HEIDEN HOTEL

by Shirley Jacoby Paris

AMONG THE MOST PLEASANT MEMORIES OF MY CHILDHOOD were the summer vacations spent at the Heiden Hotel in South Fallsburg, up in Sullivan County, New York. The cumulative memory of those times spent in the pine tree park, on the sunny, sloping lawns, wading in the cold, gravelly Neversink River, dancing under the revolving mirrored ball in the casino, singing onstage in a little-girl squeak, walking through flowers while "dressed up" in my organdy party frock topped by long, dark curls--well, it's like a perfume of the spirit, the evocation of a heart song. I can hear the sound of the gypsy carnival and the tambourine, smell the chicken coop and the fragrance of the flowers watered at twilight, see the quiet, brilliant glisten of the swimming pool after lunch, with no one about but an eager little girl who loved to have the place all to herself. It was, in a sense, my fairyland come true.

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I am Shirley from the Bronx. When I was a little girl we, the Jacobys, lived on Wythe Place, west of the Concourse near 170th Street. Summers we went to "the country." For three weeks! Mom packed for days--valises and the steamer trunk hauled up from the basement by the "super," Mr. Sizzavic. Her lovely evening clothes went into the trunk: long black lace, short flowered silk, flowing chiffon scarves, evening purses, silk opera pumps. And, of course, my organdy party dresses with satin sashes, my bathing suits, and the ubiquitous curling iron. Oh, that curling iron! I had to have long corkscrew curls to be properly "dressed up" in the evenings. The trunk was shipped ahead, a day or two before we left.

The morning arrived, enveloped in mid-July heat. We waited impatiently for the hack while Mom scurried around, making sure windows were locked and lights were out. Pop hovered nervously in the background somewhere.

The doorbell rang. My brother, Adolph, and I dashed to open it, and there was the chauffeur, so eagerly anticipated. He carried our valises downstairs and stacked them on top of the car, securing them with heavy rope, together with those of the Koplins. Dr. Koplin, our dentist, lived in the building; his daughter, Irene, was my best friend. They were going to a bungalow near Monticello.

The hack was one of those touring cars with wire-spoke wheels and running boards, high seats with grooved black leather upholstery, and plenty of room for kids to sit on laps. Mommas and kids, pocketbooks and picnic lunches, all in a heap.

But Adolph, prone to carsickness, didn't ride with us. Alone, he traveled on the rickety New York, Ontario and Western Railroad from Weehawken, reached by ferry from 42d Street and Hudson River. Once, all of us had journeyed by this smoky, odorous route. I can still smell it and feel the soot in my eyes. Soot even seeped into the sandwiches (sliced egg on fresh-cut pumpernickel). I can still hear the plaintive cry of the, train whistle.

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The trip took six hours on old Route 17. My first memories are of Suffern and railroad tracks. A little
farther, the highway paralleled the tracks on the right, with Tuxedo Park to the left, its aristocratic houses ascending the mountain. We looked out the window at the train chugging along, its huge puffs of cindery smoke smudging the landscape. Near Middletown we stopped for a picnic on a grassy field.

Middletown was the Gordian knot finally eliminated by the Thruway. Tight-lipped streets, awry and overwhelmed by traffic that clogged them every summer. It took an hour to get through the town, now normally traversed in minutes.

As we approached the Shawangunk Range, the road became steeper and narrower. Before we knew it, we were snaking along the awesome sidewinder course up into the Wurtsboro Hills, considered quite dangerous, especially when it rained. Cars had been known to tumble into the valley below. However, the view was magnificent: a variegated pattern of flat farmland and pastures below, enframed by the undulating green of the mountains.

Physically uncomfortable as the long trip was, it holds, in retrospect, infinitely more savor than the insulated, air-conditioned bus ride of recent years, just two hours via the Thruway at a mile a minute. Perhaps the very slowness of the earlier trips allowed us to encompass more, made it easier to pause and wander for a short while along white birches, to observe the sun’s changing gradations of pink, gold, and rose-orange as we journeyed from morning till late afternoon.

Billboards proliferated towards Monticello, proclaiming good times in the "Borscht Belt." Soon we deposited our neighbors at their bungalow and continued on to collect Adolph at the, South Fallsburg railroad depot, that grimy old wooden relic at the foot of the hill preceding Fallsburg. On the way we passed the Thompsonville Road.

