

Reflections on the Delmar Hotel and the Demise of the Catskills

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For many years I rarely discussed my parents’ hotel, but lately I find myself mentioning it more often. As I settle into my forties and watch my two little girls grow up, I wonder how to tell them what it meant to me to grow up in the Catskills.

When I had the chance to read Phil Brown’s book, Catskill Culture, I admired his ability to come to terms with this period in his life. I thought that perhaps it was time to take a stab at it myself. And to try to understand how the Catskills vanished so quickly and so completely that an archive had to be established to ensure that some traces survive.

In our family there was often talk about writing a book about the hotel. But how to capture the zaniness, the colorful characters, the exhausting routine and the special camaraderie that made up the Delmar Hotel? We would try organizing it around a day-in-the-life. My mom rose at six to begin to prepare for breakfast, first for the staff, then for the guests. My dad bantered with a guest who was up at dawn waiting to complain about something askew. The day ended at 11 PM as the nightly performance in the casino drew to a close and the last trays in the tea room, where guests would repair after the show, were put away. (The casino is what we called the social hall where shows and movies and Saturday services took place.) Then we would try a year-in-the life, trying to evoke the rhythm of preparing for the summer onslaught, the rush of the first guests arriving, and the long, slow process of shutting the hotel down after “the season.”

But none of these schemes left room for some of the best stories. Like the time the owner of the hotel across the street hired a man to burn down his hotel. The arsonist got drunk, mixed up the directions, and ended up burning down the main building of what was then the Jacob Inn. Or the story about the man who walked up to the front desk and told my dad “I bet you don’t remember me.” Dad replied, “Your name is Epstein, right? You were here about thirty five years ago, am I right?” And he was right. Or the way the guests would come to the bakery to ask

for a care package for the trip home. "I'm going to an empty house," they would say. "Perhaps you have a bissel of cake and a few cookies for me?" A reasonable enough request, except that 150 guests were all going home to an empty house, and a sorcerer's apprentice was needed to keep the take-home bags filled. And where would we profile Sadie Cohen, the ultimate irrepressible yenta who would insist on special ordering every element in a Hawaiian salad. And Theodosha "Terry" Jones, the steady chambermaid who served tea to the guests after the show, after a full day of straightening up the rooms. We all thought that Terry's son, Doug Jones, beat Cassius Clay in their 1965 professional boxing bout, but he was robbed of the decision. We never could come up with the right way to capture it all.

So here I won't even try to paint a full portrait. Instead I recall a few things that evoke the later years of the Catskills, much later than Herman Wouk's Marjorie Morningstar and the rise of Jerry Lewis and the other borscht belt comedians. And I take a stab at explaining the demise of the Catskills.

Growing Up

I grew up in the Delmar Hotel, located just east of Liberty, New York, on Route 52, between Grossinger's and Brown's. The hotel was started by my grandfather, who opened it for guests in the summer of 1929, just before the stock market crash that would plunge the nation into a sustained depression. After the second world war, the hotel was run by my dad and mom, Max and Claire Jacobs. My parents met in Paris during the war, and my French mother was responsible for the names of the buildings at the hotel -- Biarritz, Capri, Deauville, Lido, and Riviera. Our hotel could accommodate about 150 guests, but this was considered a small hotel.

In my first recollection of the hotel, I was three or four. I walked into the kitchen naked, holding my clothes in front of me, dodging the waiters rushing to bring their breakfast orders to the guests. "Mommy, get me dressed!" I called out over the din, as I slid in between the steam table and the big serving table. The steam table was hot enough to burn your fingers, and the serving table was the center of traffic. I knew that you had to watch your step during meal time -- steer clear of the busboys who were not too sure of their step while hauling the bus-boxes over-stuffed with dishes, the dishwashers swinging the newly-cleaned kettles around, people rushing from the pantry to the bakery to the walk-in refrigerator. But I felt I knew my way around well enough.

