Chapter 1

Returning to the Catskills

Prelude: Nighttime at the Seven Gables Hotel, Greenfield Park—1959

"Oy, what a meal. Let's get out for a quick walk and then get to the casino so we can sit up front."

Gradually, a hundred adults leave the dining room, some to stroll or sit, others to pick up their children on the front lawn. The kids have just left their circle around the flagpole, where the counselors have lowered and folded the flag to the trumpeted taps. It was hard to get the youngsters in a circle once they had charged out of the children's dining room. How long could children sit—strung along benches for six or more on each side at long, plastic-covered tables—waiting for food? How much ketchup could they pour onto their spaghetti and still eat so little of it? How loudly could they complain about another's night's dessert of cherry Jell-O? But the children know that soon their parents will come and relieve the counselors of their charges, probably taking them to the concession for candy or soda.

Even with all the excitement of parents collecting children from a day at camp, it is a fairly quiet time in the hotel's daily cycle. Still light at 8:15, dusk closes in on tired children and parents who are in between the hotel's many ac-

tivities. No swimming, softball, mah-jongg, basketball, calisthenics. Just quiet before the dark brings show time and a new series of adventures.

Adirondack chairs and benches fill the lawn, punctuated by regular wrought iron and wood park benches. The casino porch has two sides completely lined with benches for sitting as well. The Main House and White House have chairs on their porches. Even the stairs of guest buildings provide places to sit and schmooze. An occasional bat brings forth the common concern that it will get into women's hair, especially if the hair is put up.

The concession opens, having shut during dinner so the proprietor can rest or—if the proprietor is ambitious—sell soda in the dining room. For the patient children, what a wealth of treats: Yoo-hoo, Dr. Pepper, tubes of chocolate licorice and pretzel rods in plastic containers, frozen Milky Ways, egg creams, little packages of Drake's Cake—plain or marble pound cake and round coffee cake.

At last, the first dime in the jukebox from one of the teenagers. Out of maybe sixty-four records, perhaps five are really up to date, and those are the ones we will hear over and over—this year the hot tune is "Zing Went the Strings of My Heart." Off-duty staff can join in too—the lifeguard, some bellhops, counselors as they are relieved. The dining room staff is still cleaning up and setting up for breakfast. Most of them won't come down till they shower away the sweat of another hectic dinner. Lindy and slow dances predominate; the twist won't arrive until around 1960. This is the young people's time to play in the hotel's main gathering spot.

Listen, the band is unpacking their instruments. The drummer has thrown the lever on the snare and is ripping off a quick paradiddle; then he stops to adjust the bass drum closer and tighten the high-hat's wingnut. With a twist of his mouthpiece, the horn player roars out a couple of riffs, some from Broadway shows, some old Yiddish favorites. Removing his instrument from its heavy brown canvas cover, the bass player turns the pegs to bring the strings up to pitch. At the keyboard, the pianist runs fingers up and down in cascading arpeggios, spinning off little quotes from old standards in the middle. Because the singer was not there for a pre-dinner rehearsal, this is the time she quickly runs through her charts and gets her cues. But she doesn't want to give away the surprises to guests already in the casino, so it's a very informal and quick thing.

Then the band fools around for maybe ten minutes doing music that they particularly like. You might hear a short jazz tune or a parody of a traditional favorite Catskill song. It's also the time for students of music to chat with the band and learn tricks of the trade.

The wooden chairs had been moved aside for a previous activity, so they are now unfolded again and placed in straight rows over the pine boards of the floor. The MC is testing the single spotlight, which is set on a black pole; some trustworthy teenage guest will have the honor of operating it.

Some of the adults sit at the bar—a counter shared with the soda fountain but separated by a folding-countertop entrance. They're having J&B ("Jewish booze"), Seven and Seven (Seagram's 7 and 7-Up), Rheingold or Miller beer, hanging out and trading stories about the day's activities, maybe setting up a poker game for after the show.

The MC consults with the concessionaire, and the plug is pulled on the jukebox to the familiar protest of the youngsters who now have to give up rock and roll for something more adult-oriented. At nine o'clock, the band strikes up their theme, signaling the opening of the night's entertainment. After several choruses, the bandleader steps to the mike:

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. The Barry Scheinberg Orchestra welcomes you to the casino of the Seven Gables Hotel for a wonderful Saturday night. For the next half-hour, we're here to play for your dancing pleasure, and later we have an all-star show with Broadway entertainment. Please join us in the first dance. Here's the 'Miami Beach Rumba.' Grab a partner and let's get on with the music."

