

## **Interview with Manny Meland**

**Interviewer:** Today is July 9, 2019. We're interviewing Manny Meland for the Miami Beach Visual Memoirs Project and he will be part of the archive. So we were talking about your coming from Montreal. How did your family get to Montreal to begin with?

**Manny Meland:** That's so interesting. They're all from a little shtetl in Poland. Every Sunday, after sermons, the local Poles would come over to beat up the Jews to get even for their killing Christ. The Pogroms were getting worse and worse. With the good fortune of the Meland family is my father's oldest brother met a young lady whose brother was in the dress business in Montreal. That was around 1928 or 1929. He wanted to get his sister out of there and get her out of that danger, so he brought her there. The first of the Meland's got to Montreal. My Uncle Duvid went to work for his brother, Yankl Gould in the dress business in Montreal. Saved up and brought his kid brother Minashe. He brought him to Montreal. The two of them saved up and brought another brother. Eventually they got the last one my Uncle Joe, my Uncle Yuska 1938, we got him out of Poland. After that, the gate came down, whoever was trapped there.

Now my mother's kid brother was 15 years old and he was crying. My brother Sammy was 6 years old. He told me the story. He says Uncle Zalig was crying. He wants to come to Montreal. But they had to leave him over to look after the old parents. So they all perished in the Holocaust. When I think of it, it still brings tears to my heart.

Anyways, the family got to Montreal. They have to make a living. They only got into the shmata business - the clothing business. Ladies dresses, ladies suits, ladies coats. My father - there were six brothers and a sister. They all had a business, and they never got together. You imagine if they would have gotten together and run it - the purchase together, the market together. But no, we had a strange dynamic in the Meland family. They were very proud and each wanted to outdo the other. However, if one had a problem healthwise or financially, they closed the ranks. They were very dedicated to each other. Just like they dragged one another to Montreal.



My Uncle Maltl, Max, came to Miami Beach, and he said to his brothers, what are we doing up there in the frozen North? We have to come down to paradise. So one by one, he brought them down. Now, they came down to Miami Beach. You have to make a living. They didn't get into the shmata business, but they bought little hotels. Forty five were motels. My father bought the Drexel Arms, Yuska bought the Josan Apartments, Shyka bought the Hudson Apartment. On by one they started to buy, and they were good in the hotel business. But they did it because they had to make a living.

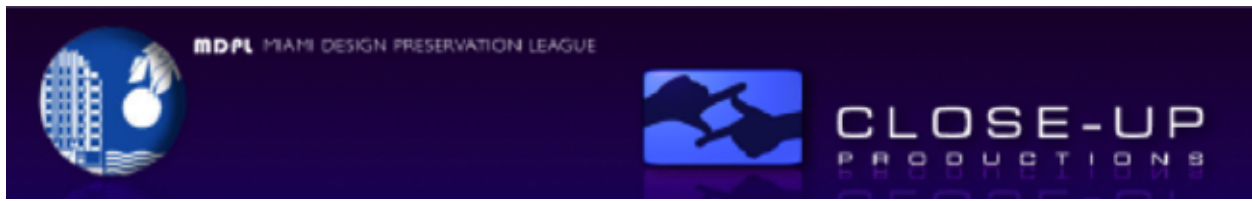
Anyways, the nephews and the nieces began to follow too. My cousin Manny, my brother Lou, and myself. My brother Lou had gotten his feet wet. He invested with my father, so he was gung-ho about a better investment in Miami Beach. We bought the Charles Hotel on Collins and 15th. Now the Charles Hotel added a strip of seven shops. Lums was on the corner and the other one I remember was Katz's. Katz's is a kosher restaurant that eventually moved across Collins to where Senor Frog occupies that spot today.

Interesting about Lums was, the Perlman brothers, they bought this little bar. They specialized in selling hotdogs steamed in beer. The hotdogs were sensational, and the coleslaw...because their license was only beer and wine so their coleslaw was infused with wine and some other sauces and their mustard was deli grade mustard. That little Lums spread out. They put them into different locations. Those hotdogs were sensational.

**Interviewer:** Was that the very first Lums, then?

**Manny Meland:** That wasn't the first one. It was one of them. Any case, they had big success with Lums. They bought Caesar's Palace. Now when I bought the Charles Hotel, I missed an opportunity by not buying Lum's stock. However, these brothers who scored on the magic of a hotdog, they also knew what Ollie's Hamburger, which was located just west of Collins on 23rd Street.

