

Survivor, Entrepreneur, Father

Harry Hirsch



Harry Hirsch sits at the center, surrounded by family. Back row (l. to r.): Joe, Evan, Jonathan, Larry. Front Row: Amy, Abbie, Miriam, Sophie.

Susan: What year were you born?

Harry: 1923

Susan: What city?

Harry: Kucowo, a small village in eastern Poland, near Lodz. I was the youngest of six children. We lived on a 7-acre farm. My father ran a small general store.

Susan: When were you taken away to Auschwitz?

Harry: When I was 16 years old. The Germans marched into Poland on September 1, 1939. One year later

they took me and my brother, Josef.

Susan: When were you liberated?

Harry: When the Russians liberated Poland in 1945. [By then the Nazis had killed three of his brothers and one sister.]

Susan: Did you remain in Poland?

Harry: For a while, but I did not like the way the Russians ruled Poland. So, I moved to Munich, Germany.

Susan: When did you meet your wife, Sophie?

Harry: In 1946. In a German depor-

Harry Hirsch is a true survivor.

He survived the concentration camps of Auschwitz – the numbered tattoo still visible on his 85-year-old forearm.

He went from being a carpenter in Philadelphia to owning a chicken farm in Corbin City to being one of the largest property owners in the City of Cape May. Among the Hirsch holdings: The Montreal Hotel on Beach Avenue and City Centre Mall on the Washington Street Mall. He is a man who believes in “coincidence.” But it would seem, to someone who has known him for a long time, that his greatest achievement has nothing whatsoever to do with coincidence. He is revered by his family, most specifically his sons, Larry and Joey. Occasionally, Larry added a few anecdotes of his own to this interview.

tation camp. It was a coincidence.

Susan: What did you do in Munich?

Harry: I bought a butcher shop from a man who used to be an SS [Schutzstaffel – German for Protective Squadron] officer in the Nazi army.

Susan: An SS officer?

Harry: Yeah. He was a very nice man. Vanderholt was his name, I think.

Susan: How long did you run the butcher shop?

Harry: Four years. My wife and I left for America. Mr. Vanderholt took



Sophie and Harry in the early days

back the business. We became very close. I took the family to visit him and his family in 1972.

Larry: The man was well into his 60s at the time and when he saw my parents, it was as though his children had come home. Here is someone one who is technically your enemy who welcomes us like family.

Susan: Why did you come to the U.S. and when?

Harry: My wife had a brother living in Philadelphia and I had a first cousin in New York. Sophie did not want to have children in Europe. We came to Philadelphia in 1951. Larry was born in 1952.

Susan: What kind of work did you do when you got here?

Harry: They taught me carpentry in the concentration camp. When I came to this country I got a job in the Strawberry Mansion section of Philadelphia building storefronts for 75 cents an hour. We had an apartment there, but it was not the country, which is what I was used to. We did not speak English, but people were very nice to us and eventually we learned.

Susan: What happened next?

Harry: In 1953 I bought a chicken farm in Corbin City, outside of Tuckahoe. I did this with the help of the Jewish Joint Distribution Organization, [which helped in placing Holocaust survivors, many of which were, like Harry, farmers back in Europe, and were placed in the Vineland area.]

Susan: How long did you own that?

Harry: I owned it for eight years. My youngest son Joey was born in 1959.

Susan: What did you do then?

Harry: While I owned the chicken farm, I started developing an egg and chicken route. I would go door to door selling eggs and chickens. Then I started wholesaling to restaurants and hotels in Wildwood and Ocean City. I bought a warehouse in Tuckahoe for that purpose. I operated out of it for three or four years. Then, in 1964, we moved [the business] to Wildwood to a converted food market on 17th and New York Avenue. I was a wholesale distributor for chickens, eggs, bacon, turkeys and French fries – a restaurant-hotel food supply center.

Susan: What was it called?

