

**Michael Kirschenbaum**  
**31 Gorham Street**  
**Cambridge, Ma 02138**  
**617-491-1984**  
**michael.kirschenbaum@comcast.net**

*Forgiving God in the Catskills* is a chapter from my forthcoming memoir tentatively titled: *A Jewish Chicken Farmer's Son*. I was born in Munich, Germany, but my memories start as a four-year-old on our chicken farm near Lakewood, N.J. My parents were refugees, survivors. They were Polish Jews who lost their families in the well-ordered madness of genocide and the chaos of war. My mother, Bronia, fought with the Jewish resistance. My father, Godel, an inmate at Auschwitz, was an Orthodox Jew with a number tattooed on his forearm. His parents, his brother, his sisters his nephew were all victims of the Holocaust. My father often told us stories about his life in Europe. They were tales that wandered from the small town where he was raised, to his war years in the ghetto and at Auschwitz and sometimes his postwar years in Munich. He taught his family to see suffering clearly, but he also taught us to try to live life with joy. *Forgiving God in the Catskills* focuses on a family visit to the Catskills to celebrate the Jewish New Year.

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## ***Forgiving God in the Catskills***

***By Michael Kirschenbaum***

Dad is wheezing as he goes through his morning rituals, shaving, cleaning his dentures. He sits down to put on his pants. He is ninety and we are sharing a hotel room in the Catskills for Rosh Hashanah. I pretend to sleep as he readies himself for morning prayers. He likes to get there early to reserve seats for the family in the Stardust Room. My brother and my nephew are in the room next door. It is just the boys. My father and I are widowers. Mom and Ronnie are dead. My brother Ben is in the midst of a divorce. Ben and I have girlfriends who are not Jewish. My nephew's girlfriend is Jewish; a Russian immigrant who grew up without religion and never missed it. None of the women were tempted by religious holidays in the Catskills.

I can smell Dad's cologne. He takes pride in the clean new shirt and fresh tie he has for day two of the holiday. The older crew at the Catskill resort is pretty well turned out, but even here, some of the older folks have trouble keeping food or drool off of their shirtfronts. I am in my late fifties and I feel just a little guilty about how being among the truly aged makes me feel young.

Dad picks up his *tallis* and heads for the Stardust nightclub. The room is a large indoor amphitheater whose blue walls are decorated with stars and galaxies. A dark horsehead shadow peeks up from one of the nebulae. Most nights the room hosts the cabaret; today it is doing double duty: Rosh Hashanah services in the morning and a stand-up comic at night. We are at Kutsher's, an aging resort, one of the few left that serves kosher food and has a Rosh Hashanah

program. This is the Borscht Belt. In its heyday, names like Buddy Hackett, Danny Kaye, and Joan Rivers headlined. There is a poster in one corner for an upcoming “Polka Fest,” which triggers TV memories of the Lawrence Welk Show (my mother loved the show). She thought Welk was Polish because he had a Polka band. Wikipedia tells me he is Russian, from German stock. For me, all accordion players bring polkas to mind, or is the other way around, and all polkas remind me of accordions? Before Dad leaves he makes sure I’m awake.

“Don’t be too late! They blow the shofar today.”

The ancient ram’s horn is somehow part of our covenant with God. Bob Dylan comes to mind. “God said to Abraham ‘kill me a son.’ Abe said, ‘God you must be putting me on.’” When I first read Genesis as a child, I asked my father, “How could someone tie up his child and kill him?” My father explained that Abraham knew God was just testing him and was not really going to let him burn his son on a mountaintop altar. God does relent and the shofar harkens back to the ram that Abraham sacrificed instead of his son, Isaac.

My father’s faith has been tested by a God that did not relent, a God that took his whole family as sacrifice, burnt offerings in Nazi crematoriums. I know he sees his own survival as a miracle. For him and most of his “*Greeneh*” friends, the survivors, the post WWII immigrants, holding on to the religion, to the traditions meant, at least in part, not giving their enemies the satisfaction of completely destroying their community.

“Dad, are you going down for coffee first?”

“No, it’s too far. I’ll be okay.”

Yesterday, I brought him coffee on a whim and he drank it gratefully during the rabbi's sermon. He still gets around pretty well, but the dining room and the Stardust lounge are at opposite ends of the property. The 1,000 yards of extra walking is more than he will endure for a cup of coffee.