My mother was busy pouring pancakes onto the griddle. Everyone laughed to see the buck-naked little boy wandering around the bustling kitchen. "You are going to have to learn to put your pants on," one of the waiters pointed out. I felt a little embarrassed, although at first I didn't quite see what all the fuss was about. So people could see my tush -- so what? I held my clothes in front of my privates --

why was everyone laughing at me? My mom put down her pitcher of pancake batter, scooped me up, dressed me and ushered me into the children's dining room, where I ordered my usual, french toast "with a stick of jelly."

I did learn to put my pants on, of course, and before long I was one of the waiters rushing around the kitchen, carrying trays and trying to keep all of the orders straight. I remember standing in the very same spot one Passover breakfast, next to the steam table, putting the finishing touches on a tray of matzoh-brie, medium-boiled eggs and farfel cereal when my father burst in, just back from picking up the mail, waving two thick envelopes in his hand. "Harvard and Yale -- both with scholarships!" I smiled to myself as I lifted my tray and walked with measured steps out to my station in the dining room. I collected my hugs after I had finished serving breakfast. When you had thirty or more people waiting for their breakfast, family celebrations had to wait.

Working at the hotel had always been about saving money for college. My dad even posted signs in the lobby "Suggested Tips: Waiters, \$6 per week, Busboys, \$4 per week, Chambermaids, \$3 per week." We then made the standard even more brazen by amending the sign to read "Suggested Minimum Tips." Dad's loyalty seemed perfectly divided between the guests, whose comfort and satisfaction we had to cultivate, and the staff, including his sons, who were working three meals a day, seven days a week, saving up money for college. With about 30 guests per station, one could earn \$180 per week as a waiter, and over the course of ten weeks save perhaps \$1,500 toward college. During the inflationary 1970s we hiked the rates up to \$8 per week for the waiters, and I think even \$10 for the eight-day Passover holiday. With college room and board costing around \$5,000, it took a couple of summers to earn enough to pay for one year of college.

But I've gotten a little ahead of the story, because the dining room was the last rung, not the first, on the hotel employment ladder. As a little child, I had a lot of room to roam. We had a swimming pool, a merry-go-round, an awesome metal slide that could get quite hot in the mid-day sun. As a teenager I could practice my tennis swing on the backboard of the handball court. And I certainly had more freedom than most kids my age. But I soon had to go to work, an experience that many children of small-business owners know well. Following in the steps of my older brother, Howie, my first job was taking care of the pool. At eleven I added the candy store to my portfolio, again following in my brother's footsteps. At first it was a great thrill to go to the candy wholesalers -- Briker Brother's in Liberty -- to order cases of pretzels, potato chips, and candies. Sodas were delivered by trucks decked out in Coca Cola and Seven-Up logos. My Dad liked to joke that I was my own best customer. And next to the store was a pinball machine that I got to know intimately.

But the clientele of the hotel was in the midst of a rapid change. Just a few years

earlier the children's dining room was filled to the brim with 40 boisterous youngsters and nearly as many mothers hovering, making sure that their little Mark or Janet had eaten dinner. But suddenly the families stopped coming. The Marks and Janets went to summer camps, many of which were themselves located in the Catskills. So my candy store made \$200 for the whole summer when I was eleven, and only \$150 when I was twelve. The long hours and sparse customers eventually wore on me, although I did get the chance to read a lot. I thought I would have enough free time to complete a correspondence law program then advertised on match-book covers. When a representative called me, he suggested that I finish high school and college first.

Near the end of that summer, the pantry man quit, and my parents and I decided to close the candy store and put me in charge of the pantry. I learned the basics quickly enough -- I could make an attractive "Hawaiian" salad and even cut up the three pound blocks of cream cheese into presentable portions. Shredding vats of cole slaw, filleting the maches herring -- the specific tasks were hardly difficult. I remember betting my friend Matt Bessen that I could cut up seven lemons in a minute -- I think I lost, but it was close. There was plenty of variety, but a fair amount of drudgery as well. Putting away the food ("the livestock") was a tedious chore after every meal. And preparing for the meals could take considerable time. Preparation was everything, for during meal time the requests would pour in faster than one could keep up. I remember having to section grapefruits for an over-flow crowd of 175 guests at Passover, and it seemed that every other night dinner opened with grapefruit. Dayenu!