That was I watching the hotel nightlife, a ten-year-old who grew up in Catskill resorts. Those memories rooted around in my head, coming out often enough when I shared stories of my youth. But until quite recently, I had never understood how powerful that legacy was for my life, or how meaningful it was for millions of others. This book is my exploration of that legacy.

I grew up in a family of "Mountain Rats," a Catskill term for those who lived and worked in "the Mountains" over many years. I spent three months each year in the Catskills, from 1949 (my birth) to 1971, and I returned through the late 1970s to visit my parents who were still working there (my father died in his coffee shop in 1972, and my mother was a chef until 1978). In 1946, my parents bought a small hotel, Brown's Hotel Royal, on White Lake, which they owned until 1952. A postcard and photos of the hotel from those years show gardens of tall cannas and the omnipresent, sharply angled, broad-slatted "Adirondack" chairs. The postcard guided me in 1993 back to the hotel's location, which my parents had always kept hidden.

One year, their chef quit at the start of the season. Unable to find a re-

placement, my mother, Sylvia Brown, gave herself a crash course in cooking and never left the kitchen again. After the hotel went broke several years later, she spent the rest of her working years as a chef. Only small and medium-size hotels (up to approximately three hundred guests) would hire a woman because, according to my mother, the kitchen staff in a larger hotel wouldn't take orders from a woman chef. My mother's placement in the smaller hotels set the tenor for the level of places I worked in. When I was still under age sixteen, I needed her push to get jobs usually held by older teenagers and people in their twenties; later I preferred that size hotel because I had gotten used to it.

My father, William Brown, worked variously as a maitre d', waiter, coffee shop manager, desk clerk/chauffeur (for an employment agency), and operator of small "concession" coffee shops rented from hotel owners. With me in tow, my parents plied their tools of the trade, and I took in Catskill culture from their traversal of that society. A major part of my childhood was formed in these resorts, and much of what I learned about human motives and actions—coarse and fine, crass and noble—was modeled on the behavior of people working and playing in the Mountains.

The Life and Death of Hotels: My Return to the Mountains

It's thirty-four years after that scene in the Seven Gables casino. I leave Cambridge very early on an August morning in 1993, heading for three days in the Catskills to trace my life's odyssey through the resorts where my parents and I worked and lived. My first stop is Chait's Hotel, in Accord, about halfway between Kingston and Ellenville. My mother cooked at Chait's from 1970 to 1978. In 1972 my father ran the concession, and he died of a stroke on the floor of his coffee shop. My visit there includes a walk through the fields full of purple-topped statice where I spread my father's ashes (contrary to Jewish law, he, and my mother after him, wanted cremation). I knew that ex-owners Annette and Max Finestone had built a house near the hotel, and I was pleased to hear that they were still there. As I drove up the hill from Chait's, I saw Annette on the porch of her beautiful house—built on land that she kept back from the property included in the hotel sale. Max and Annette would be the only hotel owners I knew from the old days who were still around to talk, though I did converse with the son of one proprietor from my childhood.

Chait's had become Su Casa, a pleasant hotel not unlike Chait's, with yoga,

intellectual and musical events, but no heavy entertainment scene. Since that visit, Su Casa was sold to Elat Chayim, a Jewish spiritual group. Elat Chayim is an outgrowth of Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi's P'nai Or, part of the Jewish Renewal movement. Based largely on the teachings of Schacter-Shalomi and his student Rabbi Arthur Waskow, Elat Chayim is run by Rabbi Jeff Roth and Rabbi Joanna Katz. They term themselves "neo-Hasidic" in that they believe in putting joy in all worship, but regular Hasidim see them as apostates. These participants observe many rituals, though with modern, often new age touches and a commitment to gender issues, ecology, and mystical elements of other religions and traditions.

I proceed down Route 209 through Ulster County, stopping at Ellenville where I went to school for parts of several years. I had loved Saturday morning ice cream sodas at Balotin's Drug Store, a reward for enduring an allergy shot at the doctor's office. I had enjoyed taking the money I earned helping my father, and spending it on stamps at the coin and stamp dealer in town. And when I was thirteen, Ellenville was home to my girlfriend, whose uncle owned the Cherry Hill Hotel where my mother worked. Here is my first glimpse of how depressed a classic Catskill town could be. The streets are very empty, and many businesses are closed. It is not what I remembered of the busy and exciting place—"the village"—that I always looked forward to visiting.

From Ellenville, it is a short hop on Route 52 to Greenfield Park, best known for the Tamarack Lodge that many erroneously claim was immortalized by Herman Wonk's *Marjorie Morningstar*. The Seven Gables, where my parents worked for six years, is gone save for "The Bungalow" (a small four-room guest building) and the day-camp building. How did we wind up there years ago? Ann and Harry Portnoy stopped at my parents' little restaurant in Fort Pierce, Florida, in the 1950s, on their way to Miami Beach. They got into a conversation about the hotel they had bought in 1946, and my mother wound up cooking for them for six years.