Ollie's was a little strip bar with six stools, and his hamburgers were delightful. His hamburgers and his liver. But the trouble was, he wouldn't mix the liver and the hamburgers. You would have to clean the grill. So if I came in and I said Ollie, I'd like some liver, he'd say no, we're doing hamburgers now. So I'd plead with him. I'd say, Ollie, where else in the world can I find a



liver like you make? And I have to get some liver? He says you won't find a liver like mine anywhere. So have pity. Make me liver. He says okay, he scrubbed the thing, and he would make the liver.

But there were times when the bar was full - that is the six stools, and a few standing, and some people would want liver and some people would want hamburgers. So he would lecture us--listen people, get together and decide what do you want? Hamburgers or liver? It's the pizzazz. It's the pizzazz of Ollie's that made him so important, that made everyone want to go to Ollie's. Because when he was cooking his perspiration had went into the cooking and a cigarette - he always had a cigarette with a long ash. When the ashes disappeared, I presume those contributed to the magic ingredients that went into his hamburger.

But any case, to get back to the Perlman brothers. The Perlman brothers scored big time with their hotdogs that were infused with beer and they imagined that Ollie - if they could get his recipe, they could repeat that magic. But Ollie was stubborn. he wouldn't sell. Eventually, they offered him a million dollars. A million dollars for the recipe for his hamburger. Well he sold out. He sold out. But I have to tell you, before that, the funny part was a limousine would pull up in front of Ollie's, and a rich old lady with her white pearls - with the chauffeur would open the door to the back seat - she would come out and sit on the stool that Ollie reserved for her. She would sit on the stool to order her Ollie burger.

Well, this was the Ollie burger that the Perlman brothers thought would repeat the magic of his steamed hotdogs. They paid him a million dollars for it. He closed his little bar. The Ollie burger, the pizzazz, the story that followed the million dollar price for the hamburger attracted a lot of attention. But attention is one thing. In the end, the hamburger has to be worth a million dollars and it was far from it. it was a very tasty hamburger, but it wasn't worth the million dollars, and besides, I think lacking all the schtick that went in with the hamburger. That was part of the magic of Ollie's hamburger.

**Interviewer:** Ollie became a millionaire.



**Manny Meland:** He became a millionaire and he closed his little joint.

**Interviewer:** And the Lum Brothers never did really recoup the million dollars.

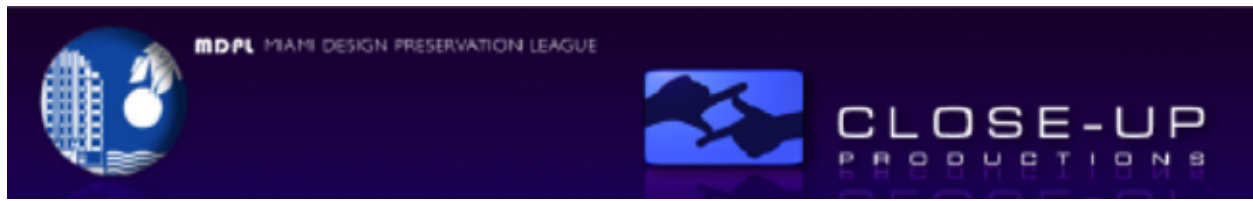
**Manny Meland:** Well, the thing is owning Caesar's Palace, losing the million dollars didn't hurt them too hard, so they survived that. I have a connection to it because they were in our strip mall at the Charles Hotel.

**Speaker 3:** What period was that in? And what was the hotel business like then?

**Manny Meland:** That's important. That's an important question. What happened was we bought the Atlantis Hotel. I came down from Montreal to run the Atlantis Hotel. I was the President, the Manager. When we bought the Atlantis Hotel, the dynamic or the rhythm of the hotel was every week when we looked at their records, the week of - let's say Christmas - the same families came from New York, from Boston, from Detroit. They would come and the kids hadn't seen each other since the year before and there was so much excitement in the hotel. We had that pleasure for two years and then the advent of the condominiums reared its head.