“Ok. Coffee and a roll or a piece of cake. Not too much. And, please, this time put it in a bag.”

Even though he and others are worshipping in a night club, seated at tables that rise up in tiers surrounding a round stage, Dad's sense of decorum remains. It is violated by eating his food at prayers. Or perhaps he does not want to offend others who have not had their coffee and might look longingly at his bagel.

I struggle out of bed, grateful for the thin sheet of plywood between the bed and the mattress that keeps the mattress from being concave. I cannot find a new razor blade and on a whim use Dad's Norelco. I pop off the top and empty the grey-white beard trimmings. The three floating heads prove surprisingly comfortable and effective, better than my fancy European electric shaver. When I clean the shaver I notice that my beard trimmings are almost the same color as Dad's.

Sitting next to my father in the Stardust Room as the cantor leads the morning prayers, I think about our rabbi in the old farmers' shul in New Jersey. He drank too much and his beard was tobacco stained. He was a gambler and played poker till all hours of the night. There were rumors that he had a mistress in his younger years, but when he prayed on the High Holidays and the tears ran down his cheeks staining his robe and the congregation joined him wailing as he recited the *Unetaneh Tokef* prayer, he became my archetype of a rabbi. The *Unetaneh Tokef* is a Michael Kirschenbaum

dark prayer with a dark history composed by a rabbi who was tortured and killed in the 11<sup>th</sup> century for refusing to give up his faith. “Come let us declare our faith as we pass before the lord to be judged, who shall live and who shall die, who by sword or plague, by water or fire, by stoning...” Those assembled had seen whole cities destroyed, generations murdered as they watched. They lost fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, husbands and wives, sisters and brothers. In that New Jersey shul, the dead were gathered among us, a tangible presence. No one was unscarred and even the children trembled. A coda ending the prayer told us that repentance, prayer, and charity reduced the harshness of the decree. They asked for forgiveness, but I marveled that they had kept their faith, that they had forgiven God for what he had done to them.

Here in the Catskills my father is not the only one with a number tattooed on his forearm. The Holocaust left marks on many in the crowd. The survivors and their families carry the same burdens.

Dad was from Wyszogrod (*Vish- e- grod*) along the Vistula River in Poland where Jews are mentioned as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century and a famous synagogue was built of stone in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and stood for 200 years. He spoke with awe of the place with its Baroque architecture, the biggest building he ever saw in all his youth. The Nazis destroyed it in 1939.

As we sit in the Stardust Room, he asks me if I will be fasting on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement that marks the closure of prayers for the New Year. This tenth day of the New Year is the final settling of accounts with God. It is a traditional fast day, one in which you take neither food nor drink. I ask him if I should fast, knowing he will say yes. Getting him to say it out loud somehow makes it another *mitzvah* I could do for him. He tells me about fasting on Yom Kippur at Auschwitz, how the first year was very hard and he thought he would pass out

during his work detail, how the thirst was worse than the hunger. The second year was easier because he was assigned to work nights and so he could sleep in the day. He hid his soup and crust of bread under his bunk and it sat waiting for him, waiting for the fast to end.

Rosh Hashanah is not a fast day. And after prayers we join the crowd heading for the dining room. It is a vast space. The numbered tables, plates gleaming, seem to extend to the horizon. Gefilte fish, chopped liver, kugel, herring, challah, and bagels are already in place as people find the seats. The holiday feast brings back memories of the “glory days.” The resort was built in 1907. Next year it will be a hundred years old. The dining room can seat over a thousand. Eddy is our waiter, a small man who looks like a teenager until you get closer to his hands and eyes. He and his bus person, Andrea, are from Brazil. Both have been working in the Catskills for fifteen years. You can usually judge seniority by how far away the waiters are from the kitchen. Eddy is not one of the oldest hands, but there are newer crews walking past Eddy’s station into the deep recesses of the dining room. They carry platters with fifteen entrees balanced on their shoulders.

“It’s not like it once was.” Andrea in a slightly accented voice bemoans the decline.  
“Now it’s just the old folks.”

Last night as we sat around the table, it seemed the dead reached out to us. We reminisced about the Concord, a more upscale resort, near Kiamesha Lake, where our family had once gathered for the Jewish holidays— until the resort closed down. We were trying to recall what year that was. 1997? Or was it 1998? Our timeline was measured by who was still with us and who was not.