As in an archeological dig, brick stairs and iron railings lead to overgrown bushes and trees, with only foundation stones left from the main guest house called (as in many places) "the Main House." The other buildings—a second guest house called "the White House"; the buildings containing the casino, kitechen, and dining rooms; and staff quarters-burned long ago and were subject to bulldozing and complete removal by the neighbor who bought the land. He lived for some time in the old day-camp house. "The Bungalow" is deserted. Nevertheless, Fred, the caretaker since 1962, incessantly mows all the area, as well as seven adjoining fields divided by old fieldstone fences, stretching for

countless acres. It seems almost a kind of grave-tending, since none of the land is used. Even the pool was excavated, and this is rare—old pools sporting bushes and trees abound in the Mountains, often the only remnant of dead hotels and colonies. Throughout the Catskills are hulks of resorts, skeletal handball courts, collapsed buildings, and a few buildings that refuse to fall. Everywhere is the tale of dead resorts that once teemed with life. Rows of abandoned bungalows stand watch, though overall they fared better because these small buildings could more easily be maintained and some could be converted to condos.

I first hoisted a bus box for pay at the Cherry Hill, also in Greenfield Park. The faded hotel sign still stood at the turnoff from the highway, but in a hundred feet the road stopped at a barricade. It made me think that a landslide had just taken out the whole road and the hotel. There is another nearby hotel on Briggs Highway, the Greenwood Inn, where I once worked for a weekend, now turned into the Hasidic Camp Bnos Beltz for Girls. There are still deserted buildings standing at the Birchwood Lodge, where the Cherry Hill Road hits Briggs Highway; this was the closest walkable medium-size hotel that we would go to in search of greater adventures than the small Cherry Hill could offer.

My journey continued through Woodbourne, turning left on Route 42 where the state prison dominates the landscape. Route 42 takes you through Fallsburg and South Fallsburg, the area of the largest concentration of sizeable hotels (Raleigh, Olympic, Pines, Flagler, Windsor, Nemerson, Brickman). I had learned that the Fallsburg places where I worked, the Nemerson and Brickman's, were no longer functioning; the former was now a yeshiva and the latter was part of the ashram I would visit later in the day.

As 42 winds toward Monticello, I come to Kiamesha Lake, famous for the Concord. There, the Evan's Kiamesha Hotel, another place where my mother cooked, had long ago been torn down, though its attached bungalow colony remained as a new condominium development, with many new houses built as well. In Monticello I meet up with Alan Barrish, librarian of the Crawford Public Library and one of the organizers of the first Catskills conference. We drive together past Fallsburg sites, stopping at the Siddha Yoga ashram, which I describe in a later chapter.

The first thing for the next morning would be the search for what I expected might be the ruined foundation stones of my parents' old hotel in White Lake. In 1946, Max Waldman sold the Royal to my parents, who took out a $16,500 first mortgage and a $4,500 second mortgage and owned it as Brown's Hotel Royal. I had always heard about this place and would ask my parents questions about it. They would simply say it was not there anymore, and I never

thought to look despite the fact that for many years when I worked in Swan Lake, I frequently drove past White Lake on my way to Monticello. Once, while waiting for jobs to open up for my parents, we stayed at their friends' (George and Miriam Shapiro) bungalow colony for a couple of weeks in Kauneonga Lake, a village on White Lake only several thousand feet away from where the Royal hotel was; no word was mentioned of the hotel. So I assumed that like many old places, it had burned, fallen, or been knocked down. The village of White Lake was on the north side of the lake, where Route 17-B hit Route 55. To go to Monticello, I always took a left at the village of White Lake; a right would have taken me to the hotel, had I known about it.

Why had they kept hidden the location and survival of the hotel? As I matured, I was able to see more of my parents' foibles, one of which was a desire to repress the hurts and failures of their lives. They were upset that they failed in the hotel business and then had to work hard the rest of their lives doing the same work in the pay of other owners. Over two decades, they tried several times to run restaurants, and once they had a mosaic tile store, but they fared no better at these than at Brown's Hotel Royal. I have in my possession a copy of the August 4, 1952, deed that Joseph Jacobs obtained when he bought the hotel at a mortgage foreclosure for $15,325. To return to the hotel, to tell me of it, to see it on the highway would bring up sad memories and make harder their summers in the Mountains. Perhaps they feared that I would question them more about why they were unable to make a go of the Royal, when other small hotels managed to survive.