When I called to New York to see if the family would renew, they advised me they bought a condominium in North Miami Beach. I called Boston, I got the same story. Suddenly, we began to lose our customers and we weren't replacing it with walk-ins. So now we needed a new business plan, and the plan we came up with...first of all, we reckoned we needed to rent out at least 50% of the hotel to cover our expenses. otherwise, we would be in a loss situation and we would be in trouble. We came up with the idea that we would get yearly guests for at least 51% of the hotel. Now, the reason why we had to get at least 50% is we changed the designation of the hotel from hotel to apartment, because now we had over 50% of the guests were yearly guests, we were designated an apartment.

That gave us a couple of advantages. Number one, our insurance bill fell to 50% of what it was and that was a big ticket item. Our taxes fell because apartments were taxed lower than hotels. But the main thing is in order to get 50% yearlies or more, we had to give them yearly accommodations, which meant we had to keep cooking facilities. We couldn't put a stove into the hotel room. The codes wouldn't allow it. But in an



apartment building, nothing unusual about having a cooking facility or a refrigerator. We took the beds out. We put in a sleeper couch, so they slept at night on the couch and the couch was a place to sit during the day. And that was our business plan for the Atlantis. We called all our relatives and installed that plan in all the hotels.

**Interviewer:** They would come down for what length of time?

**Manny Meland:** No, people lived there for a year.

**Interviewer:** Year-round.

**Manny Meland:** They were yearly guests. We would have 50, maybe some places was 90%. Now, when we had yearly guests, we gave them the cutlery, the pots and pans, the sheets, and towels, maid service. So it was like an apartment hotel. They were getting the service, but so a lot of retirees, this was a terrific situation. They came down to South Beach. They lived year-round in the hotels. Most of the hotels had swimming pools. Hey, it was really nice. Saturday night, we entertained our guests and gave them free cocktails and an entertainment program. During the week, we served them hotdogs, just a little treat. I think that we fundamentally changed the hotel business of Miami Beach.

Now, we don't get credit for it, the Meland family because eventually other hotels that were having trouble saw what we were doing, and it became ubiquitous. But the truth is, I believe that before the Meland's, there may have been the odd hotel room that snuck in a hot plate or a little refrigerator, but we made that as a hotel plan. That was how we changed the hotel to an apartment. That is what I told the Jewish Museum. The impact of a Canadian family on South Beach was that we fundamentally changed the hotel business on South Beach.

**Interviewer:** You had to get a conversion, a rezoning, or what was the process?

**Manny Meland:** No, they accepted the fact that once we had more than 50% that we were an apartment building.



**Interviewer:** But that was quite an investment to make in appliances and cutlery and everything to make that conversion.

**Manny Meland:** Well, it wasn't that much because first of all, we started off...we didn't do 50 at one time. We did it as they came in. We would put an order but they would hold it for us, so everything was in the warehouse and they would ship it as we needed it. We'd pay for it. We got deposits. We'd pay for it. It was a bit of an investment. But hey, when you're in business, you have to be prepared for the things that you were not prepared for. The business changed. Condominiums, something. It was an innovation. It didn't exist before we got into the business and it changed our business completely.

**Interviewer:** And changed the demographics probably of the beach.

**Manny Meland:** Absolutely, absolutely, so Miami Beach changed a lot. Now you had a lot of elderly people, whereas before you had people coming down who were excited to be down for their week and all that. So it changed a lot. It lost a lot of its glamour. That's why the Fontainebleau used to entertain. They had Sammy Davis Jr. and Frank Sinatra. They lost their luster too because they got their guests from our hotels too. When they lost those guests, they couldn't afford to bring in the big name acts, so Miami Beach changed fundamentally.

**Interviewer:** When, and you owned the Atlantis, you owned the Charles?

**Manny Meland:** The Charles we owned in 1965. The Atlantis, we bought in 1967. I remember buying the Atlantis in 1967 because 1967 was the 100th anniversary of Canada. Canada was formed in 1867. 1967 was its centennial and that's why they had the Expo '67 in Montreal to commemorate Canada's centennial.

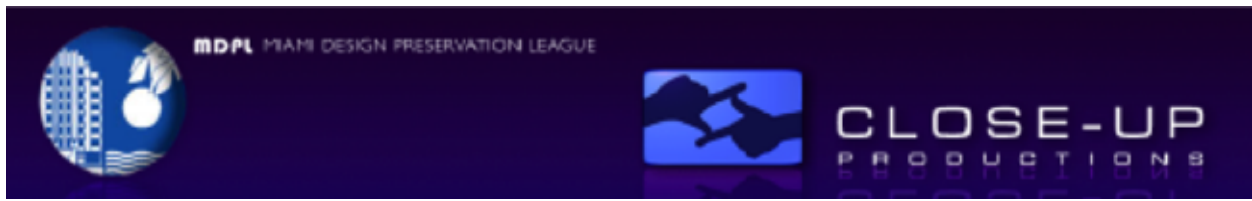
**Interviewer:** Did you get a lot of clientele from Montreal?

