

Max Jacobs

May 24, 1915 – January 31, 2004

The following is the eulogy I delivered for my father, Max Jacobs (including some additions and amplifications).

Max Jacobs was a character. He lived to the ripe old age of 88. Mentally he was sharp as ever until the very end. However, he complained of his failing health. “The golden years are not so golden” he would say. But I think he would rather not have us focus on the discomforts of his later years and his final illness but rather celebrate the many wonderful and striking aspects of his most active years. Max hated funerals where the focus was on praising God to the neglect of the individual who just passed away. Max would have wanted someone to speak about his life. I feel that in many ways I am my father’s son, and so it seems natural for me to stand up and say a few words about Max.

Max's Families

Family is one key to understanding Max Jacobs’s life. He was devoted to his own immediate family but was also committed to keeping the extended family together. And the Delmar Hotel, which he ran for most of his life, was in many ways another kind of extended family. Guests would often remark that the hotel had “a real family feeling” about it. Max had a paternal affection toward the generations of busboys and waiters whose summer earnings at the hotel enabled them to put themselves through college.

Max was a devoted son. His mother, Anna, lived with him at the hotel they owned and operated for 13 years after he and Claire were married. He would speak of his mother’s charm and kindness in the warmest tones. Max’s beloved brother Harry died of a heart attack in 1963. This was a huge shock for Max, since he admired and looked up to Harry. Max was also devoted to his sister Sarah, ten years his senior. Sarah’s daughter Selma married young and had her children at the same time as Max and Claire. Selma’s sons, Keith and Abbey, were the same ages as my brother Howard and me. We would all play together during family gatherings and on extended visits that Keith and Abbey would make to the hotel. Max was Harry and Sarah’s baby brother, little Maxie. So he became Uncle Maxie to all the nieces and nephews who viewed him through the ‘little brother’ lenses of Sarah and Harry.

Max met Claire in Paris during World War II and brought her back to the states. They worked closely together running the hotel during their 58 years of marriage. She ran the kitchen and cooked for 150 guests while he ran the office. They were rarely apart, and never for long, and they made most important decisions together. They were a good team.

Max was a steady and loving father. He would pick us up after school when we would stay late for Hebrew school and, later, debate practice. He had high hopes for his smart sons. He wanted Howie to become a doctor or a math teacher and me to become a senator. But part of him wanted us to carry on the family business. Even after I received my Ph.D., he said “You teach during the

school year. You could come up and run the hotel in the summer, you know." I suppose that it is natural to want your children to carry on your life's work even when you really want them to pursue loftier ambitions.

As a grandfather, Max was probably closest to Howie's oldest son Ben. He was especially touched by Ben's deep interest in history, Max's favorite subject. Max shared a love of show tunes with Howie's daughter Katherine. He was proud of my daughters Elizabeth and Madeleine, but his advanced age and troubles with hearing made it difficult for him to get to know them well. Whenever he would see them, he would say "Hiya, darling. You get prettier every time I see you. You know I have a problem. I don't know which of my three granddaughters is the prettiest."

The Hotel and the Family

Max was the proprietor of the Delmar Hotel, formerly the Jacob Inn, in the Jewish Catskills for most of his adult life. The Delmar was located on Route 52 between Liberty and Loch Sheldrake New York, but mail delivered to Ferndale would also reach us. Max helped his father, Hyman Jacobs, build the hotel on the site of a farm that was purchased in 1929. Max ran the business after his father's death in 1936 and became the principal proprietor after his mother's death in 1960.

The hotel was the gathering point for our extended family. Relatives would often come to visit; young cousins working their way through college would take a summer job in the dining room or the band. My brother and I had elaborate Bar Mitzvah parties at the hotel with the extended family visiting for the weekend. It was at the hotel that my cousin, Enid, met her husband Arnold Schwartz, who, at the time, was working there as a waiter. I married Sharon on the front lawn of the hotel on a warm October Sunday under a bright blue sky with the fall foliage in the background.

Max and Claire would always try to bring the family together for reunions. In some ways this represented his effort to continue the Schwartz Family Circle, where his mother Anna's five sisters and their families would meet. Our family would often drive down to New York City from the Catskills for such gatherings, which became less and less common during the 1960s as the Schwartz family became more dispersed. In his later years, Max and Claire would host family reunions in the fall or at Thanksgiving. These occasions will be warmly remembered by those who attended.

Jokes

Max was quick with a joke, and his jokes often had an element of irony and a kernel of wisdom. "Why is that man so tired? He was born tired and had a relapse." "How crooked are the executives at Enron? They are so crooked that they sleep in a round bed." "How slow is that woman? She is so slow that she will be late for her own funeral." "How bad are these jokes? These are the jokes that killed vaudeville."

