

George Swiderski's New York State of Mind

There are people all over the world who eagerly part with their hard-earned money to get close to celebrities and catch glimpses of the rich and famous.

Then, there are a select few who get paid to rub shoulders with the world's elite.

On Top of the World resident George Swiderski was one of those people.

Deep in the heart of New York City stands the glamorous Waldorf Astoria hotel. It is located in mid-town Manhattan, and is the place to be seen for celebrities, politicians, elite athletes and world class entertainers.

George worked at the Waldorf for several years as Banquet Beverage Supervisor. He feels lucky to have had the chance to mingle with people that most of us only hear about in the media. His autographs, photos and anecdotal memories could fill a book, and his stories are far too numerous and entertaining to do justice in these few words.

George's middle management position included some interesting advantages. One such perk was his visibility with anonymity. As a supervisor, he traveled freely throughout the hotel, but, unlike those who served, he didn't wear a name tag on his suit. This gave him the look of a visitor with the access of an employee. It also placed him close to many visiting dignitaries.

On one occasion, George briefly discussed "The Guns of Navarone" with Gregory Peck, who played Mallory in the blockbuster movie. As luck would have it, the movie was a favorite for both of them.

On another day George was pulled aside by Estée Lauder and asked what kind of an accent he had. When George explained his heritage, she exclaimed in her own thick accent, "Oh, I love men with a foreign accent!"

To those of us who wonder what the rich and famous are really like, George says they are just like the rest of us. He remembers most of them as very down-to-earth and approachable, presumably because of the safe and controlled environment in the hotel setting.

Of all the many famous people he met, one of his favorites was former President Gerald Ford, who George regards as a true gentleman.

On his 40th birthday, George found himself at work at the Waldorf and in the right place at exactly the right time. He was standing near a cocktail reception with Ronald Reagan, who was President at the time. During a lull in the proceedings, George approached the President, who took hold of George's hand and shook it while the shutters clicked. To this day, George keeps his souvenir photo in his wallet for the naysayers who think his stories might be just a tad delusional.

Another of the perks of working for the Hilton-owned Waldorf Astoria was George's free hotel lodging. George took advantage of this luxurious benefit and stayed in Hilton-owned hotels all over the globe. Rooms in cities like Rome, Paris and London, which would have cost several hundred dollars per night, were free of charge.

George grabbed every travel opportunity he could and sometimes found himself planning his next adventure while flying back to his New York



George Swiderski holds a photo taken of him and President Ronald Reagan. This picture was taken in 1986.

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by John Koning

home.

Not all of George's trips were luxurious. While a youngster living in Poland, he once hitchhiked solo across Eastern Europe, from Poland to Bulgaria for three weeks. It wasn't because he was crazy, as some might have thought. He wanted to challenge himself and to grow as a man.

He had pre-booked his return train ticket from Bulgaria, which, as it turned out, encouraged him to persevere when the going got tough.

After the Waldorf, George moved to the the Waldorf to the exclusive Park Avenue Colony Club, a women-only private club for the wealthy, where he enjoyed much better wages and generous Christmas bonuses. His years there were spent in a

stimulating and rewarding environment.

So how does our George end up shaking hands with Presidents, power-brokers and stars?

George is the first to admit that he has been lucky. He does, however, have the uncanny ability to be in the right spot at the right time.

Once, while traveling in London, England, George's innate sense of opportunity scored him a wave and the chance to photograph Princess Diana when nobody else was even aware of her presence.

Now, as George's adventures continue here at OTOW, where he volunteers as one of the OTOW Press Association's paparazzi, we can all benefit from this Polish New Yorker who sees things just a little differently.