**Manny Meland:** A lot of?

**Interviewer:** Clientele, guests?

**Manny Meland:** Yes, we did. From Montreal and from Toronto. We were Hamisha people and we got...but it was mostly from New York and Boston and Detroit, the big cities.





**Interviewer:** Before the conversion to condos, what was the social atmosphere like in the hotels?

**Manny Meland:** Well, there was a lot of social interaction between the families. They were all - depending on the week - but everyone seemed to know each other. We had the same repeat customers every year. new ones of course were added, and they got caught up in the fun of the other families. They would go out for dinner together. They would go out to nightclubs together. They would go out to highlight together. There was always groups. The kids, we would have babysitters for the kids, to entertain them, and the adults would go off and do adult things. It's just a lot of fun. we had Saturday night, of course. we entertained everyone. so we had a social room, a nightclub. We would have our singers sings for them and if we had some talent in the group, we were happy to display their talent, and that's the way we did it.

**Interviewer:** Maybe some who weren't talented were still eager to display their untalent.

**Manny Meland:** You might say it. You might say some of the, we advised them. We complimented them on their great act, but advised them not to give up their day job.

**Interviewer:** (laughs) So it sounds like you kind of had fun along with it. I mean it was a business, but that you enjoyed it.

**Manny Meland:** I was 30 years old. I was 28 when we bought the Charles Hotel. At 28 years old, I owned a hotel. I don't have to tell you, it was a lot of fun, indeed.

**Interviewer:** What kinds of fun did you have?

**Manny Meland:** Well, I won't say it.

**Interviewer:** (laughs)

**Manny Meland:** Well, I was a bit of a rascal. One of the reasons I left Montreal is because I was having difficulties in my marriage, and coming down to manage the hotel, not only got me away from a bad situation, but it gave me a reason to look after the business, so that was part of my fun. They were my, I would say, a little bit of a wild time, but I settled down soon enough. I settled down. my



son called me and he wanted to come live with me and I said I would like to have you come live with me, but I have to discuss it with your mother. I called her and she says I think it's a good idea. He doesn't listen to me. Maybe he will listen to you, but I don't want him living in the hotel. So I got an apartment and I played Mr. Mom for a number of years.

**Interviewer:** That will settle you down.

**Manny Meland:** Yes, yes.

**Interviewer:** Did your children go into the business?

**Manny Meland:** No.

**Interviewer:** What was it like being in business with your cousin and your brother?

**Manny Meland:** Well, my cousin Manny, he was so nervy. He had the nerve, we say, of Dick Tracy. He got us into a lot of these deals. Frankly, they worried me because we always extended ourselves. We extended to buy one hotel. We mortgaged the other and used the money. And so when the business changed and we didn't have one hotel to worry about, we had several hotels to worry about. But he was relentless. he was relentless. He wanted to own the whole Miami Beach. He bought the Belmar with his father. My brother Lou and I didn't join him in that adventure, and eventually, he bought the Algiers with his father. But Lou and I didn't get into those deals. They were too scary for us.

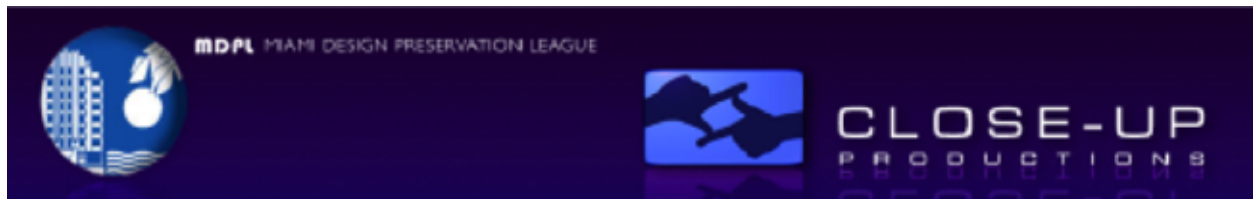
**Interviewer:** But your cousin did well.