“Did Ronnie come to Kutsher’s?”

“Yes. Remember, she helped Mom walk to the dining room.”

“Yes, Mom was still walking then.”

Before lunch today, we had paused in one of the lobbies near a wheelchair elevator. Dad was resting, although still on his own two feet, holding hands with my brother and me as we walked.

“Dad, are you thinking of Mom?” Dad, a little teary, looks at an elderly woman wheeling away from the lift. “We took her just like that.... She didn’t like to be in the chair.”

“But, thank God for wheelchairs.” My brother reminds us of the painful year when Mom insisted on hobbling about, taking ages to get from place to place, a two-person escort required at every stage.

Mom always showed up at meals especially when there was a Jewish menu.

“Wow, they have gefilte fish.”

“But it’s not like Mom’s.”

“Oh, look there’s honey cake.”

“Not as good as hers.”

My nephew Rickie has been looking forward to some honey cake. He loved Mom’s. But, he has some allergies that make eating at the resort challenging. It is a long list, including milk products. Today, it is the nuts that keep him from eating the cake. Mom’s cake did not have nuts. Hers was dense, chewy, dripping with honey. Think of fudge brownies. She made something like

fudge honey cake. Almost every time I visit my old college friend, Claire, she tells me that of her biggest regrets was not getting Mom's recipe. "It was amazing. Somehow, instead of drying out it got moister over time."

Dad has taken on Mom's role, trying to make sure everyone eats. My brother Ben and I are good eaters. Tall mesomorphs, Mom claimed that we were finicky in our childhood eating, but we had blossomed. Dad watches us with satisfaction, but complains to Rickie that he hasn't eaten anything. Rick is tall too, but doesn't carry any extra weight on his narrow frame. His mother has struggled with weight, but her mom, a Lench, can still wear the size 4 gown she wore at her wedding 60 years ago. Dad would say, sometimes jokingly and sometimes not, that she looked starved or withered. Maybe I'm being harsh, and skinny is a better translation from the Yiddish.

Dad's at it again. "You don't eat like a Kirschenbaum. You eat like a Lench." Ben and I are doing our best to uphold the family honor, asking our waiter, Eddy, to bring out extra entrées, and some potato latkes and schmaltz and herring to try alongside our three egg omelets. Plates crowd the table. Ben and I sample them all, devouring, deracinating, digging through the offerings shamelessly. Rickie is more circumspect, dainty even, his plate half full, unmoved by the abundance. In my youth, I was embarrassed by the seeming gluttony of some my parents' friends. Were they beggars afraid that they would never see food again? Their plates looked like the tangled growth of dense tropical forests, tendrils of food hanging over the edges. The men and women moved past the smorgasbord, stuffing whatever cookies, bread, crackers they could scrounge into white linen table napkins for late night snacks. Not limited to the Catskill's Jewish Alps, the same behavior was evident at a Jersey Shore resort where I worked one summer. I was similarly repulsed. Over the years, my attitude and abdomen have softened.



Nowadays I worry about Dad. We live 300 miles apart and I don't get to see him as often as I'd like. I know he's lonely. After all, he and Mom were together for over fifty years. But Dad's proud. And private. Later in the afternoon, after playing a round of golf with my brother, I return to our room energized by the fresh air; it had been overcast on the green, but still warm, warm enough to be comfortable in long sleeved jerseys.

Dad is already dressed for dinner. As I dress, I ask him how things are going with Krisha. She's the Polish woman whom my parents hired when my mother became ill and who stayed on as a live-in companion after Mom died. Krisha cooks for Dad and cleans the house. It is a great relief to Ben and me that Dad has someone to talk to, someone who makes it safe for him to live at home.

"How's Krisha?"

"She's good."

"She's always so happy to hear my voice when I call and she seems disappointed when you're not home."

My conversations with Krisha are restricted by her limited English and my non-existent Polish. "Father, not home. Play cards," she tells me

Dad plays cards with the ladies now. There are not enough men left to play poker. They have all died.

"She likes you," Dad smiles. "She says you are one in a thousand."

“I told you more than once how great your sons are.” I tease him. “But, what does she mean?”