On my field trip in 1993, I found the hotel easily, having identified it by the single postcard that my parents had. I immediately saw the quite well-appointed Bradstan Hotel, a bed and breakfast. That was it! I looked and gaped, and certainly nearly every detail that I could make out from the postcard was reproduced in the real hotel. I walked into the hotel, found one of the owners in the kitchen, a young man in his thirties, and asked what was the name of this place in the old days, to which he replied, "This was Brown's Hotel Royal." I showed him the photocopy reproduction of the postcard. He was quite amazed, as was I. Here was the hotel that I had lived in as an infant, the resort my parents owned between 1946 and 1952, before it went bankrupt and they left. Here I was, back in a place I always wanted to be.

Unlike so many places in the Catskills that had fallen into complete abandonment or had been burned, this one was transformed and redecorated into an upscale bed and breakfast, with a beautiful dining room where weddings and other affairs are catered and a bar that has a cabaret on weekends and provides

a local watering spot the rest of the week. The new owners found a few old things worth keeping, such as a dresser. Most other things have been picked up elsewhere, but have been designed to create a 1940s and 1950s atmosphere: brocade curtains, rattan furniture, art deco pieces, beaded curtains in doorways. The side buildings remain, though several dilapidated bungalows were torn down. Two rooms that stood on the front porch alongside the entranceway could not be reconstructed, so they had been removed. That was where my parents and I lived, with us on one side and relatives on the other.

My uncle Max was some kind of partner, at least at one point. Many of our relatives came and stayed there as paying guests, and they also helped out building tables, repairing docks and furniture—a kind of volunteer help. Others worked regular jobs—cousin Essie was a bookkeeper, cousin Gloria worked in the office, cousin Sylvia worked in the office too, aunt May worked as a chambermaid, and cousin Gene and his wife Dolores entertained. Another cousin considered buying the adjoining property and signed an agreement with my parents to trade some of his land to my parents so that they could expand their driveway, in exchange for some of their lakefront property. I have this document, but my relatives have no knowledge of the deal ever going through.

Scott Samuelson and Edward Dudek, the current owners, have framed a postcard of the hotel in the days before it was Brown's Hotel Royal and was just the Royal, before some of the side buildings were added. After 1952, my parents were out of business. Sol Pasternack bought it in 1954 from Joseph Jacobs, who had bought the hotel at foreclosure auction, and Pasternack ran it until he sold it to the current owners. It got more ramshackle—when the current owners bought it in 1991, they found many little stoves all around the place that had been put into rooms and the remnants of bungalows. It had become an increasingly seedier boarding house, filled with poor people and SSI recipients. The current owners spent two years transforming it and winning an award from the county historical society for the best preservation reconstruction project.

It is hard to leave Brown's Royal/Bradstan, but I can't take any more of Ed's and Scott's time—I, for one, know the rigors of running a hotel, no matter how small. After a walk to the lakeside, I depart and continue around White Lake, the most exquisite of lakes in the Mountains, rounding the village of Kauneonga Lake on my way to Swan Lake. I stop at Paul's Hotel, where I worked for two years. I knew that it was Daytop Village, a drug rehab center, but was unprepared for the hostility I faced. Burly staff members wanted to know why I was visiting, gave me little information, and refused to let me take any photos. I finally got some superior to let me take photos, as long as there were no people in them.

The one bungalow colony I worked at, SGS, is further down the highway. The SGS is a broken down wreck that was later bought and renamed Cayman's Country—with a couple of bungalows standing and a few people living there. The casino and coffee shop are completely shuttered, and there is no sign of any life in the main part of the colony. The pool is overgrown, the basketball court seems to have disappeared, and junk lies all around. Through the dead town of Swan Lake, I turn left at the lake to the Stevensville and the Commodore, two hotels where I also worked. The Stevensville, once a very grand place, remains standing in part, but is fenced off and decayed. Immediately next door, the Commodore is in ruins.

I progress toward Liberty, grabbing a quick bite in a luncheonette. This was a bustling town, which I visited many times each week through the years I worked in Loch Sheldrake and Swan Lake. Now it is dreary, lacking the excitement of the staff and guests who made its main drag a major shopping area. I leave, stopping at Grossinger's just outside of Liberty. I can't get past the front gate. The new Korean/Japanese owner has yet to put the place back into operation, and no one is admitted. From there I go on to Loch Sheldrake, down Route 52 past Brown's Hotel. Charles and Lillian Brown's hotel is still running (at that time, but no longer), the place made famous by Jerry Lewis, the Browns' adopted nephew, who always played to crowds there in the Jerry Lewis Playhouse. Catskill roads were full of billboards for Brown's, with a huge head of Jerry Lewis sticking out above the sign and largeletters reading "Jerry Lewis says Brown's is my favorite resort." People always asked if I was related; they still do. As a youngster, I hoped I was—because I knew Brown's was an important hotel—but I wasn't.