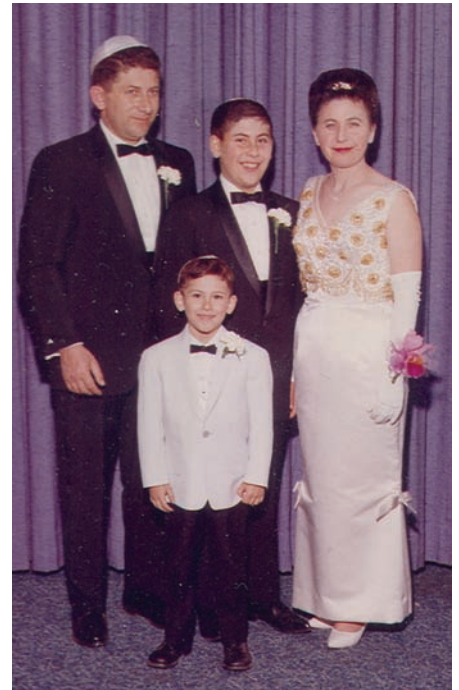
Harry: Harry's Eggs and Poultry.

Susan: Simple and straight to the point. Did your sons work with you?

Harry: Yes, well, Joey was only seven, but Larry was 14 and would help out. When Larry was 12 years old, I put him on the truck with a driver once a week, when I had to go to Philadelphia. He knew all the Wildwood stops and would tell the driver where to go.

Larry: What about the time you forgot about me?

Harry: Oh yeah. [He smiles and



Harry, Joey (in front), Larry and Sophie

waves Larry off with his hand.]

Larry: When I was a kid, my father would take me to Wildwood once a week. He would give me dollar and drop me off and would say, "Meet me at 2 o'clock at such and such a restaurant." Tell her what happened?

Harry: Oh well. I got home one night and my wife said, "Where's Larry?" And I said, "Oh he's out playing somewhere."

Larry: It took him four hours to remember that he left me back in Wildwood. It got late and I called home. By that time he was already back in Tuckahoe. So my mother called him into the house and said, "Are you missing anybody?" But we had such nice customers. The people who owned the restaurant sat me down. Made me a hamburger and watched out for me until my dad came.

Susan: Well, we're up to 1964 and you still haven't told me how you ended up in Cape May.

Harry: Ah. It was a coincidence. It was in 1963. One of my customers was a man named Sid Hess. He was a butcher at the Avalon Market. He



was also Jewish, and there weren't so many Jews down that way, so we became good friends. One day he told me about a bar that was just built in Cape May. He wanted to buy but didn't have the money. So he asked me if I would buy it and he would run it. So, I went down to Cape May and bought it.

Larry: Without telling my mother. Then realized he had to go home and tell her that he bought a bar.

Harry: No. I didn't tell her. When I got home I told her I bought a bar in Cape May. She said, "What are you going to do with a bar?" I said, "What do people do with bars?" But I was a silent partner. Sid ran it.

Susan: What is there now?

Harry: Carney's

Susan: Oh so, it's still a bar? But where did the hotel come into the picture?

Harry: The next year, in 1964, Sid told us that the city was auctioning off some property on the east end and, although it was still zoned residential, things were going to be

changing and the property would eventually be zoned commercial. Sophie went to the auction and bought the land. We looked at it as an investment, really. All of a sudden we started getting some phone calls asking us if we wanted to sell it. One man said he would pay me four times what I bought it for. So, I asked him, "What are you going to do with the property?" And he said, "I'm going to build a hotel." And we thought, well, why not us? If they can do it, we can do it.

Susan: What year was this?

Harry: We started construction in 1965. My wife ran the hotel during the day. We didn't have a maintenance man. We couldn't afford one. I still had my wholesale business. I ran that during the day and came back to the hotel at night to work on the repairs.

Susan: What happened to Sid's Bar?

Harry: We kept it until 1973 or '74. Sid always had an option to buy it, but never offered. One day my wife said, "If you are not going to sell the

bar, I'm getting out because I don't want to be in the bar business." So we worked out a deal with Sid and sold the bar to him. Sophie died in 1975.

Susan: Well, if you had to do it all over again, would you come to Cape May?

Harry: Oh yes. It's been a beautiful life.

Harry recently suffered a slight stroke and his sons have taken over much of the daily operations of the business. He lives in Galloway Township now and spends his days giving Larry and Joey business advice, as is his custom. *HH*