After a full summer in the pantry it was on to the dining room. At fourteen I was a bit young to be a bus boy, but I worked with my older brother Howie. At eighteen he was a seasoned veteran and could show me the ropes. I promised not to over-fill the bus boxes. After dinner, I would do Howie's set up for him, because he had to change quickly in order to play saxophone and clarinet for the evening shows. I filled in for him once, played terribly, and the piano player (who doubled as an art instructor) refused to work with me again. And thus I avoided working five nights a week in the band in addition to my three-meals-a-day, seven days-a-week day-job.

At sixteen I moved up from busboy to waiter. My busboy was older and much bigger than me, and at first it was a bit awkward. But I knew the routine pretty well, and was able to give the guests a sense of confidence in me. I remembered the special details about each guest's preferences, I delivered the food pleasantly and promptly. Once I got into Harvard, the guests would often volunteer that they had a granddaughter for me. I learned many important life lessons in the dining room.

- In the chaos of the meal, slow down, take a deep breath, stay focused.
- When things seem to be too slow, speed up, get ahead of the curve or else you will find yourself crushed when everyone finishes at the

same time.

- When on the way to the bakery, it's OK to steal a taste of the chocolate cake batter, but always turn the electric mixer off first (and turn it back on afterwards).

These are lessons that have guided me through the years.

Living at a hotel meant learning many useful skills: hanging wall paper, fixing a toilet (my college classmates were amazed on more than one occasion at this talent). I learned to skip pebbles on the water of the pool, practicing with a ready supply of chlorine tablets. But there were chores that I dreaded. We would put up newspaper on the windows in the winter to keep the sun from fading the rooms. In the spring one of the first tasks was taking down the paper and dusting the window sills (vacuuming if necessary). In addition to the accumulation of dead flies, we would occasionally encounter a hornet's nest. The prospect would fill me with dread, and I did my best to persuade my brother to take the lead on this.

Having a hotel in the family seemed perfectly normal to me –many of my friends had their own hotels. Marc Stier's family ran Stier's hotel, Eileen Pollack's family ran Pollack's, Stanley Lipkowitz's family ran Lipkowitz's Bungalows. The only difference was that our hotel no longer bore the family name. In the late 1940's my parents decided that The Jacob Inn was no longer a fitting title, and they came up with Delmar as their Americanized replacement. A few friends grew up on chicken farms, but these were in decline even before the hotels faded from the scene.

Who Killed the Catskills?

As a sociologist I wonder, "What happened to the Catskills? How could it unravel so quickly and so completely?" Sociologists often discuss the way one generation passes its culture, values and rituals to the next generation through a process called socialization. I have never placed as much stock in socialization as some of my colleagues, and perhaps the Catskills experience explains why. In the course of three generations, Catskill culture was born, flourished and vanished. So much for the standard socialization story.

Most of the Jewish academics I know want to study the world, and don't feel any special need to devote their academic careers to studying the Jewish experience. African-American social scientists continue to feel an obligation to study the oppression of their people, as do many Hispanic and Native American scholars. Perhaps we Jewish academics have unduly neglected our own experiences. For the untimely demise of the Catskills is a perfectly sociological "whodunit," no less deserving of serious scholarly analysis than the mating rituals of the Canela (a tribe in the Brazilian Amazon) and the earnings patterns of Asian-American engineers, topics that some of my graduate students have found perfectly irresistible.

Surely the success of Jewish immigrants to America is an important part of the explanation. Large numbers of Jews moved out of the hot tenements of New York City to the surrounding suburbs of Long Island and New Jersey. Air conditioning made summers more tolerable, so escaping the city for “the mountains” became less of an imperative. The decline of anti-semitism also played a role. The blatant refusal to accept Jews as guests in many resorts that gave rise to the Jewish Catskills has dissipated. Today we can take it for granted that no Sheraton, Marriott or Hyatt will refuse a reservation from someone because their last name is Cohen or Goldstein or Scheinbaum. As Jews became more affluent, they sought a broader range of vacation experiences than the Catskills could provide. At the same time, the children of the hotel owners went off to Ivy-league colleges and were no longer interested in running the family business. Marc Stier attended Wesleyan on his way to Ph.D. in Political Theory at Harvard, Eileen Pollack went to Yale and landed a faculty position in English at the University of Michigan, and Stanley Lipkowitz went to Cornell before earning his M.D. and Ph.D. degrees.

