

Can the Catskills last kosher resort be saved?

By URIEL HEILMAN
JTA news service

MONTICELLO, NY —For Yossi Zablocki, it was the phone call of a lifetime.

Last February, the manager at Kutsher's Country Club, the last kosher resort hotel in the Catskill Mountains, called him in a panic with news that owner Mark Kutsher was thinking of retiring and closing down the place.

Zablocki, 37, had spent his summers growing up at the famed resort in upstate New York, graduating from camper to lifeguard to gabbai and leader of High Holidays services. Suddenly he had an opportunity to realize a lifelong dream — and he jumped at it.

"He always dreamed of taking over Kutsher's," Zablocki's wife, Daniela, said between bites of egg salad in Kutsher's dining room. "He really does think of it as a second home. When the opportunity to take it over came up, he asked me, but I think it was a given this was not something I could say no to."

Now a criminal defense attorney for the New York Legal Aid Society and a general contractor living in Elizabeth, N.J., Zablocki saw the opportunity to run Kutsher's not just as a third job but as the fulfillment of a calling.

Within days, Zablocki was booking guests for Passover and laying plans for the summer high season — when his endeavor will undergo its real test. If his new programming and marketing approaches work, Zablocki may be able to restore Kutsher's lost sheen as a thriving retreat for kosher-observant Jews. If not enough summertime guests show up, the Catskills likely will lose its last kosher resort.

Half a century ago, Kutsher's was part of a thriving Catskills culture that served as a summertime haven for city Jews to stay cool, eat well, be entertained and revel in the company of landmen from near and far.

"In the past, these hotels opened the doors and guests just fell in from the sky," Zablocki said. "Everyone was coming to the Catskill hotels. They didn't have to sell themselves."

But the advent of air conditioning, the end of restricted hotels, and the assimilation and gentrification of American Jewry changed all that, turning many Jewish Catskills resorts into ghost towns. Over the past couple of decades the few remaining Jewish resorts in the region have shuttered their doors, been sold to non-Jewish owners or become Chasidic summer camps.

Zablocki is seizing Kutsher's status as the only kosher resort left in the mountains to draw new customers. His vision is to bring back guests to this relic of American Jewish life with a combination of new programming and aggressive marketing. His target audience is a younger, Modern Orthodox crowd that may not know the Borscht



Photos by URIEL HEILMAN
Yossi Zablocki, right, poses with Carla Kutsher, whose husband was the longtime owner/operator of the family's namesake resort.

Belt.

"I have someone calling every single yeshiva day school in the Northeast saying, 'Why don't you come up to Kutsher's instead of going to some roadside Best Western and bringing in your Torahs, kosher caterer, etc.?' Come here. We have everything," he said. "You don't have to bring food, siddurim or even Shabbos candles. You don't have to worry about electronic key cards or walking around without an eruv. Everything is taken care of."

In addition to indoor and outdoor swimming pools, an 18-hole championship golf course, a health club, a lake, boating, tennis, bocce ball, shuffleboard, children's activities, an eruv enclosure and, of course, lot and lots of food, Zablocki's "new Kutsher's" is booking entertainers like singer Neshama Carlebach, comedian Yisroel Campbell of the off-Broadway show "Circumcise Me," and the Orthodox rock band Soul Farm, as well as magicians and entertainers for kids.

Zablocki also is updating the resort: He has added a hot tub to the indoor pool, brought in spa treatments and fixed up the children's playground.

Yet in many ways, walking around Kutsher's on a summer weekend is like traveling back in time. Gray-haired, tuxedoed waiters still whisk around dishes of chopped liver, schav, pierogi and, of course, cold borscht soup. There's still a cosmetics shop in the lobby called Justine's Makeup Counter, an automat and vending machines that date back to the 1950s. And Jackie Horner, who served as the inspiration for the hit 1987 film Dirty Dancing, is still leading dance classes, exercise routines and "Bingo for Bucks."

Except Jackie is now in her 70s, the old chairlifts on the ski hill haven't worked in years and the grand stage in the cavernous Stardust Room is dark except on weekends.

But dozens of elderly Jews from Florida still flock here every summer to take up their usual places in the dining room, the kitchen is open, tickets are on sale for the High Holidays and next Passover, and comedians from the city are

making the two-hour drive up from New York to coax laughs out of overfed Jews. The Catskills culture lives.

It's something you can't take for granted, Zablocki warns. Kutsher's almost didn't open at all this year.

"Once this era is gone, the Borscht Belt will be completely forgotten," said Mickey Montal, who runs the kitchen at Kutsher's. "You can go to a Sheraton anytime. We want to preserve the kosher hotel and the nostalgia of the area. It's an intricate part of Jewish life in America. People that come here enjoy it immensely."

But more guests must materialize for Zablocki to make back the money he invested to open the hotel and lease it from the Kutsher family.

The hotel has 250 operational rooms; Zablocki figures he needs an average of 150 of them occupied on summer weekends — about half that midweek — to break even.

Zablocki says he has lost about 30 pounds since taking control of the hotel.

"I've stopped eating. I used to come here for the food, but I can't enjoy a meal. I'm constantly doing everything," he said. "There's definitely much more to running the hotel than I initially thought."

If anyone can do it, Zablocki can, his sister says.

"Yossi's a bulldozer," Chana Zablocki told JTA. "When another brother of ours had a brain tumor everybody said was inoperable, Yossi was the one who got on the phone and found a surgeon in Arizona who had done 200 of these surgeries. And today, thank God, our brother is married and healthy."

Ultimately, success or failure will hinge on whether the American Jews of today are interested in what Kutsher's has to offer.

"Ninety-nine percent of the people that come here are coming to have a version of the Catskills hotel experience: as much food as you can eat, entertainment, shows. We're figuring out how to recapture and capitalize on that," Zablocki said.

"We're not reinventing the wheel. People should have a nostalgic feeling when they come here. We're keeping this as a Catskills-style resort."

Uriel Heilman was a guest of Kutsher's Country Club. To view a slide show of Kutsher's, go to www.jta.org.



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