Hardly any small hotels could duplicate Ed and Scott's rehab feat of Brown's Royal. Most are hulks; a few are incorporated into bungalow colonies. One small-to-medium-size hotel where I worked, the Karmel in Loch Sheldrake, also survives. In the early 1970s, the Jacobs and Katzes went bankrupt, and the current owner bought it in 1976 to run a children's drama camp, the Stage Door, which numbers the children of movie stars among its campers. The old nightclub has been turned into a large theater, the main lobby into a smaller one. All over are trunks, wardrobes, and piles of costumes and set props. The kitchen puts out buffet meals where the children come and make their own tuna fish or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. While most of the original kitchen is still there, the old stoves and refrigerators and salad counters are certainly not turning out the kind of food that they used to. Overall, the place is in wonderful shape and being well used, a unique survivor of the glory days of the Catskills. This was a pleasing way

to end my discoveries of the day, and I headed back to Monticello where Alan Barrish and I would drive around some more. My visit to a yeshiva and to the large ashram of Gurumayi is described in the chapter on resort religion.

My Next Return: A Conference on the Catskills

It is September 1, 1995, two years after that emotionally intense visit to my old haunts, and I am driving up Route 17 to the Catskills, full of anticipation. The excitement accelerates when I get to the deep turn descending into the valley at the Wurtsboro Hills. I used to love to stop at the scenic overview just as the turn began, offering a gorgeous look at the Shawangunk Valley below, but the overview has been removed. A few miles later the road rises on the far side of the valley, and I am tingling as I turn off at the Rock Hill exit. Another few miles and I will be at Sunny Oaks in Woodridge, one of the Catskills' last remaining small hotels (there aren't that many large ones left either), where I will be co-conducting a conference, "The History of the Catskills," over the Labor Day weekend. Though eager to get there, I want to savor everything on the way. I stop and take photos of the Glen Wild Synagogue. I start up the stairs of the decrepit Zucker's Glen Wild Hotel, but seeing the front lawn occupied by several orthodox women I retreat, fearful of being seen as a nonobservant camera-clad male interloper.

It is hard to believe that the conference is finally going to happen. For two years, a small group of scholars, hotel families, and local residents tried unsuccessfully to get a small grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. I was thrilled to learn of such a group, which I found out about after their first attempt, and I eagerly joined the conference planners. After the second rejection, it seemed unlikely that the event would occur. But Shalom Goldman called me in early July, while I was vacationing on Cape Cod, and said that the Sunny Oaks Hotel owners would be delighted to host the conference. Could we possibly pull off the whole organizing of a conference just six weeks down the road? It was worth trying, and it was a wonderful experience. For the first time, we brought together a terrific assortment of people with a deep interest in keeping alive the Catskill legacy: local residents, current and former hotel owners, waiters from the past, writers, filmmakers, and scholars from disciplines in sociology, history, Judaic studies, and architecture. Organizers and attendees enjoyed themselves, learned a lot, and sparked wider public and media attention.

This could not possibly stop here, so we set about to build the Catskills Institute—a group to organize future conferences, collect archival materials, publish a newsletter, develop museum exhibitions, give talks, and spread the memories of Catskill culture to all possible audiences.

And what was it that we gathered to study, memorialize, and reminisce about in a gathering in a small hotel in Woodridge? More than a geographical area, more than a complex of resorts, the Catskills was a major social institution in American Jewish life. Like many other people, I was shaped by it. What is this place, the Catskills?

What Are the Catskills?

Just under a hundred miles northwest from New York City lies a magic land, enveloped in a rich legacy and rampant mythology. Many called it the "Borscht Belt," this Jewish resort area in the Catskill Mountains that was the playground of Jews, who were mainly from metropolitan New York and of all classes and occupations, from the end of the last century to the 1970s. They went as guests to hotels, bungalow colonies, and camps, and as workers to eke out a living or work their way through college. They went to preserve cultural and religious affinities, escape the drudgery of the year's hard work, and find romance. In the Mountains, Jews of Eastern European descent could become Americanized while preserving much of their Jewishness. In the Catskill resorts, they could have a proper vacation like regular Americans, but they could do it in a very Jewish milieu. As the vacationers moved into the next generation and became more assimilated, they created less conspicuously Jewish environments, but Jewish environments nonetheless.