But the immigrant success story is not enough. Other groups have been successful and have maintained more identifiable ethnic enclaves. Chinese-Americans come to mind as a comparison group. In recent years, Chinese-Americans have achieved tremendous social and economic success, attending elite colleges and entering the mainstream professions. Both Jews and Chinese intermarry with white, Anglo-Saxon Americans at remarkable rates. But in many major cities one can still find a Chinatown. Why have the Chinese succeed in maintaining this nexus of ethnic institutions while the Jews were unable to keep the Catskills in business?

The answer I have come to believe is that my parent’s generation (but not my parents in particular) put the first nail in the coffin by starting a rapid exodus from the boisterous hotels and bungalow colonies. By the early sixties, success and the Americanization of the Jews of New York had put the Catskills in mortal jeopardy. As families stopped coming for the summer, the Catskill experience no longer evolved to conform to increasingly American tastes. The hotels continued to evolve, but did so in response to the changing needs of an aging clientele. As youth culture began to take hold in the late 1960s, the gulf between the experiences and outlook of my generation and the vacation experience offered at Catskill resorts had become a deep chasm.

I don't know from personal experience why families stopped coming -- that was happening off-stage from my perspective. What I do know was that the aging of the guests made the demise of the hotels much more likely, because they came to represent a vacation experience that was increasingly removed from what younger, more Americanized Jews would seek out.

In other words, affluence, suburbanization, and expanding vacation opportunities explain some of the decline in the popularity of the Catskills, but they are not enough to explain why interest in this type of resort experience completely evaporated. I am suggesting that a tipping process changed the basic character of the resorts. Tipping is a concept familiar to sociologists who study residential segregation. Once a neighborhood becomes predominantly black, whites generally avoid buying new homes and the public definition of the neighborhood changes. I am suggesting that aging may play a similar role in defining the character of a resort. Once hotels and bungalow colonies were predominantly oriented to elderly customers, families with children began to seek other vacation destinations. This explains the fact that the change from family resort to retirement resort took place so quickly and so completely.

At the Delmar, the timing of this transition is quite easy to pinpoint. When I was five years old, in 1960, the Delmar was very much a family resort. The children's dining room was packed with forty or more children. The day camp employed as many as four full-time counselors, and the vast caches of arts and crafts supplies my parents bought never seemed to last into August. Husbands would often join their wives and children on Friday evening, and the kitchen was prepared for a number of late arrivals. The day camp closed in 1965, when I was ten, and the candy store two years later. The hotel remained open for twenty more years, but in retrospect the fate of the Jewish resorts was sealed the year the day camp was converted into a storage room.

The Catskills melted away from the bottom up. The bungalow colonies were the first to go, then the smaller hotels, with some of the largest and fanciest hotels hanging on the longest. The Concord just closed, lasting a decade longer than Grossinger's. The larger hotels were able to offer amenities that enable them to maintain a mixed clientele longer.

By the time I was a teenager, the guests were largely retired -- well older than my parents. We would discuss how to attract a younger clientele -- would a tennis court help? A putting green? Or maybe a shuttle van to the golf course. Of course many of these ideas were impractical, too expensive, and in the end they might have delayed but would not have reversed the inexorable exodus of families from the Catskills.

My parents wanted a middle aged clientele, but their definition of middle aged was forced to bend as the guests grew older. At one point, our working definition of being middle-aged meant someone who was still able to use the shuffle-board court, then someone able to walk to the court, then someone able to see it from the dining room window, then someone able to remember what shuffle board was, then...

This division by age may seem peculiar, even unkind, but remember that this was

just the moment when youth culture was coalescing, with demonstrations against the Vietnam war, with the emergence of the generation gap. We didn't subscribe to Abby Hoffman's dictum "Don't trust anyone over thirty" but we knew just what he meant. It was a time of moonwalks. Reminiscing about the shtetl would have to wait.

