

THE WAY WE WERE

By John Sedgwick

The Loew Life



A stubby, round-faced man in his late twenties walked into New Hampshire's Grace Inn in 1925 to ask for a room. Fine, said the hotel clerk. Just sign here. In a somewhat irregular hand, the guest inscribed the register with *E. M. Loew* and waited for his key. The desk clerk took a deep breath, went to consult the manager, and returned to say he had made a mistake. The inn was full. Sorry.

Loew went back to his car. But instead of driving off, he spent the night curled up on the front seat. The next morning he drove to the nearest bank, withdrew a fat wad of money, and bought the place out. Not that E. M. Loew was going into the hotel business. He was, after all, well on his way to becoming New England's premier movie theater magnate. He just wanted to make a point. He turned the Grace Inn into a Jewish resort.

E. M. Loew is like that: decisive, proud, headstrong. He doesn't mess around. He didn't have a cent, didn't even speak English, when he came to America from Hapsburg Austria in 1913 at the age of sixteen, but he put together, single-handedly, one of the largest entertainment empires in the country. In his prime, he owned nearly a hundred theaters up and down the East Coast, half a dozen flashy nightclubs (including the

Latin Quarter, once New York's flashiest), blocks and blocks of prime real estate, restaurants, hotels, banks, and race-tracks—holdings that once had a value reaching into eight figures. (No one seems to know what that first figure was, and E. M. isn't telling.)

The roly-poly Austrian made the most of his billions. He bought mansions in Milton, the White Mountains, and Palm Island, Florida, where Al Capone was one of his neighbors. He threw vast parties, attracting scads of women, including two wives, whom he attracted simultaneously, much to the consternation of one of them. He hobnobbed with movie stars in Hollywood, Las Vegas, New York, and Europe. Ever generous, E. M. gave away so much money to Jewish charities that businessmen coming to E. M.'s office often found the waiting room filled with rabbis.

Now eighty-two, Loew still comes into the office every day to run his affairs. But the empire is declining. The man who was famous for his hard bargains is being taken these days. Unshaven, his face puffed out, hair nearly gone, the cigar-chomping mogul slumps behind a broad desk surveying hundreds of fading black-and-white photographs of his relatives (Loew's family numbers eighty-six)

propped up several rows deep on a long table facing him. The wood-paneled Tremont Street office is as much a relic of the past as Loew himself is. Loew wears a shabby blue suit, a blue and white polka-dotted shirt, a blue and white polka-dotted tie, and, on one wrist, two gold watches. "One's E. M. time," he says, somewhat enigmatically, "the other's P.M." A colossal Victorian clock adorned with twin angels, perched on a table, offers still another version of the hour. Beside it, on a brass column, sits an old-fashioned, extremely ornate telephone. It doesn't work. "They couldn't hook it up for me," says Loew in his quick, chippy voice. "Didn't know how." One of Loew's vice-presidents, Ray Canavan, gray-haired like everyone else in the organization, is on hand to help E. M. along. Ever since he was hit by a stroke several years ago, Loew's speech has been a bit halting. With Canavan's exceedingly deferential help, E. M. reconstructs his sixty-six-year career in show business.

Soon after he passed through Ellis Island in 1913, Elias Moses Loew moved to Boston and worked at odd jobs for twenty cents an hour before he was offered a job operating the Dreamland, a nickelodeon in Lynn. He thrilled at the opportunity. Back in Bococian, Austria,

THE WAY WE WERE

he'd been so poor that he had to sneak in to see the movies. "This way," he says of his new job, "I could come any time I wanted to." E. M. did everything: sold tickets, worked the concession stand, ran the projector, even provided the sound accompaniment to the silent films by banging on drums during the violent parts. Despite his efforts, the Dreamland failed after a few months. Undaunted, E. M. picked up another across town, the Olympia. This one clicked. The theater did so well that after a few years E. M. could afford to branch out, leasing a small movie house in Worcester, the Chrystal. That clicked. He added another in Worcester, a big, fancy thousand-seater. When that one clicked too, he was on his way. E. M. became E. M. Loew's, Inc. By 1921, he owned theaters in Lowell, Portland, Pawtucket, Providence, Springfield, Boston, and a dozen other places, so many theaters altogether that Loew's Inc., a huge New York movie company run, actually, by a distant relative of E. M.'s, tried to buy him out. This was during the war of the movie barons. The relative, Marcus Loew, offered "a lotta money" but E. M. turned him down flat. "I was a young fella," he says. "I wanted to make it better."

That he did. In the next few years, E. M. added vaudeville houses (Kitty Dukakis's father played the violin in one of them) and even a production company, which, however, was quickly dropped. "Stars, agents, directors," says E. M. "It was all too much." Then came the Depression. While other businesses foundered, Loew's thrived. In a cash-only industry that, it seemed, people always had money for, E. M.'s capital mounted as prices dropped. So he expanded by leaps and bounds. He didn't just buy theaters, he bought whole blocks, theaters and all. That's how E. M. came to own, once, half of Boston's Washington Street. When Columbia Pictures faced a severe money crunch in the early thirties, E. M., mostly out of kindness, floated them a loan. Ever since, when Columbia pictures have come to the Northeast, they've played exclusively in E. M. Loew's houses—at cut-rate prices.