He gets a more serious look on his face, still bemused, but not laughing.

“She means because you are not jealous, not bitter. She likes that you are quiet and don’t get angry. She says if every man was like you there would be no war.”

Dad recalls an old Jewish proverb about who is truly a rich man. A rich man is the man who is “*Sah-mey-ach B'chelko*,” someone who is happy with his portion. Ben walks in to see if we are ready to go eat again and I miss a chance to push Dad on what he thinks. Jealous of whom? My brother, his wealth, his children?

Krishna is a deeply religious woman who goes to mass most days. One son lives nearby. He came on an education visa, and is probably an illegal immigrant by now. She calls home most days and talks to her husband, her daughter, and her daughter’s husband, who all live in the same house in Poland. I think her mother-in-law is there too and perhaps others. Krishna has probably sent \$50,000 back to her family in the few years that she has worked for my father, and in Poland that is a small fortune. They have bought land. I think they are building a new house.

It is easy to imagine why she might wonder at my not being bitter. My wife died a horrible death as the cancer choked her lungs, but I have worked hard to forgive the fates. My father likes to use the German expression: “*Alles geht vorüber*.” Everything goes by, and you can get past anything, but sometimes I think of another German expression: “*Alles geht drunter und drüber*.” Everything goes haywire and it ties you in knots.

After dinner in the hotel dining room, people wander about in the lobbies socializing. There are couches and overstuffed chairs arranged so that families can lounge in the semi-comatose state brought on by sugary wine and generous portions of Borscht Belt food. To be honest, I have not seen any borscht, although we have been served chicken soup and beef *flanken* and *veal paprikash*... and ... and ....

Dad runs into some guys he knows. They are *Greeneh* too. Friends of friends, they were members of the “society” or the “organization,” which usually refers to a holocaust survivor group but it could be any Jewish organization.

I leave them to chat. The conversation often begins with an old person’s Jewish Geography, asking about who is still alive and in what state of health, but moves on to children and grandchildren, business ventures, travel, politics, the state of the hotel.

I drift towards the “Flying Saucer Café,” a smaller companion to the Stardust Room. It is a bar/café halfway between the dining room and the larger amphitheatre. There is music drifting out. As I walk by one of the larger family groups, a white-haired woman looks up at me and says, “It could be John Kerry.” The others turn towards me and mostly nod. I smile. I have heard it before.

“I’m not sure whether that’s a compliment.”

They laugh and argue that he is a distinguished man. Their accents mark them as native New Yorkers. Yet apart from a young woman Rickie’s age and her mother and father, the others belong to my parent’s generation.

I complain that Kerry has always looked dour and that, even though I voted for him, I could not remember a single thing he had ever said or championed.

I break off and wander into the lounge. A woman with an amazing voice, of gravel and honey, is belting out rhythm and blues with some show tunes and rock and roll mixed in. There is a small dance floor. Two couples are dancing and several groups of women are sitting about. Ben joins me for a drink, “Ask one of the old ladies to dance and make her New Year happy!” He pokes me in the ribs, pushing me towards the dance floor. I do love swing dancing, and sometimes the older ladies display greater ballroom skills than the younger ones. One is tapping her foot, expensive shoes keeping a good beat; her outfit shimmers and she looks game. Shirley is her name, and I ask her to dance. She does pretty well twirling about, smiling when she gets the hang of the stop and goes. She is flushed and breathing hard. I slow down the tempo and let her collect herself as the song winds down. She goes back to her friends beaming.

Since Ronnie died, whenever I dance, the memory of holding her on the dance floor brings back a tumult of joy and loss. We got to be hot stuff when a band was rocking, but it didn't start out that way. Ballroom dance has gender-based roles. Feminism was in an intense phase when we started dancing. Men leading had implications of patriarchy and oppression. Radical feminism, consciousness raising and women's liberation were a fire racing through the country and especially hot where we lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Ronnie was in the Boston Women's Graphics Collective that silk-screened feminist t-shirts and posters. One of my favorite photos shows a woman working at a construction site wearing one their t-shirts. Shovel in hand, the t-shirt proclaims: “Women hold up half the sky” -- one of Chairman Mao's proverbs.

Getting Ronnie to accept that I was leading on the dance floor was a problem. We had faced similar issues when we were learning about white water canoeing, sorting out who would choose direction and tactics for avoiding rocks in the fast water streams.

