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# William Sokolin, Wine Seller Who Broke Famed Bottle, Dies at 85

By **SAM ROBERTS** MAY 2, 2015

The slightest mishap can cause someone to cry over their beer, or shed tears over spilled milk, but on April 23, 1989, at the Four Seasons restaurant in Manhattan, nobody could have blamed William Sokolin if he had sobbed over a broken bottle of wine.

Not just any bottle, even by Four Seasons standards, where a double magnum of Château Ducru-Beaucaillou, St. Julien 2008 now goes for \$2,700. The bottle Mr. Sokolin famously broke that night was a 1787 Château Margaux, which had been found in a Paris cellar in 1985 and was said to have belonged to Thomas Jefferson. (It was inscribed with the initials Th.J.) Mr. Sokolin had been hoping to sell it for \$519,750.

A wine merchant for more than a half-century, Mr. Sokolin died of heart failure at 85 on Tuesday at his home in Manhattan, his son, David, said.

He was born on April 25, 1930, the son of David Sokolin, who opened a liquor store on Madison Avenue after Prohibition ended (and was said to have been granted New York State license No. 4), and the former Lillian Isacoff.

He graduated from the Horace Mann School and Tufts College and was signed by Branch Rickey to play for a Brooklyn Dodgers farm team but instead enlisted in the United States Army during the Korean War. When he returned, he joined the family's liquor business, and by the end of the decade he had shifted its focus to

wine.

The company, which moved to Bridgehampton, N.Y., in the late 1990s, stores and rates wine, buys individual collections and sells it, though now only by catalog, telephone and online. It is still family owned.

In addition to his son, Mr. Sokolin is survived by his wife, the former Gloria Schren; a daughter, Deanne; and two grandchildren.

A connoisseur himself, he once suggested, while weighing the roles of soil, climate and winemaker, that cabernet sauvignon grapes be planted in Central Park.

The author of “Liquid Assets” and “The Complete Wine Investor,” Mr. Sokolin estimated in 1990 that rare wine could appreciate about 15 percent annually. “I know of people who have gone broke and been saved by their wine collections,” he said.

If Mr. Sokolin was counting on good fortune that night at the Four Seasons, however, he must have been sorely disappointed.

Brandishing a priceless bottle at a crowded party was otherwise vintage behavior for a salesman with a penchant for publicity. But this time, at a dinner heralding the arrival of the 1986 Bordeaux, Mr. Sokolin accidentally bumped into a metal-topped tray table and knocked two holes into his historic smoky-green bottle.

The wine spilled out, leaving a blood-red stain on the carpet that evoked a homicide scene. Fellow oenophiles were aghast.

“I committed murder,” Mr. Sokolin told a New York Times reporter a few hours later.

“This is not possible,” he said. “I went to the table and told two people, ‘I broke the bottle, and I’m going home,’ and — bang! — I went home.”

As he was leaving, several bystanders dipped their fingers in the broken bottle for a taste. Julian Niccolini, the restaurant manager, pronounced the residue unpalatable, concluding that it had deteriorated. Mr. Sokolin said he had taken the bottle on consignment but had not intended to sell it that night. (Fortunate, because the State Liquor Authority said it was illegal to sell wine on consignment.) He said that he had been billed by Whitwhams, an English exporter, for \$212,000 and that the bottle was fully insured.

In a homage to P. T. Barnum in 1991, Mr. Sokolin put the empty but damaged bottle up for auction at Guernsey's. As an auctioneer lifted it from a velvet-lined case, Mr. Sokolin conspicuously leapt to his feet, grabbed it and anxiously muttered, "I'll do that."

The bidding began at \$30,000.

"All right, \$10,000, please," the auctioneer said. "Do I hear \$5,000?"

Finally, someone yelled, "I'll give you \$100."

Mr. Sokolin's family said he donated the unsold bottle to Save the Children, the international relief organization.

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