The Catskills were in the hospice by the time I was in college. By that time a gulf of age separated me from the allure of the Catskills. For me, Yiddishkeit was more about the trials and tribulations of the geriatric set than it was about my own heritage. The aging clientele chose prunes over lox and eggs, and Fiddler on the Roof over the samba. By the time I graduated college, the Catskills were literally dying of neglect. I was too busy writing my dissertation to go to the funeral. The transformation of the character of the Catskills from a vibrant center of family life to a quiet vacation locale for retired Jews can be traced through entertainment and food, two of the hallmarks of the Catskill experience.

Showtime in the Casino and The Generational Divide

The aging of the guests revealed itself first in the entertainment. Every night there was something: four shows, one movie, one night of bingo, and talent night. This separated the small hotel from the bungalow colony, which often had just a weekly show on Saturday night.

At the Delmar we would have three singers for every comic, because singers were lower risk. Most singers were good enough to help the crowd pass an enjoyable evening, but many comics bombed miserably -- the element of surprise had long since gone out of many of the same old jokes. And it was usually a bad idea to have more than one hypnotist per summer.

The music at the hotel was a mix between Broadway show tunes and old Yiddish songs. My dad liked to play Broadway scores on the hotel's louder-speaker -- Pal Joey, Guys and Dolls, Camelot. When it was still a family resort, the music was contemporary, popular music, with some older Yiddish favorites mixed in. Of course the most popular was the score from Fiddler on the Roof with its beautiful songs that evoked the shtetl. Most of the singers felt they needed to include one or more songs from Fiddler in their song set.

I can still map out a typical singer's set: an upbeat welcome song or two followed by a few Broadway show tunes. Then a sentimental turn toward Yiddish classics, perhaps "Shein vi di L'vone" "Belz," or "Tsena, Tsena." Some of the more athletic singers would dance the kazatska while singing the lively "Rumania, Rumania." A singer aiming straight at the guests' heartstrings could add some of the more sentimental Yiddish favorites (My Yiddishe Mama) or songs directed at Jewish identity itself -- "Tell Me Where I Should Go" or "Hatikva," the Israeli national anthem. A few songs, like "Bei Mir Bistu Shen," were sung half in

English and half in Yiddish, since by the 1960s Yiddish competence was disappearing among the younger parents and certainly among the children.

Running the candy store meant going to the show every night. And two years of singers, comedians, magicians, and hypnotists, surely constituted an overdose. How much *Rozhinkes mit Mandlen* could you take? By the late 1960s I was thoroughly sick of *Fiddler on the Roof*. I had heard every song a few hundred times too often. *Dayenu!*

But who could forget the high drama of “talent night”? Countless skits were performed by the guests and staff that often made gentle fun of the Catskills experience, many of which included elaborate productions of Broadway show tunes with modified lyrics. And talent night could turn into a pitched battle. One former cantor once tried to sing all of the verses to some interminable Yiddish song. People begged him to stop but he wouldn't. He was on a mission to preserve Yiddish songs, while the audience just wanted to have a good time.

Many original compositions were composed for talent night. These typically took the form of new lyrics for familiar show tunes. One that sticks in my mind is “*Delmar Time*,” sung to the tune of “*Summertime*.” The chorus went like this:

I've got the blues, from working at Delmar.
I've got the blues, from serving food.
I've got the blues, from working at Delmar.
So take what you ordered and come in to eat on time.

This song was performed live by the waiters in front of the guests, and went on for many verses. The singer would talk over the musical backdrop, complaining about the trials and tribulations of being a waiter. “Everyone wants the end piece of roast beef. But there are only two end pieces. What is a waiter to do?”

When I was young I would sing on talent night. One disastrous evening my selection was “*Maria*,” from “*West Side Story*.” Somewhere along the line I got the lyrics confused and I found myself stuck singing “I'll never stop saying *Maria*.” When it became clear that I couldn't figure out how to get past this point, the audience burst out in laughter, and the band brought the song to a merciful conclusion. Later I would stick to playing the saxophone – no lyrics to worry about. Eventually *Howie* and I would play saxophone -- piano duets, most notably *Dave Brubek*'s rhythmically complex “*Take Five*.”