**Manny Meland:** Well, he did okay. Eventually, he bought the Miami Skyways Hotel, but I won't talk about that because it's not a Miami Beach hotel.

**Interviewer:** You saw a real shift, then, in the kind of people who were coming down, and the whole entertainment aspect of it. What other ways did you see changes going on?

**Manny Meland:** Well, we used to go out and see bands and big names. At the Sea Isle, for example, in the basement, they had a guy named Ronnie. Ronnie did an act. He hung a bunch of instruments on the wall behind him. If you could play that instrument, he





welcomed you to come up and play with him. He played the piano. If you could sing, he welcomed you to come up and sing with him. Well, I played the harmonica and I used to do a French Canadian round, so he used to introduce me - Manny Meland is going to play a French Canadian tune for you. I would play it and my reward was I got a free beer. Well, I'll do anything for a free beer. So that was a lot of the entertainment not only at the Sea Isle, but at the Promenade, they had a guy doing a similar kind of act, and it was fun for us. It was simpler, but you came down. You participated. The same wannabes got up to sing every night and you cheered them on.

**Interviewer:** It was like karaoke.

**Manny Meland:** It was like karaoke, absolutely, except they didn't have a printout that you could follow. That was a different kind of fun that we did.

**Interviewer:** One of the big changes that had a tremendous impact on the beach, particularly South Beach, but the whole beach, I think, was the exodus of the Mariel, the famous Mariel Exodus.

**Manny Meland:** I was going to speak about that. Yes, Marielitos was the second blow that Miami Beach suffered. The condominiums was the first one and Marielitos was the second one. You can imagine, Ocean Drive, my family owned three hotels on Ocean Drive - the Ocean Blue, the Waldorf Towers, and the...I can't think of the other one. Any rate, Marielitos came down. I knew the owner of the Leonard Hotel. The Leonard was south of 5th street. The guy was around my age. He bought the Leonard Hotel. He stepped in to break up a fight between two Marielitos, one of whom drew a knife and stabbed him in the heart and killed him.

That was the element we were dealing with. Castro opened his prisons and his insane asylum and he unloaded that on us. South Beach, just jammed with its art deco buildings became the home of the Marielitos. Need I say more than that. That's what Miami Beach became. Not the whole beach. They were mostly down further down the southern part of the beach.

**Interviewer:** How did it have an impact on your families that owned hotels along Ocean Drive?



**Manny Meland:** Well, less people wanted to spend yearly time in hotels. The prices came down. We had to ask less. That's the way it affected not only them but throughout the business. When we bought the hotel, the revenue was higher than when we were dealing with the yearly guests, with the yearly guests, we had to give them yearly service. That means we had to wash their towels and their linens and wash their dishes and we had maid service 24/7 and air conditioning 24/7. A lot of the hotels, at times, some of them would close up for the summer, and only open them in the winter time.

As a matter of fact, in the Atlantis Hotel, one of the guys who was an entertainer in the Fontainebleau, I can't remember his name, but he would spend the summers on South Beach, and when we were opening the Atlantis Hotel, we left the windows open so mold wouldn't take over the hotel. We didn't want to run the AC all year round. We were walking on the first floor and we heard what sounded like someone sawing wood, so we headed to that sound. Eventually we came to a room and we opened the door, and this entertainer was sleeping in that bed. He climbed in from a window and was spending the summer as a free guest in our hotel.

**Interviewer:** He was squatting.

**Manny Meland:** He was squatting. When we walked in and said what are you doing here? He said who are you? I said we're the owners of the hotel. He had the tenacity to say when are you going to change the sheets? I'll never forget that.

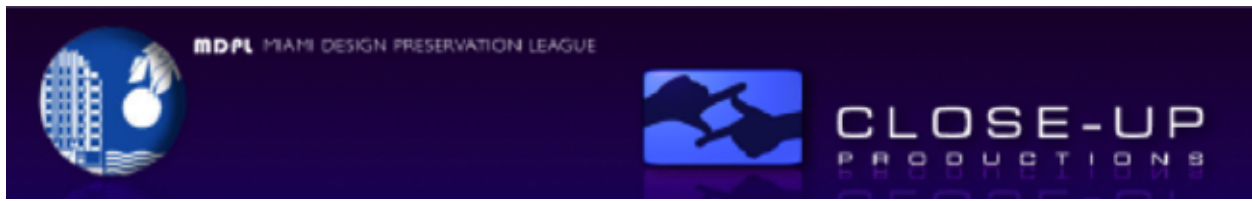
**Interviewer:** Was he a comedian?