The drive to Heiden's was a mile and a half back towards Monticello, then southeast for another mile and a half. There were four hotels on this spur before you reached the hamlet of Thompsonville with its general store and three or four ramshackle cabins huddled under luxuriant trees. The hotels were Heiden's, Ratner's (the now-famous Raleigh), Schenk's Paramount, and the Commodore, which overlooked the icy, rapid Kiamesha Creek. Between Ratner's and Schenk's was an obscure, overgrown cutoff leading westward about a mile to Kiamesha, used occasionally by horseback riders and strollers.

The Thompsonville Road was unpaved, being merely a wide, reddish dirt path bordered by goldenrod and other wildflowers. Whenever a car rattled by, a cloud of red dust tailgated, billowing up through the trees. After a rainstorm muddy potholes lay in wait for unwary wheels.

Leaving the depot, we drove through the bustling main street of South Fallsburg, then up an incline on the outskirts of the village towards the first kohk-aleyn (literally "cook yourself" or "do your own cooking"). The kohk-aleyn was a boardinghouse with communal kitchen where boarders did, indeed, do their own cooking, storing perishables in the communal icebox. The entertainment was of one's own devising, like that by the dark-eyed, vivacious girl who wandered over to Heiden's from Altman's Cottages afternoons to play the piano in our casino, engraving "Malaguena" on my musical consciousness. She performed it once during "Amateur Night," much to the enjoyment of the guests. Of course, what she really had in mind was meeting young men who visited or worked there--future doctors, lawyers, or businessmen, like the three sandy-haired sons of a family that owned a thriving carpet concern.

Past algae-filled Pleasure Lake, in the middle of which was anchored a rowboat, a solitary fisherman dozing in it, the highway meandered, rose up, then suddenly veered downwards into the Thompsonville spur. Presently, Altman's came into view, then, at last, the verdant, sloping pasture of Heiden's, where a
few cows grazed placidly. At the base of its escarpment ran the shallow tributary between Pleasure Lake and Neversink River. Halfway down, a gravel path rambled towards the grassy terrace at Heiden's pool, reputedly the biggest in the mountains. On the terrace, a row of roughly hewn, yellow wooden lockers faced a grove of stately trees on the other side of the pool.

There, our beloved Heiden's--cream stucco with brown-pillared porches. As we turned into the red dirt driveway, gravel, dust, and chickens flew about, heralding our arrival, as did the grinding screech of brakes. Everyone and everything tumbled out, and one or two young bellhops appeared and lugged our valises into the lobby. White-haired, gracious Mr. Heiden greeted us at the screen-doored entrance and escorted us inside, where we registered, simultaneously exchanging greetings with familiar guests and staff.

The registration desk was to the right of the entrance, next to the children's dining room, where late in the evening, after the show, tea or coffee and cake were served. Guests played cards there, too.

In front of the lobby windows were small writing desks containing cubbyholes filled with stationery, picture postcards, and scratchy pens, the old-fashioned steel point kind that we dipped into an inkwell. On rainy days these desks were continuously occupied, correspondence flowing home through a metal-rimmed slot in the registration desk.

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Years ago I remembered aspects of the, visits that were concerned with the physical properties of the hotel and its grounds. More recently I am reminded of the Heiden family and how they were integrated into the daily life of the guests as though they were all part of the same family. Of course, most of the hotels in "the mountains" started this way; one has only to read the history of the area and its resorts. But I speak only of the Heidens because I grew up knowing only them, from about the age of five through my high school years.

In those days we were really guests of the hotel--not anonymously as today, when "guest" is a euphemism for a stranger renting a room via the computer system. No, we were personal guests of the Heidens; the parents and their children greeted us as if we were part of their own family, joined us in the dining room and in the casino, played tennis and Ping-Pong with us, served us tea and cake afternoons and evenings, and then sat with us and chatted about life with its problems and pleasures.

Even the social staff was like family. A group of entertainers, hired for the season, produced plays and skits, songs and dances, jokes and games--not only evenings but also during the day, on the lawns, while guests sunbathed or swam, or if it rained, in the lobby and on the porches, and sometimes in the casino, where they danced with as well as for us.

