

Good-Old Cafe Royal

By Nathan Ziprin

The once-green Second Avenue pastures are now largely seared to me yet the urge to return in nostalgic memory is often irresistible.

What beckons most is the Cafe Royal, where I spent more days and nights than I care to remember, talking about the sacred and mundane, discussing art, listening to gossip, evaluating the girls, playing pinochle and resting from the turmoil of the street.

There were many stories circulating about the cafe, among them one that its last owner won it in a pinochle game. However, whatever the legend, the truth is that it

TELL TALES

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to Sammy, one of the finest gentlemen, anywhere.

There are other forms of gambling divertimento, like Keno, where you may win up to \$25,000 for a single dollar, but the odds against this happening are as phenomenal as the payoff. Keno is a glorified, Bingo-type game. There are eighty numbers, of which 20 are selected. You may wager various amounts on one to fifteen numbers. If the numbers you marked are among those selected, in various amounts, you win. On many occasions we were present when a lucky player came up with a combination that netted \$25,000.

There are other less popular methods available for parting you from your money, like the bird cage and big six, but you'll have to be the sole judge of whether the entertainment is worth the price.

There are all kinds of systems, and some have an advantage of lessening the odds against the player, but none give an advantage over the house and therefore are not certain of returning a profit. One that caught our interest, and which we pass on, but do not recommend, was explained by a rather sensible chap who displayed a large bankroll, he said he won.

His was the law against probabilities. It could be played at any game. You jot down five results that appeared, then you make a progressive bet on the opposites. For instance, at the crap table, say there were two passes, a missout, a pass and a missout. You bet against the dice, the first two times, then you bet with them, then against then with. The theory is the same series of five will not pop up twice in a row.

It may work, but then again the dice have no memory, nor do they have any sentiment.

There you have the basics. Come, enjoy, and good luck.

was one of the rarest enclaves in the world, attracting the elite, the poor, the rich, dignitaries and charlatans, purists and gamblers and such disparate segments as writers and actors.

For some reason I have never been able to fathom why, the Yiddish poets and writers of belle letters always kept themselves aloof in one corner of the cafe as if by silent agreement with the more talkative actors. One could tell which was the actors' corner by its exuberance and the exhibitionism of its occupants, its gaiety and the string of unusually, and at times exotically, dressed women. The corner where the writers were wont to congregate was generally more subdued, except of course on the frequent occasions when they were engaged in literary, political or personal feudes. At all times, the actors seemed to be beyond the pale of the dreamers.

At its heyday, the Cafe Royal fevered with Jewish writers, intellectuals, poets, actors, playwrights, producers, journalists, bon vivants and what then seemed to us the younger set an array of the most beautiful, most interesting and most exotic women in the world. Such was its fame as a literary cafe that it attracted celebrities from every part of the world and in every field of human and creative endeavor. Trekking to the Royal was like going on a pilgrimage.

To stray visitors the Cafe Royal was a curiosity. To its habitués it was a sanctum to which they trekked daily. One met friends there, but more often than not the meetings were moments in literary dialogues, exercises in disputations, and at times, promenades into the pardses that is within the exclusive domain of the creative. The tables at the Royal over the years were often silent witness to literary judgments that either spelled radiance or extinction for aspiring writers. They were witness too to the germinating of new literary movements on the Yiddish rialto and to literary conspiracies by the un-great who feared fresh voices.

The Royal, of course, also attracted to queer, the bizarre and the unsavory of character.

The closing of the Royal -- an inexorable victim of time and change -- ended the reign of a unique Jewish way of life not only on Second Avenue but on all the streets, avenues and nooks and corners of the East Sides throughout the Jewish world, bringing an end to a climate that can never be imitated.

The story of the Royal is of the very folklore of the now largely vanished Jewish East Side. Only the poets and writers who were of its stream are competent to record the story of that unique corner of 12th Street and Second Avenue.

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