These hotels, colonies, and kuchalayns were not merely resorts where you stayed, but were miniature societies where people knew lots about each other and created intricate relationships in a neighborhood and family mentality that could not be found at an ordinary resort. These New York Jews created a whole resortland shaped by their urban culture. They imported their music, humor, vaudeville revue style, culinary customs, language, and worldviews. There are simply no other such creations of any resort area, much less an area so thoroughly dominated by one group. The Catskills was the ultimate version of a summer-resort-based minisociety, a collective enterprise woven with humor, food, entertainment, Yiddish culture, and a myriad of patchwork efforts that built a giant community.

Without consciously intending it, these people created an environment that would linger in memories long after the Catskills declined in the 1970s. Catskill culture was a unique experience of work and leisure of the first generations of twentieth-century American Jews. This reverberated in music, humor, and teenage coming-of-age dramas. Because Catskill culture wasa major facet of the Jewish experience, it also has influenced a larger, secular, cosmopolitan culture—at least on the East Coast.

Recent popular portrayals of the Catskills in film and prose include the Grossinger's mock-up from *Dirty Dancing* (filmed in North Carolina), literary recollections of the real Grossinger's, singles weekends at The Concord in the 1980s and 1990s, and memoirs of major celebrities. (At the second History of the Catskills Conference, Eileen Pollack pointed out that the kosher salt box on the dining room table in *Dirty Dancing* is shot so that the Hebrew letters are blurred—Jews will know it's a kosher salt box, but gentiles will not have to see the Hebrew letters in clear view.) These images do convey some of the Catskill atmosphere to many who knew and to a large number of those who never knew the area. But this focus fails to do justice to the ordinary guests and staff who populated the "Jewish Alps." While the large hotels were important, the heart of what we all called "the Mountains" was a hefty number of small- and medium-sized hotels laced with bungalow colonies. Strung through Ulster and Sullivan Counties, the Catskills are not even the "real" Ca;skill Mountains, but merely foothills to the legendary Rip Van Winkle topography.

The familiar Catskills are gone, with only handfuls of very large hotels remaining. Smaller ones burned down or were sold to Hasidic groups, redone as yoga ashrams and Zen meditation centers, converted to drug rehab programs, or just left to fall apart. Many bungalow colonies were divided up as summer condos, transformed into Hasidic enclaves, or abandoned. Yet, surprisingly, there are a good number operating as nonreligious colonies. The town streets—once vital with crowds of guests, workers, and locals who serviced the resorts—are fairly empty, lined with many vacant storefronts, and largely populated by Hasidim and unemployed people.

Studying the Catskills

This book's origins lie in a 1991 lunch at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in Cincinnati, where I shared Catskill stories with a friend who suggested there was grist for an ethnography. The idea seemed in-

trigning, but it took a personal jolt to move ahead—my mother died two months later, leaving me an orphan. Perhaps "orphan" is an odd term for a settled family man of forty-two with children of ages six and nine, but it certainly is apt—I was cast into a new look at the world where I was no longer the child of any living parents. My search for roots was also a search for the meaning of the Catskills; that formative aspect of my upbringing is also a fascinating slice of life for many others. My intent here is to present that Jewish cultural environment and its broader social context, while exploring my own roots in it.

In some way, I already had in mind an idea of preserving the Catskills. When my mother was still alive, I toyed with the idea of getting her to write *Sylvia's Catskill Cookbook*, a collection of her wonderful recipes, which had gotten out to too few people in the years she cooked in the Mountains. I realized that this project would not work. My mother was terrible at sharing recipes, leaving out by intention or accident key ingredients and by giving directions in such terms as "a bit of," "add just enough," and "you'll know when." Curiously, she had often complained about how my father's Hungarian mother and sisters would withhold proper instructions for key dishes, such as strudel, which required endlessly walking around several floured, cloth-covered tables to pull the filo-like dough evenly and micro-thin. Maybe she was getting even with the world for those slights, and I didn't want to get involved.

But in another way, I was not ready to really accept the importance of the Catskills in my life. I remember seeing *Resorts of.the Catskills*, edited by Alf Evers, Elizabeth Cromley, Betsy Blackmar and Nell Harns, in a bookstore in 1979. Though I looked it over for a few minutes, I didn't rush to the cash register with it as a prize. The Catskills raised a deep ambivalence in me—criticism of its problematic parts in my life and excitement over its personal and larger social significance. It would be a while—at my mother's death—till I could at least see that this ambivalence existed and talk openly about it. I have heard very similar ambivalence from many of the people presently studying the Catskills, as well as many people I have interviewed.

