

On behalf of the entire Stier family, I want to thank Marisa Scheinfeld and the Borscht Belt Historical Marker Project both for the project itself and for including our family's hotel so prominently in the Ferndale marker. We are all very proud of our hotel, our history in the Catskills, and the entire Borscht Belt.

I recently discovered something about the hotel property. I thought my grandfather deeply loved it because it enabled him to get my great-grandfather and other family members out of the sweat shops in New York and because he was proud of the business our family built.

However a few months ago, I used street view in google maps to look around the village of Mihova in the province of Bukovina where our family came from. It is now part of Northwest Ukraine.

It turns out that that Mihova is in the middle of the Carpathian mountains. And those mountains look like and are used like the Catskills were. As I followed the river where our family grain mill must have been, I found a small ski slope with a faux Swiss building similar to the old ski center at the Catskills Davos Resort. And I realized that the river where our mill was located now provided water for making snow.

So perhaps my grandfather and others also loved the Catskills because it reminded them of their boyhood homes.

I remember my dad telling my reluctant grandfather that we had an offer to buy the hotel but for not much more than the mortgage we owed. Grandpa responded that the business had kept our family going for fifty years. And had it helped give my dad and uncle and me, and my sister and cousins, great educations which led to solid upper-middle-class jobs. That was enough.

Over 53 years, our hotel also provided jobs for another 4,000 people. That includes mostly young men, including me, who paid for college with the earnings we made in the dining room. Those of us who were smart enough to tell the guests we were planning to become doctors did even better. The hotels supported providers of food, and entertainment, as well as contractors and plumbers and many others.

All that work provided great food, comfortable rooms, good entertainment, and perhaps the greatest attractions of the Catskills, fresh and cool air and the friendships formed, and renewed each year in the mountains.

Sure we might have done better financially.

In the 30s, we had a guest whose family stayed at the hotel for six weeks while he worked in New York from Monday to Friday. Against, my grandfathers' advice, he got into a poker game with some serious gamblers. He lost a bundle and came to my grandfather to say his family would have to leave. My grandfather told him to stay for the rest of his vacation on the house. It was a good business decision. The man brought his family back to our hotel for the next thirty-five years. And he stopped playing cards. But a hotel owner who was only focused on the bottom line

would not have been so generous with a man who stayed in one of the cheapest rooms, two flights up in the Main House!

I'm focusing here on the business my great-grandfather, my grandfather, his brothers and sisters, and my mother and father built and sustained at Stier's Hotel because I want to say something serious about the importance of remembering and honoring the Borscht Belt.

Some people look back at the Catskills with nostalgia, a wistfulness for a time past. That makes sense for folks who made friends at the children's camp, had their first romance dancing to a hotel band, or remember the relief from the city heat.

But if you did the hard seven-days-a-week work in the hot kitchen and dining room; if you dealt with often difficult guests or employees; if you agonized about paying bills in a business that only really made money in the years after World War II; if you saw your parents stressed by the hard work of the business; or if you were part of a family that could never take a summer vacation, your nostalgia for the Borscht Belt is likely to be limited and mixed with a not insubstantial share of bitterness.

I don't feel sentimental when looking back at Stier's Hotel except when I think about all the good times I had with our extended Stier and Steinbrecher family members, with my 15 great aunts and uncles and many cousins.

But I always look back at our hotel with the pride of being part of a small group of people who created a business community that helped some Jewish immigrants secure economic opportunities while providing others with a vacation refuge. And we should remember that the success of this business community was built mainly on working-class New York Jews who had nowhere else to go because they were not welcome at other resorts.

When people explain the decline of the Borscht Belt by pointing to growing Jewish wealth, cheap flights to Europe, and air-conditioning, they forget that, ironically, the decline of antisemitism was instrumental in killing the Jewish resorts.

In my eulogy for my grandfather 27 years ago, I pointed out that the vast majority of Jews in Eastern Europe didn't come to the United States and that we should honor the courage and energy of those who did. The importance of them doing so was brought home to me when I looked at the Yad Vashem website ten years ago and saw all the Jews named Stier from the village of Mihova who died in the Holocaust.

Similarly, we should honor the few people who, despite their fear of horses and cows—my grandfather once told me how scared he was of getting kicked by the cows when he milked them—scraped together the funds to buy farms that they turned into resorts.

Whether they had 800 rooms or 100, this small group of people built an extraordinary region that provided economic opportunity, vacations, and a community in which a unique comic sensibility

was nurtured. All of that was critical to launching Jewish immigrants successfully into this country.

Some of us worry today about carrying that success into the future. So this is a good time to look back and take strength from what our families achieved here in the Mountains.

I'm so grateful for the Borscht Belt Historical Marker Project, and all of you, for helping us do that.