“Left!”

“Left?”

“No! Right!”

“Right?”

After swamping the canoe a few times in chilly New Hampshire streams, we learned to trust each other. I would steer from the stern when the water was calm, and Ronnie would call out directions from the bow when the water got choppy. The struggles over who leads on the dance floor, and what it means to feminist ideology seem a bit quaint now. Ronnie had spent almost the entire first 10 years of our relationship in a t-shirt and jeans, but she swallowed her wardrobe dogma and bought some skirts and dresses for dancing. She had always been shy, very restrained in expressing sexuality, but dancing transformed her into someone that didn't mind being a center of attention. If the music had a good beat and we could find some space on the dance floor we would fly, her skirt rising in quick turns, her eyes shining, her smile beaming out at the cosmos, electricity passing between us as we moved to the music. Our dancing was a controlled mayhem and if we lacked the precision of some of the best dancers, the joy and energy we generated often made us stand out on the dance floor.

At the Flying Saucer Café some of the “Kerry” gang had wandered in while I was on the dance floor. The young woman pushes her mother along. “Mom, ask him to dance! You'll have

fun!” Her mother, Susan, hesitates, and I ask her if she wants to try. Susan may be just a bit younger than my first dancing partner, Shirley, although she wears the same fancy shoes, glittery dress and stiff hairdo. She’s showing a little more cleavage, as well, and as we whirl about one of her straps threatens to slip off her shoulder. Ballroom dancing with a stranger begins with a dialogue, but usually no words are necessary: stance, grip, balance. The man’s job is to lead and to showcase the woman.

Susan has gotten used to leading herself, but I make an argument for leading. Not a word is spoken, but we do have a conversation set to music (credit Arthur Murray). It may have been a long time since she danced with someone who could provide a strong lead, or who wanted to, but after a few missteps she starts to trust me and have fun. The band takes a break, and she goes off happy, sweating, and a little disheveled. I go to look for Dad.

The next morning I am carrying coffee and a bagel and a piece of cake to Dad, who is praying in the Stardust Room. It is almost 9:30 AM and he has been here for a couple of hours. He is glad to see me, and asks after Ben and Rickie. I am pretty sure they will get here in time to hear the shofar. We need to make an appearance or “people will talk.” Dad worries that his buddies will tease him about his *yeshiva bochers*, the young unmarried men in his family, who might not attend shul. I remind him that there are few people left of his generation to pay attention to such things. He is off the hook. It’s now my generation’s job to worry about these things.

The congregation is reading from the Torah the chapter about Abraham, the ram and Isaac (*Yitz-chak* in Hebrew: *He will make us rejoice*). Dad takes the bag of food I brought him and discretely walks out of the room to have his coffee in the lobby. I am left behind to guard our

seats. This part of the service, the Torah reading, had always served as a break for most of the congregation. The kids and the smokers would make a beeline for the outdoors. As I have grown older and given up smoking, I've started to enjoy this segment more than the regular prayers, reading along in the biblical Hebrew that I learned in grade school and watching the parade of people called up to say blessings.

This is when the rabbi gives his sermon. The seats are filling as the time approaches for *musaf*, the prayer added on holidays. I look behind me and spot Susan, one of my dance partners in the large amphitheater, which rises in tiers. We exchange nods and nervous smiles. My other partners are also in the crowd, and it feels a bit like high school, furtive glances with hidden meanings.

Shirley's husband is sitting next to her and notices when we make eye contact. He may be eighty, but his eyes narrow, and his brow and lips add to the grimace and frown. It brings me back to the bible. The chapter before the sacrifice of Isaac is about Abraham and Sarah when they lived in the Negev, near the kingdom of the Philistine, during the reign of Abimelech. Even though they are both old, Sarah is still a great beauty. Abraham asks Sarah to tell strangers that she is his sister so that men will not be tempted to kill Abraham and take Sarah as a wife. Shirley's husband is safe. I am not tempted.

After the service, a woman as old as Sarah in the story struggles to maneuver her wide walker struggles down a narrow corridor into the main lobby. A small speed bump causes her to list to the left. She approaches the lift designed for those with wheelchairs and walkers, pushes the button, and waits. And she waits. I ask if I can help. She says, "It is okay, they will come and help me." And they do. One person carries the walker and the other takes her arm. When it

becomes clear that even with help she is not able to climb the stairs, they sit her down in a chair and the two sturdy young men lift both her and the chair, carrying her up the stairs.

