



6. ETHER

MILTON BLACKSTONE TRANSFORMED GROSSINGER'S from reality to fantasy in a short time. By the 1950s, just a few years into his tenure as the resort's PR man, it had become a place where dreams thrived because everything was blown out of proportion. It was a time when weekday widows – as they were known – would spend the days dancing the Rumba with young and athletic dance instructors while their husbands worked in the city. Some of these dances continued right into the women's hotel rooms for an adulterous rendezvous. These dalliances served as the perfect grist for Eleanor Bergstein's *Dirty Dancing* script, which was based on her experiences at Grossinger's.

During the Blackstone era, Grossinger's was a place where the most decadent aspirations were served up with reckless abandon. Everything from food to architecture was intentionally designed to be ethereal. The late Joel Siegel said that the real secret behind the Jewish cuisine at Grossinger's was that it wasn't "food people ate, it [was] food that people dreamt of eating." The G's pool and skating rink were designed by Morris Lapidus – a mid-century architect known as the "architect of make-believe" and the "only man to please both James Bond and thousands of homosexuals." Soaring above the Lapidus-designed indoor pool were sputnik-like orbs of brass emblazoned with incandescent stars. And if the sky wasn't enough, guests could imagine themselves in a submarine (by way of two sets of stairs going to the underground, where a glass viewing window looked out into the vast expanse of the pool). Within a few steps of the window, on the racks of the Mon Ami shop, pulp romance novels stood alongside souvenir tchotchkes.

Sputnik, Indoor Pool



The titles of the novels that writer Morris Freedman saw there during his magazine assignment in 1954 hinted at the sultry undercurrent – Naked in the Dark, Four Lost Ladies, and Darling, I Hate You.

Soon after I returned from my winter trip to the G, I sat down with Richard Grossinger at his house to talk about his times at the resort. Richard is a tall, cerebral man with locks of gray curly hair and a sense of contemplative solitude in him. He introduced me to his beautiful wife, Lindy, and then took me to his upstairs deck, where we had a panoramic view of the San Francisco Bay.

“Grossinger’s was bizarre because it was so blown up,” he confided. “It was a peek into the mentality of that era.” Richard, who wrote more than one book about his own fractured relationship with the place, helped me understand the things that I never had the chance to experience myself. He described the pervasive smell of coconut, suntan lotion, clouds of lingering cigarette smoke, challahs and blintzes, milkshakes, and mysterious mavens who circulated among the hallways. But he also talked about its dark side. When Canadian Novelist Mordecai Richler said that Grossinger’s was “Disneyland with knishes,” it was something that perhaps spoke more truth than was intended. If one looked closely enough, there were wires behind the puppetry and plaster forming the landscape of imagination.

Grossinger’s “is pretext, hoax, evidence tampering, and fake legends,” Richard wrote in *Out of Babylon*. “At first glance, it is an epic, a Jewish-American original. At second glance it is banal, pure advertising copy. It is also a sphinx.”

Reading Richard describe his ultimate disenchantment with the Grossinger’s façade made me think of that moment in the 1920s, when Jennie first decided to emulate the Laurel-in-the-Pines, an augmentation of reality that was merely dipping toes into the water of myth-making. By 1927, Milton Blackstone had arrived as a guest. Blackstone first came to Grossinger’s with a sports injury under doctor’s

orders, but within a few years, the aspiring writer and basketball player realized he could instead write history at the G.

Blackstone himself was part illusion, as were scores of famous Jews who came to Grossinger’s under assumed names. His name was an Americanized pseudonym (Blackstone’s last name was really Schwartzstein; Eddie Cantor’s was Edward Iskowitz; and George Gershwin’s was Jacob Gershowitz). Richard’s own stepfather was Reuben Turetsky before he became Bob Towers. Towers told Richard’s son that a “man couldn’t do business in those days with a name like Turetsky.”

As the master craftsman of the Grossinger myth, Blackstone lived the life of the resort’s PR rainmaker. When Malke – who despised violence of any kind – was caught listening to the boxing match of Barney Ross (the first sports star to help propel the G into the national consciousness), she confidently reasoned: “I am listening, not for the fighting, but for the victory of a man who must fight that his people may be left in peace. That kind of fighting I believe in.” It was 1933, and anti-Semitism was at a boiling point; Hitler had come to power. Blackstone overheard Malke’s line and knew good PR material when he heard it. The quote from Malke was one among a legion of taglines that he used to sell the idea of Grossingers to Jewish America, and he had chosen an ideal time to use them. This hotel had become the Promised Land for scores of refugees from Nazi Germany. The bellman Ed Lerner said that glimpses of concentration camp tattoos were a frequent occurrence at Grossingers in the 1950s.

Blackstone turned Grossinger’s into a literal fiefdom by using political connections to get a post office designated at the resort (zip code 12734). After that deed was complete, he knew Grossinger, NY would appear in journalists’ datelines from coast to coast. He took Eddie Fisher out to the G when Fisher was a wide-eyed young singer and set the stage for Eddie to be “discovered” by





Gehenna, Indoor Pool

Eddie Cantor at the Grossinger Playhouse. He told young workers to wildly scream when Eddie finished his debut schtick with Cantor. In 1948, he convinced Jennie to put in an airport, and he essentially invented the "singles weekend."

As Grossinger's matured into a full-fledged institution with profits, Blackstone packaged the entire Grossinger odyssey for the mass media and made sure that Jennie herself had become a woman who was admired by an entire nation. In a 1954 episode of "This is Your Life," Ralph Edwards surprised Jennie Grossinger in front of a television audience of millions. As Edwards narrated the meteoric rise of the Grossinger's Resort from a quaint Jewish boarding house in the mountains, Blackstone stoically smiled in the background, knowing the publicity that he was generating. On rainy days, they'd often play (and replay) the episode on a television in the lobby – quintessential Blackstone.

The same year as Jennie's "This is Your Life" appearance, her face was distributed to the kitchen tables of housewives across the country when the General Baking Company of Brooklyn purchased the rights to mass-produce and sell Grossinger's Rye bread. Jennie appeared on the wrapper with a lithograph of a trademark Grossinger Catskills Tudor building in the background.

"The fun and fresh air people get here at Grossinger's really gives them an appetite," said a smiling Jennie Grossinger on one particular postcard. "They love all of our food... and a particular favorite is our Grossinger's Rye and Pumpernickel Bread. Now you can get this same hearty, flavorful bread at your favorite food store. Try a loaf. I'm sure you'll love it." Joyce Antler wrote in her history of Jewish motherhood, "Her smiling face on every mass-produced wrapper, exuding warmth and domestic cheer, Jennie became the Jewish mother personified, the 'Jewish Betty Crocker.'"