Loew was the second man in America to build a drive-in theater; it was the Lynn Open-Air, completed in 1937. Movie people said he was crazy. Who'd want to watch a movie sitting in a car? But people flocked to it. Five years later he added to his empire what soon proved to be his biggest money maker, a New York nightclub with high-kicking dancing girls and seating for a thousand called the Latin Quarter. His partner in that venture was Lou Walters, Barbara Walters's father. (E. M. remembers the twelve-year-old Baba Wawa as "just like her father, a real snappy talker.") Five

years after that, he picked a spot halfway between Boston and Providence to build a track for harness racing in Foxboro. It took a while to catch on, but it did. Did it ever. When Patriots owner Billy Sullivan was looking several years ago for a place to build a stadium for his team, E. M. offered him a lot near his racetrack for the total sum of a dollar. It was both magnanimous and good business—the perfect E. M. combination. The Patriots, he un-

When the Loew apartments were completed, E. M. called the contractor over, thanked him, and said that now he'd like the deed to his other building, "the one you used my materials to build. Give it to me or you go to jail."

derstood, would bring the track a lot of free publicity. And E. M. retained ownership of the parking lot, which was good for considerable revenue. "The town of Foxboro was nothing before we came," he says proudly. "Now property values are sky high."

How did this Austrian immigrant do so well? By being one tough customer, that's how. Take the time the man who owned the Boothbay, Vermont, theater Loew rented tried suddenly to terminate E. M.'s lease in order to give the place to another exhibitor. Loew tried to be a gentleman about it, giving the landlord three days to change his mind. If he didn't, Loew told him, he would be sorry. The owner didn't change his mind. He was sorry. E. M. bought the five-and-ten next door, tore it down, and, in a matter of weeks, put up a brand new cinema right next to the old one. There, every night E. M. played a first-run film, plus a second film, and gave out free coffee besides—all for half the price of tickets at the house next door. Before the month was out, the new exhibitor went broke, and the owner saw the value of his theater drop to just about nothing. As E. M. had predicted, the man was sorry.

Or consider the time E. M. smelled something fishy about an apartment complex he was building in Florida: a hundred thousand dollars' worth of materials was unaccounted for. E. M. hired two detectives to work as carpenters on the project to find out what was going on. They soon discovered that much of the concrete, lumber, and bricks delivered to the complex were being diverted to another site twenty miles away where the contractor was building some luxury apartments of his own. E. M. told the detectives to say nothing. He'd handle it. When the

Loew apartments were completed, E. M. called the contractor over, thanked him, and said that now he'd like the deed to his other building.

"What other building?" gasped the contractor.

"The one you used my materials to build," Loew said evenly. "Give me the building or you go to jail."

He got it.

If E. M. Loew knew how to put the screws to people, he also knew how to swing. His Milton estate shows that. Now surrounded by ranch-style homes, the forty-eight-acre spread has everything: a broad, tree-lined driveway, lush Persian gardens, four houses, one of them an immense, forty-odd-room (the Loews have never counted) mansion stuffed with gilded Louis XV furniture, gold-inlaid chests, painted porcelain figurines, chandeliers, and wall-to-wall carpeting an inch thick and overlaid with pastel-shaded Orientals. The works.

Much of the furniture belongs to Sonya Loew, the Czechoslovakian heiress who was E. M.'s first wife and who is currently in residence at the Milton manse. This requires some explanation, for E. M. is, strictly speaking, still married to his second wife, Mimi, who lives in Connecticut, tending, it is said, to her invalid brother. Mimi, however, never did move into Loew's Milton estate; and Sonya never moved out of it, even after the divorce, until Mimi obtained a court order, back in the fifties, requiring her to do so. That's the story anyway. Rumors abound to explain why E. M. married Mimi at all if he didn't want to live with her, but such gossip always attends the rich and the powerful, doesn't it? Sonya Loew returned quietly to the Milton residence several years ago. Asked if wife Mimi had any objection to his current living arrangement, E. M. said, "At my age?" and burst into explosive laughter. Others, however, are not so flip about the love triangle. As one put it, "When E. M. dies, the court case is going to be unbelievable."

Judging from Sonya Loew's appearance, it seems unlikely that she'll simplify matters by going to her reward before E. M. With her gobs of black hair, smooth, rounded cheeks, bright eyes, trim figure, and soft, milky skin without a trace of a wrinkle, Sonya looks about thirty-five. She is actually in her seventies. Still, she acts young, gliding gracefully about the French sitting room in a tight-fitting velvet jacket, cooing about this and that in a high lilting voice, radiating her Austro-Hungarian charm. Friends compare her to Zsa Zsa Gabor, which is quite appropriate, for the Loews were friends with the Gabors for years. When Zsa Zsa's mother, Jolie, remarried, the newlyweds spent their honeymoon in Milton; the groom serenaded his bride all night long with Hungarian folk tunes on his violin.