But talent night itself changed as the clientele changed. When the hotel was filled with families with children, talent night was a wild and unpredictable affair, filled with elaborate skits, stage-struck tykes, and aging wanabes grabbing a moment in the spotlight. As the supply of precocious children playing accordion or performing tap dances dried up, talent night became more a staff matter, along

with fewer and fewer aging divas. Bingo night eventually displaced talent night.

The great divide came at the end of the sixties, when youth music turned firmly to rock and roll just at the same time that the clientele became much older. As a young teen, I was drawn to the Doors, Jimi Hendrix, Cream and Simon and Garfunkel. Steve Lawrence and Eddy Gormet just didn't cut it anymore. There was no longer any middle ground, no Ed Sullivan mainstream to claim any allegiance on the part of the staff in their teens and early twenties.

Out with Yiddishkeit, in with Woodstock. We did manage to get to the Woodstock festival, which took place not more than fifteen miles from the Delmar. My cousin Karen and her husband Alan just happened to be at the hotel. They were much older, perhaps in their late twenties at the time. We had to wait until Howie was done playing after the show, and at 11:15 PM Karen, Alan, Howie and I hopped in the car and took off for Woodstock. Being locals, we knew the back way. The main roads had long since been closed but we were able to park no more than a mile or so away. The scene of more than 300,000 young men and women camping out in the mud, listening to the greatest bands of the day, was remarkable, even at 1 in the morning. We wedged ourselves into a little spot and spread out a blanket to keep the worst of the mud at bay. Credence Clearwater Revival played a nice set from about 1:30 to 3 AM. We decided not to wait for Janice Joplin, who was scheduled to come on at 4 or 5 AM. We had to get back to the hotel, get whatever sleep we could and be ready to set up for breakfast at 7:30 AM. But we made it to Woodstock!

I recently have begun to play the piano again (I dropped it in favor of the saxophone when I was in second grade). I help my daughter Elizabeth practice and I find it fun to play music again. It is relaxing and engaging and I hope it encourages Elizabeth to play more. I copied some sheet music from a fake book I found at our local library. Lots of Beatles songs, a few show tunes, and a few songs familiar to me from the hotel. I even copied a few songs from Fiddler on the Roof -- a bow to my roots that I found surprising but somehow appropriate. I sat down to play the song "Sabbath Prayer," which is sung for Tevya's three daughters. With two daughters of my own whom I cherish as much as life itself, it easily hit a chord in me. But I couldn't help editorializing. "May you be in Israel a shining name." Yes, and everywhere else. "May you be good mothers and wives." Of course, but feel free to skip both if you prefer, and remember that you can pursue whatever dreams you hold dear. "May God send you husbands who will care for you." I won't argue with that, but don't sit and wait for God to send them to you. "Favor them, oh Lord, and keep them from the stranger's ways." Well, this one was a tough one for me. At first I insisted on my universalist principles and decided to substitute some other words. Later I decided, "Well, the thought might be all right if we redefined the term 'stranger.' Perhaps I could think of Republicans, or religious fanatics of all types. Surely it's OK to hope that you daughters won't become strangers to you."

The Kitchen and the Dining Room

Jewish food was central to the hotel experience. At first the aging clientele clung to the traditional foods. But eventually the salty and greasy dishes no longer suited the older guests. Broiled flounder, not Big Macs, spelled the end of potato latkes.

The times I remember most fondly at the hotel were the quiet times, preparing for the season. In the bakery with my mom, as a little boy, my job was to put the sprinkles on the cookies before they went in the oven. I imagine all kids like to put sprinkles on the cookies, but I got to decorate hundreds and hundreds. I remember finally being old enough to be in charge of the maraschino cherries. I felt very grown up.

And the blintze blitzes. We would prepare the blintzes before the season and freeze them. Through some interpretation of the “no cooking on Sabbath” rule, warming up blintzes on a stove that had already been lit before sundown on Friday didn’t exactly count as cooking. Thus frying blintze was OK, but frying an egg was not. This didn’t make the slightest sense to me, but I could accept the fact that the hotel was advertised as following kosher rules, so we had to stay within the rules of what was accepted. In any event, we would set up a blintz assembly line on the kitchen table. Mom would make a vat of batter, and would have five or six skillets going at once. My brother (and sometimes my father) and I would take it from there: stuff the blintzes, roll them up, and line them on an industrial-size sheet pan. We would need about 125 servings of cheese and 25 potato (my preference) for each Saturday in the summer, and we would knock off two or three Saturdays in one of our blintzes sessions. Of course the participants were first in line for spoils of the blintz blitzes. Now and then Howie and I would declare a blintz irreparably broken, and we would get to munch on it then and there.