Each hotel had its own style, its own pace, its individual menu. One could distinguish among them, each unique in that it took on the character of the family that owned it and that of the guests who came year after year, usually at the same time. You could run into your summer friends regularly. Almost literally, it was akin to the home away from home. It emanated the enrichment of personal contact with those with whom we shared grass fragrance and pine tree pungency, chicken soup and apple strudel, walks through flower beds and forest glades, and homey talks and walks on wooden porches while listening to raindrops dripping on damp earth and shingled roof, weaving and re-weavung the threads of our lives, binding us each to the other, to the time and the place, with our hearts and minds and words almost inchoate, often punctuated by gestures indigenous, I think, to Mediterraneans.
Heiden's, unlike the other hotels, was somewhat like a farm--at least in regard to the keeping of animals that guests, particularly children, were encouraged to touch. We visited the chicken coop, adjacent to the sandbox, smelled the acrid odor peculiar to chickens, and sometimes picked up an egg gingerly from its warm nest. Occasionally we were given dried corn to toss.

My most vivid memory is that of watching the farmhand milk the cow, out back just below the steps that led up to the kitchen's screen door. He pulled on the teats while the bubbly liquid hit the metal pail like a strong stream from a faucet. The tall, lanky farm hand smiled shyly as we small people watched in awe.

Beyond the sunny east lawn the terrain abruptly dropped towards the Neversink, overgrown with grass, weeds, sunflowers, and a few meager berry patches. A rough path snaked tortuously down to the tree-shaded stream, where we waded in shallows, listened while birds chirped and trilled to the counterpoint of water rushing over sharp rocks.

Alongside the path out back were huckleberry bushes. Once in a while we youngsters were given small pails so we could pick the berries, and in later years I would recall these excursions in an unpublished poem:

I'd followed the road downwards in the trembling quiet of the midday sun, And dry gravel crackled beneath my step, louder than the voices left behind.

A sparrow flew by and shaded briefly my sight, While a grasshopper bounded away, And a green garter writhed through the grass, And bushes laden with berries appeared at my sides, obscuring the broad sloping lawns.

The berries we picked were prepared for the dairy lunch. They were customarily served with sour cream or heavy sweet cream, always fresh, poured from pewter-toned pots. After lunch I'd clamber upstairs for my bathing suit, then go down to the pool.

We youngsters were also treated to rides on the tame horses that were kept in open stables adjacent to the barn. My first horseback ride was an experience that went far beyond the time when I was about five or six and a pony was brought into Wythe Place. At Heiden's that was no pony but a full-grown horse--high, dark-brown, and with a long, softly swishing tail. The smell of the horse wasn't too offensive, not like the poor old creatures that pulled the vegetable and flower carts throughout the streets of New York.

Once we were all mounted, the groom /leader and five kids, out we sauntered onto the red dirt road, which muffled the sound of four and twenty hooves clomping down towards Thompsonville Road, soon turning into the Kiamesha Road. It was a very slow and wobbly ride, most uncomfortable; I hadn't yet learned to post. No, I certainly didn't sit the horse like a Scythian, or like William S. Hart of the western films of yesteryear. I was just a little girl, bumping along on her first ride into the unknown beyond, on the great brown steed, scared she might fall off or be thrown, perhaps by what would turn out to be a bucking bronco.

On the other side of the park were cottages, wooden three-story frame houses with covered porches. Nearby was the handball court, and on the edge of the woods was the concrete tennis court fenced with chicken wire framed in green-painted wood. Herbie Heiden shone here, being proficient at handball and tennis. Herbie had the dark eyes and the shyness of a fawn. His young nephew Eugene resembled him,
Eugene, my first admirer, who kissed my hand while I sat on a swing in the sun.

Sometimes Pop would walk with me Sunday mornings, just as we used to walk over the old aqueduct bridge spanning the Harlem River, down a long flight of steps to Highbridge Park, where he read the Sunday papers while I roller-skated on the macadam. At Heiden's, after breakfast in the small dining room, we would amble down the dusty road till we came to a half-hidden narrow opening in the low cliff at the curve, and in we would step.

