September 11, 2001, Helmsley donated \$5 million to help families of New York firefighters. Other contributions included \$25 million to New York–Presbyterian Hospital for medical research.

Death

Leona Helmsley died from congestive heart failure at the age of 87, on August 20, 2007, at Dunnellen Hall, her summer home in Greenwich, Connecticut.^{[5][28]} Cardiovascular disease ran in her family, claiming the lives of her father, son and a sister.^{[29][30][31]} After a week at the Frank E. Campbell Funeral Chapel, she was entombed next to Harry Helmsley in a mausoleum constructed for \$1.4 million^[32] and set on ³/₄-acres in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery, Westchester County, New York. Among the few distinctive features of the mausoleum are three wall-embedded stained-glass windows, in the style of Louis Tiffany, showing the skyline of Manhattan.

Helmsley left the bulk of her estate—estimated at more than \$4 billion—to the Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust.^[33] In addition to providing directly for her own dog in her will, she left separate instructions that the trust, now valued at \$5 to \$8 billion, be used to benefit dogs.^[34] The courts have ruled that the Trust is not legally bound to wishes separate from the Trust documents.^[35]

The will left her Maltese dog, Trouble, a \$12 million trust fund.^[36] This sum was subsequently reduced to \$2 million as excessive to fulfill its purpose. Her choice was branded 3rd in Fortune's "101 Dumbest Moments in Business" of 2007.^{[37][38]}

Trouble lived in Florida with Carl Lekic, the general manager of the Helmsley Sandcastle Hotel, with several death threats having been received.^{[39][40]} Lekic, Trouble's caretaker, stated that \$2 million would pay for the dog's maintenance for more than 10 years—the annual \$100,000 for full-time security, \$8,000 for grooming and \$1,200 for food. Lekic is paid a \$60,000 annual guardian fee.^[41] Trouble died at age twelve in December 2010, with the remainder of the funds reverted to the Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust. Although Helmsley's wishes were to have the dog interred with her in the mausoleum, New York state law prohibits interment of pets in human cemeteries and the dog was subsequently cremated.^{[42][43]}



The mausoleum of Harry Helmsley in Sleepy Hollow Cemetery

She left \$15 million for her brother Alvin Rosenthal.

Helmsley had four grandchildren. Two of them each received \$5 million in trust and \$5 million in cash, under the condition that they visit their father's grave site once each calendar year. Their signing a registration book would prove that they had visited the grave.^[44] Her other two grandchildren, Craig and Meegan Panzirer, received nothing.

In a judgment (published on June 16, 2008), Manhattan Surrogate Court Judge Renee Roth ruled Helmsley was mentally unfit when she executed her will. Hence, the Court, amid settlement, reduced the \$12 million trust fund for the pet Trouble to \$2 million. Of the \$10 million originally bequeathed to Trouble, \$4 million was awarded to the Charitable Trust, and \$6 million was awarded to Craig and Meegan Panzirer, who had been disinherited by the will.^[45] The ruling requires the Panzirers to keep silent about their dispute with their grandmother and deliver to the court any documents they have about her. It has been alleged that they were omitted from the will because they failed to name any of their children after her late husband.

Helmsley also left \$100,000 to her chauffeur, Nicholas Celea.^[46]

"Queen of Mean"

- "Lawyer Alan Dershowitz said he once had breakfast with Leona at one of the Helmsley hotels and the waiter brought him a cup of tea with a tiny bit of water spilled on the saucer. Dershowitz says Leona grabbed the cup from him and smashed it on the floor, then demanded that the waiter get down on his hands and knees and beg for his job."^[47]
- Helmsley had a barbecue pit constructed for her home.^[48] The work was performed by Eugene Brennan, a personal friend of Jeremiah McCarthy, the chief engineer of Helmsley-Spear.^[48] When the final bill came to \$13,000, she refused to pay, citing shoddy workmanship.^[48] When McCarthy pleaded with her to honor the bill, citing the favor done on his behalf and informing her that Brennan had six children to support, Helmsley replied, "Why didn't he keep his pants on? Then he wouldn't need the money."^[48]

In popular culture

- Helmsley was lampooned by Nora Dunn on several episodes of *Saturday Night Live* in the late 1980s.^[49]
- Helmsley was a recurring character in the comic strip *Zippy the Pinhead*.^[50]
- Director Tim Burton stated that Helena Bonham Carter's performance as the Red Queen in the 2010 film *Alice in Wonderland* was partly based on her.^[51]
- One of *Spy* magazine's most famous "Separated at Birth" pictorials featured Helmsley side-by-side with The Joker as portrayed by Jack Nicholson.^[52]
- In *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (TV series), the highschool bully, Libby Chessler, is once referred to as "Leona Helmsley".^[53]

- In 30 Rock, "Succession", Season 2 Episode 13, Don Geiss (Rip Torn) compares Liz Lemon with a young Leona Helmsley.

In film

The story of her adult life was dramatized in the 1990 TV movie *Leona Helmsley: The Queen of Mean*, which starred Suzanne Pleshette as Leona and Lloyd Bridges as Harry. Pleshette was nominated for an Emmy Award and a Golden Globe Award for the portrayal.^[54]

In the movie *Loaded Weapon*, a Leona Helmsley character is one of the inmates in the prison dungeon.

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External links

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Categories: 1920 births | 2007 deaths

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