Aging, not Americanization, displaced many of the most traditional staples on the menu. Prunes and cottage cheese displaced lox and eggs at breakfast, broiled flounder was awarded the slot previously held by baked white fish at lunch, and boiled chicken and flanken came to rival brisket of beef as a choice for dinner. We had to stop serving potato latkes because our aging clientele could no longer eat fried food.

My mother and I quarreled about ending our lox-on-demand policy. I said “That’s what people come here for!” But she was right -- salt-free diets were becoming increasingly common, and rotating lox and herring every day or two made perfect sense. One alumnus of the Delmar dining room staff opened his own restaurant, but it was yuppie food, and not shtetl cuisine, that was his calling card (although I am told that noodle kugel and a lox and eggs combination called “The Catskill

Scrambler” have made it onto the menu).

I managed to have my friends hired to be waiters and busboys. This made work in the dining room much more tolerable. The camaraderie of the dining room staff was among the most enduring pleasures of the hotel. We would regale each other with the latest outrageous request a guest had made, and exchange tips on how to persuade the guests to accept the less popular main dishes. We would nickname the guests (whom we got to know quite well, since they typically stayed at least two weeks, and not infrequently six or eight weeks). When the routine would get to us, we would escape by doing charades with food themes. Our lame efforts to imitate smoked white fish, or brisket of beef with stimes, would help pass the time while we cleaned up after dinner.

We even managed to establish a day-off policy. Until that time being a waiter meant three meals a day, seven days a week from late June until Labor Day. It could become quite a grind. Preparation for breakfast started at 7:30 AM and setting up after dinner usually wasn't done until 9 PM. Of course there were breaks after breakfast and lunch but the next meal was never more than a few waking hours away.

I still like a good bagel, but none of this blueberry bagel nonsense. Real bagels are traditional bagels, poppy seed, maybe pumpernickel. But when we moved to Philadelphia we were more worried about finding a flaky croissant than finding a good bagel. I enjoy a good corned-beef sandwich, but I'm more likely to seek out a pad-Thai than kugel. I do miss a number of the dishes from the hotel, and I plan to get my mother's recipes one day. But this is not so easy. Many were not written down, and the rest require down scaling from a batch designed for 150 people to a batch intended for a family of four.

I had borscht nearly every day for lunch for four or five years straight. When my Catskill roots come up in conversation, I volunteer “Yes, I have borscht in my veins.” But the bottled borscht in the store is not the same, and making my own is out of the question. I was never especially fond of gefilte fish, but now it represents the Catskills for me and I try to buy some during Jewish holidays. Unfortunately, my Italian-American wife, Sharon, prefers not to be in the house when I'm eating it.

Travel

The idea of going to a Jewish hotel, eating Jewish food and watching Jewish entertainment was never something I even considered. Jews no longer faced restrictions in pursuing the vacation of their choice.

Not that we would necessarily blend in right away. Far from it. We knew that they lived in a separate world, and we were not especially keen to pass for gentiles. I remember, as a child traveling with my family, we found ourselves in a proper Virginia restaurant on our way to visit the Lurray Caverns one Christmas vacation. A solemn version of the Christmas tune “Greensleeves” was playing in the background, while a fire filled the huge stone fireplace trimmed with pine wreathes. I suddenly recognized the tune from Alan Sherman’s riotous version of it on his satiric/comic album. My dad and I whispered our Jewish version of Greensleeves until my mom told us to be quiet. We sensed that we were not among our people, and that our sacrilegious version of Greensleeves might land us in a serious spot.

And a college education fed the thirst for world travel. Since finishing graduate school, Sharon and I have traveled to Europe, Latin American and Asia, and we have a long list of places we would like to visit some day. Go to a resort? Preposterous. But not so preposterous any more, now that we have young children. But of course there are few resorts left in the Catskills.