The branches almost touched one's head. Even at my young height I felt like stooping, feeling this way even as I think of it. We brushed the branches aside as we strolled. Occasionally we would pass a cottage in a mottled, sunlit clearing—I recall an old picket fence in the vicinity—then continue slowly, as though in an infinite maze, large green leaves gently brushing our arms and faces, firmly reminding us we were trespassing on their turf. We couldn’t even see the sky until, finally, we came out into a meadow, and there was the tiny hamlet of Kaimesha, where we climbed a few stone steps into a dimly lit, cramped grocery store.

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The gray wooden porch of the Heiden Hotel, pillared and roofed like a cloister, extended around the building except in back. We rested there on cane-backed rockers or wooden railings, with fragrant flower baskets suspended overhead. Rocking there in the shade, or even on wet days when it was crowded, we felt at peace in the country. The word "country" had only one connotation for me as a child: the Catskills, redolent of pine and clover, grass and flowers everywhere—a gan eden (paradise, Garden of Eden) we visited in the summer.

I particularly remember the clover, white or purple and fragrant, with bees buzzing among its bulbous heads, hovering among green stems, stalks, blades. One time I waited till the bees buzzed off, then picked a few flowers and brought them to the room to be put in a glass of water on the dresser near the window. I could then enjoy the fragrance, savoring the sensation of the lawn right there in the twilight as I dressed for dinner.

Dining was simple but generous, announced by a cowbell clanged vigorously by a white-jacketed busboy striding through the grounds. The dining room, on Shabbas, sparkled with white-on-white linen, shining porcelain and goblets, newly polished silver, and burnished, aromatic challah in the center of every table, salad and grapefruit or melon set at each place. Fruit was followed by chopped liver, chicken soup with noodles (or matzo balls or mandeln), roast or boiled chicken with roast potatoes, and string beans, tsimmes (carrots and prunes) or compote, seltzer, and, for dessert, sponge cake with tea and lemon or demitasse.

Afterwards the glass-paneled dining-room doors were closed, and the girls remained to help the staff prepare for the next repast. Even in their finery! This was how the marriage mart operated in those years. After all, how better to get acquainted with that nice young future doctor or lawyer or dentist (busboy) than by engaging in such domestic activity together?

Once the work was done, they would join in the evening’s entertainment. Curving to the right, the porch led into the casino, then out onto a wider porch, there, Ping Pong tables, green-painted wood with white borders, were surrounded by all audience of guests and busboys, applauding Herbie Heiden as he won game after game. I recall him, too, energetically dusting rosin on the casino floor shortly before dancing commenced, then switching on the mirror-faceted, half-globe suspended in the center of the ceiling, upon which blue, red, and yellow spotlights were trained as music filled the ballroom, sprinkling the
dancers with multi-colored confetti as it slowly revolved.

Opposite the casino entrance was the bandstand, where more college boys earned their way through school, tootling clarinets and saxophones, riffling drums, and banging cymbals. To the right, the concession: card and pool tables, the bar, the candy and cigarette counter, and, in later years, a jukebox, thanks to which I discovered Artie Shaw and "Begin the Beguine."

The resident social staff put on skits, revues, and game nights. They would toomel (create a tumult, keep things lively) and tell jokes; once a week, they would organize a kiddie show: And there I am, liddle Shoiley wit' de coils:

WAWK

ing? I

evah see a dweam did--
you Well,

Did

TAWK

ing? I

evah hear a dweam did--
you Well,

Did

Others tap-danced, did "elocution" or acrobatics, and mimicked movie stars.

Then there were the evening walks. Pansies, red geraniums, and other velvety blossoms grew along the stuccoed porch walls and the small, path-bisected lawn below where we strolled, dressed up, Mom in her short evening gowns in midweek, and on Friday--Shabbas--her full-length black lace adorned with a white-gold lorgnette and chain. After dinner the Thompsonville Road was popular with guests from neighboring hotels as well as Heiden's, light emanating from the moon or an occasional pair of headlights.

Strolling leisurely, we would find ourselves in the cool, fragrant pine tree park, which has such a special place in my memory.

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The dark, mystical green mountain and forest has been like a melodious murmuring in my life since childhood. Probably it originated in the trees and lawns in our streets and in visits to parks, but it became deeply engraved when we went to the country. I was then surrounded by trees and foliage exhibiting myriad shades of green--from emerald to jade, deep to bright, with surfaces glossy to matte, in long
spikes of pine branches, in large hand-shaped oak leaves, in light, wavy grass blades.