Between 1993 and 1994, I started committing to notes many memories of being in the Catskills, from birth through the first year of graduate school (1949-1971). I studied scholarly and popular writing and joined a small group of scholars and Catskill residents trying to organize a conference on the Catskills. I spoke to friends and colleagues about Catskill memories. Their ques-tions and connections helped me tap further personal memories.

My first round of interviewing took place between 1993 and 1995. Through word-of-mouth requests and an advertisement in the Boston weekly *Jewish Advocate,* I interviewed twenty-nine guests, workers, and hotel owners. A few were in their thirties, most in their fifties and sixties, a good number in their seventies, some in their eighties, and two in their nineties. They had spent time in the Mountains in all periods, the earliest in 1910. Some still visited the Catskills. A few had only begun going to the Mountains in the 1980s, though I was mainly looking for people who had at least begun their involvement by the early 1970s, the tail end of the vibrant life of the area. A local historian gave me two additional interviews, a legal scholar gave me another, and friends and colleagues in the Catskills Institute provided videotaped interviews of nine people's Catskill reminiscences. Some members of the Catskills Institute donated previously audio- and videotaped interviews and even conducted some new ones for me.

During 1995 and 1996, I began a new round of interviews. Some people I found from word of mouth; others contacted me after seeing articles about me in Brown University's *George Street Journal* and *Brown Alumni Magazine* (where I am a professor of sociology), the weekly *Rhode Island Jewish Herald,* and the main local newspaper, the *Providence Journal.* I located additional respondents from lectures I gave, from the annual "History of the Catskills" conference that I helped establish, and from related activities of the Catskills Institute that I helped organize following the 1995 conference. This second round, conducted from 1995 to 1997, provided 94 additional interviews, for a total of 126 interviews. In addition to the interviews, I received a large number of letters, anecdotes, and memorabilia from people who read the various newspaper articles. In particular, the *Providence Journal* article—reprinted in whole or part in the *Akron Beacon-Journal, Albany Times-Union, Poughkeepsie Journal,* and *Miami Herald*—resulted in 130 responses. Articles in the *New York Times, [New York] Jewish Week,* and *Middletown Times-Herald Record* brought more responses. Some responses were "second-hand," in that people who read an article then sent it to friends or relatives who independently wrote to me. I have not logged in these written responses individually, but there are at least 50 that contain usable information. So, I have interview and memoir material from 176 people.

I have additional material from archival sources, newspaper articles, and the growing number of books written about the Catskills. All extracts and details in this book that are not cited in the "Notes" section are from audio and video

interviews conducted by me, by my research assistants, and by the colleagues I mentioned; from letters prompted by newspaper articles; from written responses of persons too far away to interview; and from audiotapes, videotapes, and home movies provided by various people. Those I interviewed were very receptive to my knowledge and experience of the Catskills. Most were very pleased to hear about the project and to participate. People who had kept treasures brought out boxes of old menus, photographs, brochures, and memorabilia. They sought out my knowledge of the current state of "their" hotels and of general conditions in the Catskills.

I got to speak with these people in their homes, their offices, hospital waiting rooms, coffee houses, Catskill hotels, and my own office. One of the more novel interviews was when I went to Swansea (near Fall River, Massachusetts) on the invitation of a man who called me the week before, having remembered the *Providence Journal* article. He said fifteen members of his family were going to be at his house for an annual reunion, timed to coincide with a neighborhood clambake. The family circle usually spends several hours together before moving to the nearby park for the large community gathering. Since most of this man's relatives had been old Catskill guests (many at the same kuchalayn), it would be a novel way to get material. And it was, even containing its own resort-like entertainment—one man sat with a boom box on his lap, playing Allen Sherman's comic songs from "Hello Mother, Hello Father," while the rest sang along and cackled at the humor. Afterward; we walked over to the clasic New England clambake. Our table was one of about twenty tables at the large gathering, which was a clearly non-Jewish crowd. When I asked people about songs they remembered from the Catskills, they competed to see how well they remembered the words to old Jewish favorites. As one deep tenor belted out "*Schain Vi Di Livone*," neighbors passed us lobsters and clams steamed in seaweed.

The people I spoke to came from varied backgrounds. Their parents were cutters and needleworkers in the garment district, painting and building contractors, teachers, grocery store owners, newspaper reporters, restaurant workers dentists, doctors, pharmacists, professors, lawyers, kosher butchers, furniture store owners, coffee and cocoa business owners, dry cleaners, optometrists, unskilled laborers, wholesale jewelry dealers, patternmakers, auto mechanics, fish store owners, and so on. The second oldest person I talked with, ninety years old in 1993, had stayed several years in the Catskills, starting in 1910 at age eight. Her family would take the train from Boston to New York, then the

boat up the Hudson, and then a hotel bus picked them up. She had not been back since the 1920s, yet she responded to my ad in the newspaper. Why? Because she met her husband there and they're "still in love seventy years later." Others had not been back since the 1930s, but the experience was important enough to follow up on the ad and call me. This reaffirmed for me the place our Mountains have in so many people's hearts.

