

Borscht Belt Fallsburg Historical Marker Ceremony  
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The Eldorado – Marilyn Sevush Silfen

Welcome to The Eldorado, the Futurist Resort, formerly Hotel Zeigers which was located beyond those trees above Old Falls. The Eldorado was a midsize 350 guest resort that existed from 1958 to 1967, 10 summers or more accurately 10 seasons.

My family's history in the Catskills began 110 years ago when my grandparents Morris and Esther Sevush bought the Lenox House in White Lake in 1913 and ran it until 1930. It was there that my father Phil decided to pursue the noble profession of Hotelman.

He worked as the dining room Maitre'D in a lot of well-known resorts - the Flagler, Brickmans, the Homowack, Kutshers, the Waldemere, the Pioneer and the Fallsview. It was at the Fallsview that he met my mother Jean in 1947. She was a guest hoping to meet her match in the Catskills.

In 1958 the owners of the Fallsview, Ben and Ida Slutsky told him about a hotel for sale in Fallsburg. He purchased the former Hotel Zeigers with brothers Max and Jerry Slutsky and they renamed it The Eldorado. Fittingly, the deal was made at the Ellenville bank that is now the new Borscht Belt Museum.

My brother David and I were 5 and 8 when we were driven "up the country" and saw The Eldorado for the first time on Decoration Day weekend 1958. I have a vivid memory of driving past a small guardhouse, up a winding driveway to see an Olympic size swimming pool on the left, and on the right, a stunning, new mid-century modern style lobby attached to a 1930 s era white stucco Mission Style Main Building. The combined buildings looked so beautiful to me. The sun was setting, and the lobby was brightly lit - filled with grand opening plants that were given by vendors and suppliers. The lobby was in a palette of turquoise, coral and green - with a stunning yellow mosaic fish pond in front of the registration desk and furnished with low slung modern furniture.

My father greeted us in his tuxedo because although most of his time would be spent dealing with aging plumbing and electrical systems, staffing issues and the demands of hotel royalty, also known as season guests, what he really loved was booking the entertainment and emceeing the shows. That opening weekend the comedian was Jackie Mason and our social director and tummler was Mal Z Lawrence.

My mother Jean changed into one of her beautiful, beaded cocktail dresses from Loehmanns. I seldom saw her eat in the main dining room - she spent that time making up the guest rooms when we were short chambermaids, retrieving "monkey dishes" of desserts that were taken back to the room "for later", and commandeering bellhops to help her empty the ashtrays and clear the cocktail glasses from the nightclub. Such was the glamorous life of a Hotelman - and woman.

Meanwhile my brother and I enjoyed an idyllic, endless summer of swimming, volleyball, campfires, and blueberry picking. Pretty soon though I realized the advantage I had - an all-access pass to the most interesting areas of the hotel - the staff quarters, the back office, and the nightclub when I could sneak into the late shows featuring blue comics and the occasional stripper.

Best of all was having unlimited access to the Kitchen. Our rooms were in the kitchen, so we woke up very early to the clatter and crashing of silverware, pots and pans and the yelling of kitchen staff and ding room waiters and busboys - often natural enemies. And the smells - coffee, baking rolls and cakes and chicken cooking in every form.

The kitchen was the domain of the most important member of the staff that guests never got to meet. Norris the chef was an African American man who arrived from Florida every year with his assistant Riggins and breakfast chef Chicken. He ruled with military precision and discipline, and once banished my mother for a week for breaking one of his rules (My father sided with Norris). He was paid \$900 a week, a 10-week season would be equivalent to \$95,000 today and he was worth every penny. I heard very often that a borscht belt hotel was only as good as its food. I'm still trying to replicate the taste of his brisket and matzo ball soup. The other pleasures of access to the kitchen were raiding the always unlocked cookie cabinet and hanging out at the bread slicing machine as the busboys sliced our house made rye bread - to collect the end pieces.

My role models were the older daughters of my father's partners Max and Jerry. Susie and Sheila Slutsky taught me important survival skills - how to dance the mambo, how to smoke cigarettes from packs that were strategically stashed around the lobby, and most importantly, how to operate a plug switchboard. This was the birthright of the owners' daughters - there were 7 of us - to work the switchboard full time from the age of 16 for a salary of \$45 a week.

It was like a computer game - when you picked up a phone anywhere on the grounds, lights flashed, and buzzers buzzed. The challenge was to see how quickly you could attach the cords to connect the multiple callers. The busiest time was the hour before dinner when guests were coordinating their evening attire and arranging where to meet.

It was a thrill to make announcements over the loudspeaker and I'll make my last one right here - "Good evening ladies and gentlemen, the Tic Toc Lounge and the Jubilee Room are now open for your dancing pleasure to the music of Lee Sevush and his Society Orchestra."

I was working in the office on Labor Day weekend in 1967 when it all came to an end. To quote the owner of Kellermans from Dirty Dancing, "it all feels like it's slipping away. "And I let that part of my life slip away for decades, until the internet and books about the era made me nostalgic for this magical time. In 2010 my daughters and I went in search of what was left of The Eldorado.

We walked up the now overgrown driveway to the pool that was entirely filled with more

than 40 years of silt. The “new lobby” was half destroyed so it looked like an open diorama. The ruined lobby led to the double doors to the nightclub, but it now opened to the outdoors. All that was identifiable was the cement risers around the now invisible stage. But I could still imagine where I sat to hear the Shirelles and the Drifters and watch the Borscht Belt comics with the Yiddish punchlines that somehow were always funny even if you didn’t understand a word.

The mail and key slots were still there in the office and I found the cables that had been attached to the switchboard. There was a single piece of paper sticking out of the dirt. I pulled it out and read from an Eldorado brochure - “Once again it is the time of year when the question is asked, why is this night different from all other nights?’. It can be different for you too - celebrate Passover in all its glory with us here at the exciting new Eldorado.” The paper had somehow survived from 1959 and was signed by the Slutsky and Sevush Families - surely a sign from the past to the future.....

A few years ago my son-in-law found this Eldorado key online - how I wish I could unlock the door to Room 21 in the Main Building, change into a bathing suit, dance at the pool arcade to the Latin music of Jose Vega and the Cha Cha Aces, watch my parents rush from one task to another and end the day in the coffee shop with an egg cream and a slice of toasted pound cake. Of course, I can’t, but I’m grateful that I once could - and many of you have similar experiences to savor.

I want to end with the slogan of The Eldorado as the Futuristic Resort - an expression of the optimism of 1950s post war America. Comedians would joke that we should expect the new indoor swimming pool and ice skating rink “in the future, the future”. That future never came for us, and eventually all the hotels and bungalow colonies on Hotel Row would have the same fate.

But, more than half a century after we served our last flanken, danced our last foxtrot and hosted our last rock show - we’re here today.

My grandchildren are exactly the same age that my brother and I were in 1958 when we first drove up that driveway to experience life at The Eldorado as the children of a Hotelman. I’m thankful there will be a future for our memories and stories. Because of the Borscht Belt Historical Marker Project - we now have a new key to our past.