It was twilight as we entered the pine tree park--relatively small, being less than an acre, but a cosmos in itself. We were immersed at once in cool, foliated silence. The narrow cement walk led to a circular fountain, softly splashing, a popular site for photographs. Scattered among trees and bushes were benches where you could sit quietly, listening to the pine cones drop onto the forest-like floor.

Picture-taking in the park was often done by an itinerant photographer who employed an old-fashioned box camera mounted on a tripod, with a black cloth to cover his head. He'd did a brisk trade when guests were dressed up, success exuding its sweet aroma, even through a lens. The photos, developed on the spot, were mounted in stiff cardboard or in small round metal frames to be worn as cameos, which soon darkened, becoming as ephemeral as the memories they evoked.

One summer a gypsy carnival took place in the park: pine trees and bushes strung with colored lanterns, almost everyone in gypsy costume. Pop brought my tambourine when he came for the weekend, and the counselor liked it so much she appropriated it for most of the evening. The carnival was the highlight of that summer, the entire staff having arranged the entertainment and dancing, complete with wandering violinist and accordionist, and the campfire that climaxed the festivities.

The campfire took place about nine or ten o'clock on the sloping lawn beyond the casino, where the cows grazed during the day, where the myriad stars shown at night. There were actually several fires in order to accommodate all the guests. The Heiden sons and the counselors were in charge; they built the fires, Boy Scout fashion, and supplied everyone with long, slender sticks. Boxes of marshmallows and small frankfurters were passed around. After everyone had their food ready for toasting, the signal was given--a whistle, I think--and all the sticks pointed into the fires. The aroma of the marshmallows and franks, the burning wood, the dewy grass, and the pine trees and flowers--all mingled in the ambrosial night air under the stars.

We sang afterwards, accompanied by a garmushkiah (a concertina or accordion), and probably other band instruments. Wonderingly, I would gaze up at the stars--just above, almost within reach, so close and so large and so many. Even then I had a sense of infinity, of eternity... leading me, decades later, to a deep--if amateur--interest in pulsars, quasars, quarks, and the Doppler effect, inspiring me to read relevant literature by Einstein and Hawking, to follow avidly the adventures of Voyager. The concept of limitless space and time grasps me, even to the extent of making me wish I were young enough to engage in sky-diving, in order to be within the essence of space.

Midsummer's gan eden had to end. Reluctantly, we returned to Wythe Place in the Bronx, back the way we had come, but faster, since it was all downhill. When we returned home, it was as though we had been away for a long time. I had to re-acquaint myself with home and its routine, with its here and now quality, with preparations for the start of school, with plain food for dinner. Once again, we ate at a small table in the kitchen, wearing everyday plain garments, with cake reserved for Friday evening dessert while the Shabbas candles flickered. Our time in the country was now only a memory of the past summer, and a possibility for the next.

One of the strongest threads binding me to my childhood was surely woven there at the Heiden Hotel, giving me a sense of the importance of the personal, human quality that is the essence of the civilization in which people know who and what they are, in which they are aware of their values individually, but clinging to each other and simultaneously to themselves, not feeling the need to fly around to many different places or to experience it continually for thrills. Alienation didn't exist for us--we knew whence we came, where we were, and where we were going.
It was, paradoxically, just in such surroundings of sameness that we, the children, developed as individuals. We didn't have the distractions, as we matured, of constantly being compelled to adjust to strange environments, to the ever-new. There was time to ruminate, to absorb, to see in the same, in the relatively unchanging, so many differences—the various facets unfolding and revealing themselves as we developed and sought greater subtleties and nuances.

In the intuitive way our parents, without formal knowledge of psychology, knew the value of such a stable foundation of the familiar, and they provided it as a matter of course. The family setting, away from home as well as in it, contributed enormously to our development from childhood to adolescence, thence to adulthood, with roots tenaciously sunk and nurtured in substance. It was, and is, this rooted-ness upon which our characters and personalities blossomed with strength.

A deep debt of gratitude, then, to the Heidens—and to my parents—for having provided those wonderful summer vacations. They supplied nourishment that has sustained me through the proverbial lean years, and from which emerged my mature vision of both the inner and outer worlds of my milieu.

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