My respondents' fondness for Catskill memories enabled me to tap more into my own feelings. Through these Catskill veterans, I found shared memories, common occurrences, similar kinds of relationships. Interviews and excursions to the field then served as grist for further production of my personal narrative. My voice is that both of a voyager and a researcher, and it finds itself both separately and through the voices of others.

Just before my 1993 fieldtrip to the Catskills, I made a fieldtrip to Miami Beach. The Miami Beach trip provided further observations. Since some Catskill hotel owners bought or built beach resorts, many Mountain Rats worked the Miami Beach winter season and many guests frequented both locations. In the Catskill fieldtrip, I visited nearly all the resorts that my parents or I had worked in—thirteen sites, nine of which were abandoned or burned down, two were still operating as small hotels, one was converted to a drug rehabilitation center, and another transformed into a children's theater camp. I also visited other hotels, bungalow colonies, religious institutions, and town centers. I spoke with local librarians, local archivists, historians, and current residents. At the time of the first three "History of the Catskills" conferences in 1995, 1996, and 1997, I made further visits to sites around the Catskills. I made an additional fieldtrip to the Mountains in 1997 as well.

I admit that sometimes I can't tell how much of this search is mainly a personal journey and what part is a sociological and historical excursion into a significant portion of Jewish life. Perhaps that is part of the excitement, knowing that there is a thin boundary between these two elements. I do know that there is ample reason to explore this as a research topic—both because I understand its importance and because many people have affirmed that significance. Whether they are fellow sociologists, academics in different fields, or nonacademics, people who hear about my project have responded with great enthusiasm. The sociological tradition is full of valuable books that originated in the writers' personal involvement.

Alongside the journey through my family history, marked by the memories and recollections written here, there is another realm—my realization that

Catskill life made a deep impression on my career. Through observing the remarkable communities that were created, by grasping the differences between Catskills' appearance and reality, by watching the finagling, by experiencing the hustling, I gained a watchful eye. This contributed to making me a sociologist—a professional observer and interpreter of social life. Part of this sociological apprenticeship involved understanding impression management. To create the resort environment, Catskill owners and staff engaged in an enormous amount of impression management—as is required elsewhere (e.g., the theatre, the circus)—to make the ordinary seem glamorous, to make everyday experience magical. Indeed, a woman I interviewed said that the Mountains were "like a circus." I had the good fortune to spend more than two decades watching and acting in the backstage where the glamour and magic were created—by brochures that described all pools as "Olympic-sized" and menus filled with extravagant, often French, words ("roast prime ribs of beef au jus"). While larger hotels did have major entertainers and excellent facilities, smaller places claimed more than was true. They advertised their shows as "Broadway entertainment"—often this could be true only if they meant that the entertainers ate at Kaplan's Deli on Broadway in Monticello before the show. Many MCs introduced mediocre entertainers as "direct from Las Vegas," which we sarcastically rephrased as "drek [crap] from Las Vegas." Owners of many small resorts promised day camps filled with activities, which were always far less than the claim; likewise for "extensive" sports facilities, which often consisted of shuffleboard, one cracked tennis court, one handball court, and an unkempt softball diamond. At whatever level of resort, more was always pledged. Everyone worked to create images, including many of the guests who pretended to be more important than they were. One owner noted that a less-than-full hotel was deemed unattractive to guests, so if the dining room was not filled, tables would be removed to make it look filled. Similarly, staff and owners' cars would be moved to the front parking lot for visibility from the road.

Being in the Catskills also taught me about ambivalence, the contradictory feelings and experiences that people have for many elements of their lives. For many people, the Mountains provided a love-hate relationship: They were drawn back to it, yet they dislike it; they worked themselves too severely, yet were proud of being part of a community of workers. I knew about my own ambivalence toward the Mountains, and indeed that is what kept me from writing this book earlier. In the course of interviewing people, I found how com-

mon ambivalence is. The existence of countervailing emotions and relationships, I think, makes for very interesting communities. Not surprisingly, this theme comes up throughout the book.

With the backdrop of Catskill life pumping through my system, I return nearly a half-century after my birth to a White Lake hotel family to make sense of the endless stories and the many-textured legacy of this corner of the world.