I walk out to the back patio overlooking the lake. The sky appears unsettled and I hear the distant rumblings of thunder. In this moment before the storm, I turn and spot one of the young men who had carried the woman with the walker. He is telling his daughter about the woman. She he is holding his hand. Her head is turned up, the tiny chin pointing just above his kneecap, her eyes, searchlights, probing. White leggings reach down to shiny patent leather shoes below her party dress. He bends down to tell her: “Honey, we try to help people. That’s what we do.”

I feel tears running down my cheeks as I remember one of my father’s stories from Auschwitz about an inmate named Avrum. Avrum is a Yiddish variant for Abraham. Did the bible story bring him to mind? Abraham was asked by God to sacrifice his son Isaac. Dad often referred to those who died in the camps as *korbanim*, slaughtered sacrifices, gassed and cremated. My father lost his parents, his brother, and four sisters to the Holocaust. We would have needed a very large table in Kutsher’s dining room had they survived.

Dad managed to survive Auschwitz in part because he landed a job at the laundry. “This German Jew gave me the job in the laundry.” My father is talking about a prisoner who served as a factotum for one of the guards. The laundry job was a blessing, because it was a warm place in the winter and it gave Dad the opportunity to steal clothes. A fellow inmate helped him trade the clothes for food. If you did not bend the rules, you did not survive.

“This German Jew, I don’t remember his name, took care of one of the SS men and lived in a small room in the attic above the block where the prisoners slept. My partner and I would take rice or macaroni, and sugar to the attic and he would cook it for us.”



“One time we were sitting looking out the window in the attic. Each of us had a plate with macaroni with a little sugar on it. One of the prisoners from the block came up behind us. He was a Polish Jew. Avrum was his name.”

“It was a bad day for Avrum. The guards sometimes came through the bunks making selections of the people who could not work anymore. That day they had picked Avrum. Being selected was a death sentence. The next day he was supposed to be taken to the gas chamber. He came up behind us. He was in bad shape, skin and bones. He was staring at the floor, muttering over and over, ‘It’s my last Sunday, my last Sunday.’ I tell you, the spoon would not go into my mouth.”

He coughs, his throat closing again 65 years later.

“I couldn’t look at him. I gave him my plate like this.”

We were sitting in Dad’s kitchen in New Jersey when he told me the story. He picked up a plate from the kitchen table and handed it back over his left shoulder.

“‘It’s my last Sunday’ Avrum said.”

My father shook his head slowly. A sad smile crept across his face before he spoke. “I couldn’t eat anymore so I gave him my food.”

It wasn’t always possible, but even in the camps people tried to help each other.

I walked back into the hotel and stopped in to visit Ben and Rickie in their room. I watched Rickie go through a couple of bags of chips and most of a pint of avocado dip and realized he

was not a dainty eater, but simply had tastes that Kutsher's kitchen could not satisfy on the High Holidays.

For most people, the kitchen and the dining room are the main reasons for coming to the resort. The rooms are "getting tired:" or they were that Rosh Hashanah weekend. We put up with old carpets, sagging, lumpy mattresses, peeling paint, the occasional moldy bathroom and hot water shortages. Ben had stepped into the shower and soaped himself up before realizing that the water was not getting any hotter. He was grumpy most of the morning, but cheered up at lunch. . A comic at the hotel had joked; "Let me eat in the dining room and I'll sleep under the table."

The resorts were in decline when my mother was still alive. Even so, coming to the Catskills was still a celebration of life for my father and mother. And then there was always the memory of the glory days when places like Grossinger's, the Concord and Kutsher's served kosher food and had comics that delivered punch lines in Yiddish. They were places where Jews could gather with their children and grandchildren for festivals that renewed old traditions. Some of the Jews had immigrated before WWII, but many had come after the Holocaust. They called themselves the *greeneh*, the greenhorns. Now they were old people, but still thought of themselves as the new ones in the herd. The *greeneh* were happy to mingle with the others who still embraced and a Jewish culture with European roots. My parents and most of the survivors are gone. The hotels aged with them and most have passed away, but the memories still linger.

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