On one trip, Sharon and I found ourselves at a performance of Chinese acrobats in Shanghai. We went on a tour the year before the Tienamen Square massacre. There was a contortionist who balanced a wine glass on his nose, on top of which a tray was placed. He quickly added more glasses and more trays until there was an amazing tower of glassware, still balanced on his nose. At this point, he was handed a clarinet and he belted out an enthusiastic version of Hava Nagila. I remember laughing hysterically, but I could hear my aunt Sarah whispering in my ear “So, you have to travel six thousand miles to hear Hava Nagila. You could have heard it for free in the casino, whenever you wanted. But then you weren’t interested.”

So going to a Catskill hotel was pretty much out of the question. And running one made no sense, as a professional with what I considered to be loftier goals. And why run a hotel if there are no guests? If I would not consider a Catskills vacation, which of my peers would? So we let the Catskills die of neglect. But I wish some of it remained. Because it was a special place and a special time. And it was full of life, especially when whole families came up for much of the summer.

So, in my view, it was not my generation, the Woodstock generation, that killed the Catskills, although we certainly share the responsibility. The generation that came of age in the late fifties and early sixties had long since departed. The gulf between my world and that of the Delmar’s aging guests grew steadily. My friends were far more preoccupied with Watergate than with the Holocaust. We were all bar mitzvahed, all recited our haf-torahs more than adequately, but being a success meant succeeding on American terms, not in some Jewish corner of

America.

Law, medicine and academics were the most obvious paths ahead. I didn't know anyone who seriously considered emigrating to Israel, becoming a rabbi or running a hotel. My dear friend Eileen Pollack wrote a wonderful novel about the Catskills, *Paradise New York*, which drew on her experiences at her family's hotel (Pollack's) and, I like to think, a few Delmar stories she heard on long drives to debate tournaments as well. Yet I was astonished when the protagonist in *Paradise* decides to take over her grandparents hotel. So much of her story reflected a penetrating insight into the reality of Catskill life, but this twist was surely just a plot device. We felt no special need to apply to Brandeis because we expected a fair enough shot at Ivy league and other. If we were worried about having Jewish classmates, we would find no shortage at Columbia or even Yale and Princeton.

Without a Trace

Sharon and I were married at the hotel, in 1983, on a sunny October afternoon with the autumn foliage nearing its peak. All went well -- the right bride, the right place. I wasn't sure how my friends from college would react to the hotel, but a few said it was much nicer than I had described. And I think my parents were pleased to have the hotel as the setting for this life milestone. At the last minute, we decided that it was warm enough to hold the ceremony outside. So we rolled up our sleeves and carried the folding chairs from the casino to the front lawn of the hotel. A caterer would not have been as flexible.

My parents were ambivalent about whether the hotel should feature in their son's lives. They felt the hotel was a good thing because it enable their sons the opportunity to earn money for college. But college was always the future, and how long could they realistically expect their college-educated sons to run the hotel? And there opportunities for professional positions were few in the Catskills. The last conversation we had about taking over the hotel occurred when I was finishing up my Ph.D. "When you are teaching in a university, you will have your summers off. Would you want to think about running the hotel during the summer, as a backup?" "Dad!" was all I could manage in reply. We had always scorned those absentee hotel owners who would scurry up to the mountains just before the season. Surely he wouldn't want his son to adopt this half-hearted approach to running the hotel. But I suppose it is natural to want to pass along your life's work to your children. A few short years later the hotel was sold to Italian owners, and a year later it was recycled into a drug-rehabilitation center (as happened to a number of other hotels before it).

The problem is that the Catskills are gone now, now that we might like to return. To visit, to taste it, to show our children, to spend weekend or a week in a family resort. Say what you will, the hotel was full of life. It was filled with amateur

comedians, singers and social critics. It could be chaotic and challenging, like the day that nearly half the staff quit at the same time, but by and large it was festive. The Delmar was warm and homey and American Jews could be themselves in there, in the fresh air and rolling hills of the Catskill Mountains. We let it die of neglect, and we haven't built anything like it that can take its place.