**Manny Meland:** Yes, he was a comedian, yes.

**Interviewer:** Wow, and about what year was that?

**Manny Meland:** That was about 1968, I think.

**Interviewer:** Then, as the area went down, I'm talking mainly about South Beach, south of Lincoln, there was a plan at one time to turn it all into high rises and flood the streets, and make sort of a Venice-zone.



**Manny Meland:** Yes, they wanted to do that on South Point. That was done on South Point. It was a beautiful plan.

**Interviewer:** Really? You saw the plan?

**Manny Meland:** I saw the plan, yeah. They were going to have canals running between the streets. Because we had on South Beach, we had the Collins canal, and the Collins Canal had gondolas that ran from Biscayne Bay, it ran into Lake Pancoast, and up the Indian Creek. It was enchanting. It was enchanting. It went on 71st Street - 71st Street, they had that...I forget the name of the hotel there. But they would turn around there.

**Interviewer:** Did you take on of those trips?

**Manny Meland:** No, I didn't.

**Interviewer:** But you saw it.

**Manny Meland:** I saw it, yes.

**Interviewer:** And was it popular?

**Manny Meland:** But it wasn't only gondolas. There was no motor vehicles. It was all canoes or things like that, or paddle boats. I did a study, I have it over here on Collins Canal. What happened was Collins, he had a plantation on Biscayne Bay, and he was growing his mangoes. But he wanted to get them to Miami and to World Markets, but he couldn't cross the mangroves that lied between Biscayne Bay and Atlantic Ocean. He got a company to dig the canal - the Collins Canal - between Biscayne Bay to Lake Pancoast. Once you got through, you could get up Indian Creek and out Haulover and across to Miami.

That was the first conveyance, the first way, to get from Biscayne Bay to Miami Beach. In my research, I've got maps of Collins setting up lots to be sold on Miami Beach on the Atlantic Ocean side because you know, I do research on all these things. But the point was that the dirt that they took from the canal, they built Dade Boulevard. That's what they build Dade Boulevard, and Dade Boulevard was the first connection between Biscayne Bay and the Atlantic Ocean. That's why they built the causeway.



**Interviewer:** The Venetian Causeway.

**Manny Meland:** The Venetian Causeway. I got stuck there. They built the Venetian Causeway to connect up to Dade Boulevard. They ran one into another. Everything happened because of a reason. once they built Dade Boulevard, they put the Brown's Hotel on Dade Boulevard. They put the Brown's Hotel, it was the first hotel on Miami Beach. It was on Dade Boulevard. Then on Dade Boulevard, you began to get a lot of little bars. They had gambling and prostitution, and all the loud music and the rude language that accompanied it. That's where Martha Ray, she had her 1 o'clock club on Biscayne Boulevard. But eventually, she moved it onto Dade Boulevard.

**Interviewer:** Did you have any gambling going on in your hotels?

**Manny Meland:** No, we had no gambling.

**Interviewer:** Officially or-

**Manny Meland:** No, no, we had no gambling.

**Interviewer:** -unofficially, or, it wasn't permitted?

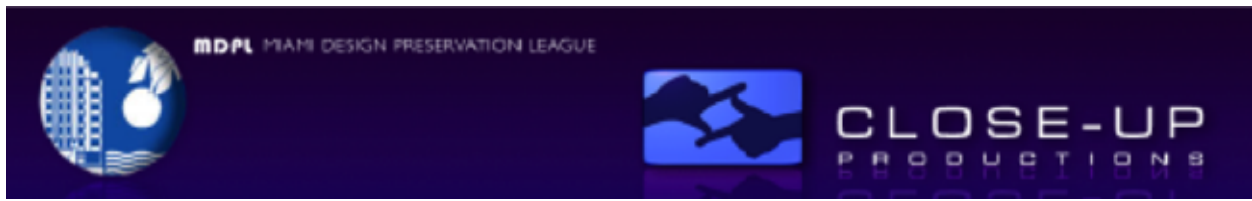
**Manny Meland:** No.

**Interviewer:** Okay, because we hear a lot about the gambling and the numbers being run and the horse races and all that.