Sonya and E. M. had wild times in



Hang the Cookie People!

These brightly colored Cookie People are made of dough, baked and coated with a varnish-like finish. Each and every Cookie People character is artfully handcrafted and handpainted.

You'll find some twenty delightful personalities in our Cookie People collection — from Boston sports' figures (Bruins, Celtics, Red Sox, Patriots) to Santa and Mrs. Santa to children's storybook characters.

Cookie People are to be found at Irresistibles.



Faneuil Hall, Boston
742-9536

Chandler's Row, Marblehead
631-8903

IRRESISTIBLES

Milton. He invited friends by the hundred to private screenings in his living room. If he went to the theater and liked the show, E. M. invited the whole cast home. On Sunday mornings at eight, he took the household horseback riding about the grounds. All sorts of People drifted in and out: Mary Martin, Ted Williams, Jerry Lewis, Dean Martin, Tyrone Power, Frank Sinatra, Elizabeth Taylor. Don't ask Sonya just who: "I



don't care who's prominent and who's not," she lolls. "There were so many people here."

Of all E. M. and Sonya's gay times together, the era of the Latin Quarter was the gayest. Sonya remembers vividly how the nightclub came about. It all began in 1942 when the two of them went to a party for the archduke and archduchess of Austria at the Café Old Europe in New York, an elegant restaurant run entirely by Jewish refugees from Hitler's Germany. When Sonya discovered, the following morning, that the café was bankrupt, she persuaded E. M. to buy it. He always had a soft spot for the Jewish cause. In two months, however, the Café Old Europe had lost so much money that E. M. was forced to sell it at a \$50,000 loss.

But Loew wasn't about to let it go at that. He told Sonya: "New York owes me \$50,000 and New York is going to pay it back to me." He called nightclub operator Lou Walters, who supplied E. M. with the acts for his vaudeville houses, and told him to build Loew a nightclub in New York and to spare no expense. Walters found a nice place on Broadway. He brought over the best dancing girls from Paris, hired the best costume designer, the best choreographer, and the best nightclub musicians, decked out the flashiest nightclub anyone had ever seen, and named it after the raciest neighborhood in Paris, the Latin Quarter. "It was paradise," says Sonya. But Loew's friends worried: A nightclub on Broadway? They told E. M. he was going to lose his shirt.

E. M., however, had an idea. He invited down seven hundred of his Boston

friends, paying plane fare, taxi fare, hotel fare, drinks, meals—everything their little hearts and stomachs desired—to see a sneak preview of his Parisiennes doing the cancan in minimal clothing. The Bostonians applauded wildly, but Sonya feared they were only being polite. "I cried and cried," she remembers. "I said to myself, I've already cost him fifty thousand. Now he's going to lose a half-million."

Sonya was sure that on opening night the Latin Quarter would be deserted except for the waiters, the bartenders, and the forty-seven dancing girls, but she figured she might as well go over there and see. The Bostonians must have spread the word because the thousand-seat nightclub was packed, mobbed, crammed. A line of people trying to get in stretched around the block; it took policemen on horseback to control them. And that's the way it went, two shows a night, night after night after night. New York paid Loew his \$50,000 back, a hundred times over.

In those days the Latin Quarter booked the biggest stars in show business, Martin and Lewis, the Big Mama Sophie Tucker, Milton Berle, Jack Benny, Betty Hutton. No more. Inflation, unions, and the rise of Las Vegas put the nightclub under in the sixties. The rest of Loew's empire has dwindled, too. His Tremont Street offices are now in the shadow of the huge marquee of the Savoy, a theater now owned by General Cinema Corporation, the chain that has displaced E. M. Loew's, Inc., as the largest in New England. Loew couldn't keep up with the postwar suburban migration; his theaters decayed along with the inner cities, and he now owns less than half the number of properties he had during the fat years. The trend-setting Lynn Open-Air is now Bob Brest's Buick. The Foxboro racetrack was sold a few years ago. Some say Loew got taken. Caught in a cash-flow squeeze, he's had trouble meeting business expenses. Now E. M. Loew is chiefly known around Boston as one of Mayor White's Dirty Dozen tax delinquents.

But, at eighty-two, E. M. is still doing pretty well for himself, thank you. He works every day and goes out every night. And for his idle hours, there are all those memories: the time Conrad Hilton implored E. M. to be his partner in the hotel business and E. M. told him flatly, "Connie, you stick with your hotels and I'll stick with my movies." Or the time Sammy Davis, Jr., demanded \$100,000 a week to play the Latin Quarter and Loew snapped that when Sammy performed with the Davis family in Loew's vaudeville houses thirty years before, E. M. paid him a dollar a night, and he was damned lucky to get that. Or the time he sat next to Elizabeth Taylor at a Las Vegas nightclub and the first thing he said to her was, "Why, Liz, you have such *bimbos!*" Or the time . . .