Max's signature comments were delivered on the public address system at the hotel. Best known were his announcements of breakfast, lunch and dinner. "Good morning ladies and gentlemen of the Delmar Hotel. It is a lovely day, the sun is shining, the herring are jumping, and breakfast is now being served, the main dining room is now open."

Sometimes he would accidentally leave the microphone on after calling a guest to the telephone, and his candid remarks would be broadcast to the entire hotel. "That Sadie Cohen, she is eating my kishkes out!" he would exclaim. These episodes were embarrassing but also funny. Howie and I would race to the lobby to the office to turn off the microphone. A couple of days after his death from complications related to a blockage in his intestines, I suddenly realized that he died of kishke failure. How ironic. Maybe they did eat his kishkes out after all.

Show Tunes

Music was often in the air at the Delmar. Max would play the soundtracks from Broadway musicals on the public address system. – Guys and Dolls, Pal Joey, Porgy and Bess. Many years ago, the hotel was burglarized. We don't remember how much money was stolen but we do recall that Max's record collection was taken. He replaced it gradually over time and was able to keep the music playing. Max enjoyed the nightly shows at the "casino" – the Delmar's social hall. Our family would venture down to "the city" to see a Broadway show – almost always a musical -- once a year. After Max and Claire finally got a VCR, they would watch videos of old musicals in the evenings with their neighbor Pearl, and Max would cheerfully hum the tunes the next day.

Politics and Religion

Max was a staunch Democrat who was passionate about politics. He loved political history, which he saw as the recounting of the struggles of the good little guys, especially during the Roosevelt period, against the entrenched interests of the powerful few. Max would corner you and ask a leading question: How can corporate executives line their pockets with such outrageous salaries? Being neutral was not an option, and changing the subject was often difficult. He would proceed with a remarkably informed discussion of the topic, venting his sense of righteous outrage on whomever he was talking with. For Max, this was small talk – detailed, thoughtful, thoroughly engaged in an effort to seriously understand the important issues of the day, often put in a remarkably broad historical context.

When he fell ill in December the first thing I said to him in the recovery room was "Dad, you have to get better. We need your vote!" If he were here today, he would have been avidly following the election campaign. He would want to know if the Democrats dumped Dean too quickly; if Kerry has the guts and the broad appeal needed to win; if the current poll numbers showing a slight Kerry lead can be expected to hold up.

Politics was his real religion. During the 1960 presidential campaign, he put up a sign at the hotel that said "Nix on Nixon." He really felt that Jews had no business being Republicans. I think he would have wanted any donations in his honor to go to the Democratic National Committee. (A few days after the funeral we got word that a Republican relative was donating to

the Democratic National Committee in Max's honor. Sharon and I felt that somewhere Max was smiling as a result of that wonderful gesture, a little victory to be celebrated. Max felt that American politics had many more setback than advances since Eisenhower and Nixon were elected in 1952. Consequently, all victories – however small – were to be savored.)

But, despite his frequent kvetching about religious dogma and intolerance, in some ways Max was Jewish through and through. After all, he ran a kosher hotel for 56 years. His jokes clearly reflected a Jewish sensibility. He was a strong supporter of the state of Israel. His commitment to social justice certainly had its roots in his Jewish upbringing. A picture of Chaim Weiztmann, the first president of Israel, hung on the wall of his office at the hotel for many years. He frequently would recall the anti-Semitism that he and his family personally experienced. He would say that in order to know who we are, we have to remember where we have been. He would want his children and grandchildren to remember his father's flight from the pogroms in Russia. He would want us to remember that the resorts of the Jewish Catskills were built in part because Jews were not welcome elsewhere. He would want us to remember the valiant struggles of Israel to maintain its independence in a sea of hostile neighbors.

My Father's Son

Despite important differences in our life experiences, I am my father's son. Max completed high school; I obtained my Ph. D. from Harvard. The depression deeply influenced Max's view of the world, while the periodic recessions I lived through never affected me in any lasting way. World War II was formative for Max, while the Vietnam War was formative for me. Max largely gave up on baseball after the Dodgers left Brooklyn in 1957, while I was happy to root for Mickey Mantle's successful Yankees. The life-shaping experiences of my daughters are even more removed from those that so influenced Max's life. But despite these differences, I share Max's outlook, and many of his inclinations and proclivities. His struggles are my struggles. I don't want my girls to struggle, but perhaps they will come to see in some ways that the causes he believed in are their causes as well. I feel that some of Max will live on in me and in my girls.

There is so much else to say, but I must bring these remarks to a close. Max would say "Enough already. Don't go on and on. They'll close the cemetery for the night and then where will you be? Your speech should go on until there is not a dry eye in the house, but don't overstay your welcome." Dad, we will always remember your charm and unique perspective on life. We will cherish the times we spent together. You will always be with us.