**Manny Meland:** I know because if you go on 5th. I went on a couple of tours on Ocean Drive and if you look at those little hotels, if you pay attention to the tiles on the floor, you'll find a subtle pattern of hidden tiles that lead to the back and they lead to a gambling den.

**Interviewer:** This was inlaid in the flooring.

**Manny Meland:** Yes, you'll see. If you go on Ocean Drive, if you go in any of those hotels, they all had gambling. one of the hotels, we had a problem with the alarm, so the alarm people, what they do is they go from point to point. When they went from one point to another, suddenly it went into a wall. So they asked the maintenance crew to break open the wall because they wanted



to see where that wire led if they were going to repair the alarm. When they broke it open, we found a walled in staircase that led up to what was once, I presume, a gambling den.

**Interviewer:** What building was that?

**Manny Meland:** That was the Olympus.

**Interviewer:** The Olympus. And that had been a hotel?

**Manny Meland:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** You converted it to a condo year-round?

**Manny Meland:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** Okay.

**Manny Meland:** When we bought it, that place was closed in. So we didn't close it in.

**Interviewer:** You didn't even know about it?

**Manny Meland:** We didn't know about it. We discovered it when we wanted to have our alarm repaired.

**Interviewer:** Interesting, interesting. That would have been about what years?

**Manny Meland:** I would say the mid 1960s.

**Interviewer:** When did your family divest themselves of the hotel business?

**Manny Meland:** 1970s. They got old, the uncles, and they began to sell out. One by one, they sold hotels and we too. We sold the hotels. I went into another business. I should mention, the family, they were very devoted to one another, but they never would get together and run it under one roof. You imagine, we had 18 hotels, if we had combined them and had a central purchasing, central marketing, what an impact we would have had. We had an impact. The impact we had was that we changed the nature of the business. but we could have had a financial impact.



Now the same thing happened in Montreal. They were all in the needle-trade business. They never got together under one roof. They were all competitive. Everyone wanted to be the best, the best. But maybe that pride is what drove them, so like I say, but they were devoted to each other. If one got into trouble healthwise or financially, they closed the ranks and rescued each other.

**Speaker 3:** No, I was just wondering about the range of geographic area, were a lot of...and I understand some of your hotels were along ocean, a number were off.

**Manny Meland:** They were from south of 5th Street, which was the ocean hotel, the Ocean Blue, to along Collins Avenue up to 40th Street. We bought what we called the All Seasons Hotel. It was the - I have to look at my notes - that was the range of it. There were 18 hotels there. We owned - I should say - 15 hotels. Three were apartments. There was the Drexel Apartments on Drexel Avenue. My brother Lou owned that with my father. There was the Joe Sam apartments was on Meridian Avenue along 5th Street. My Uncle Joe and my cousin Sam, they owned that one. It was an apartment.

**Interviewer:** What was that called?

**Manny Meland:** The Josam Apartments.

**Interviewer:** Joe.

**Manny Meland:** Josam.

**Speaker 3:** The two brothers.

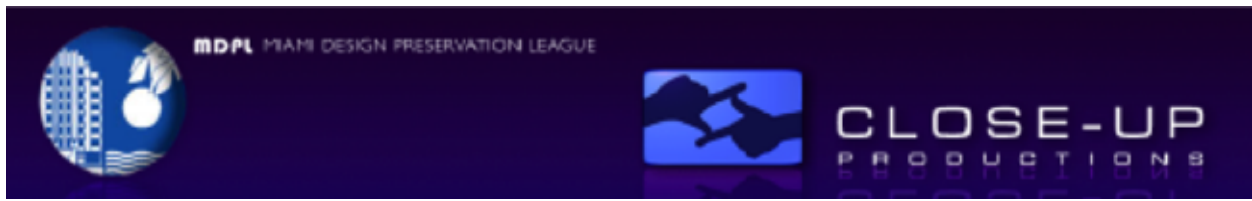
**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Manny Meland:** No, it was a father and son.

**Speaker 3:** Oh sorry.

**Manny Meland:** There was another apartment on 15th Street just west of Washington that was owned by my Uncle Jack. now they were apartment buildings but they ran them as apartment hotels because they rented them out on long-terms. They provided them with maid service and so in a way, they were apartments.





But in one case, we had hotels that we converted into apartments, but these were apartments that were run like hotels.

##