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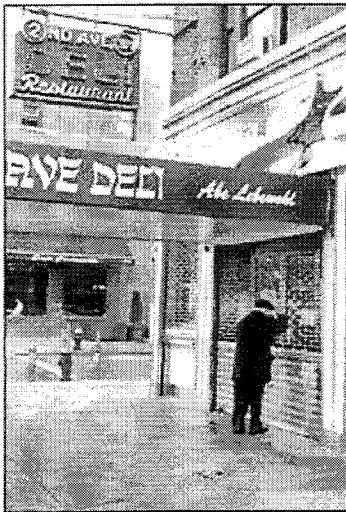
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Hold the Mustard, Maybe Forever

By **ANDY NEWMAN**

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The Second Avenue Deli has survived turbulence and tragedy in its 51 years. The decline of the Jewish enclave on the Lower East Side did not kill it. The broad-daylight murder of its beloved founder, Abe Lebewohl, in a robbery in 1996 shut it down but briefly. Dietary fashion campaigns against artery-clogging fare like brick-thick pastrami sandwiches and fat-saturated potato latkes seemed only to make the lines of defiant fans longer.

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Marilynn K. Yee/The New York Times

The Second Avenue Deli at Tenth Street, which has been a gastronomical and cultural fixture on the Lower East Side for half a century, may go out of business.

But the deli seems to have met its match in that implacable beast, the real estate market.

On Sunday, facing a \$9,000 increase in his \$24,000-a-month base rent, the deli's owner, Jack Lebewohl, Abe's brother, pulled down the grates on the glimmering restaurant at East 10th Street and Second Avenue. The closing was described as temporary, but Mr. Lebewohl said yesterday that the next time the place opens it might very well be to clear out.

The rent increase is actually built into the lease that Mr.

Lebewohl negotiated with the previous owners 15 years ago. The new owners have volunteered to come down \$3,000 in the new rent, but no further.

"If I don't get this resolved in x number of days," Mr. Lebewohl

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said, "I'll vacate." He declined to say what "x" equaled but implied that it was a one-digit number. "Less than weeks," he said.

And so the mourning has begun.

"It's almost like wiping out Carnegie Hall," said the comic Jackie Mason, whose \$10,000 reward for the capture of Abe Lebewohl's killer remains unclaimed. "A sandwich to a Jew is just as important as a country to a Gentile."

To Joan Washington, a community activist who has been going to the deli since shortly after running away from home at age 15 in search of the radical life on the East Side, the deli was about a lot more than a sandwich.

"It's not just a pastrami palace," said Ms. Washington, who is now 58. "It's the history of Lower East Side Judaism."

For all its legendary status, the Second Avenue Kosher Delicatessen, as it is formally known, is an odd sort of New York institution: It was already an anachronism the day it opened in 1954. The Yiddish theaters - Second Avenue was once known as the Yiddish Broadway - were mostly dark, and Jews and their businesses were leaving the East Village.

But Abe Lebewohl, a concentration camp survivor who had come to the United States just a few years before, was determined to make a go of it, and he did, eventually expanding from 10 seats to 250. Along the way, he fed countless homeless or otherwise hungry people at no charge and built a Yiddish Walk of Fame in front of the restaurant.

Even as the restaurant steadily raised its prices - the mammoth Instant Heart Attack, a pile of meat sandwiched between potato pancakes, is listed on the menu at \$19.95 - Jack Lebewohl kept the place full and kept up the restaurant's tradition of helping out the less fortunate. Last year, he hired a down-and-out former pornographer, Al Goldstein, as a greeter.

"I have not eaten so well since I lived with my mom," said Mr. Goldstein, who was fired after he was found sleeping in the restaurant's basement. Mr. Goldstein, a noted gourmand until a recent stomach-stapling operation, declared the deli's shuttering "almost as sad as the closing of Chock Full O' Nuts," though he added, "I never thought Jack's pastrami was as good as Katz's. It's kosher. It was bland."

Mr. Lebewohl pointed out that he was not the only restaurateur on Second Avenue to fall on hard times. Across the street was a recently shuttered French bistro. Next door to it, workers were

pulling down the sign from a pizzeria that had been in business for all of several weeks. Down at the corner of East Ninth Street was a closed Japanese restaurant with a "Store for Rent" sign in the window.

Mr. Lebewohl said that he had already received several offers to relocate, including one of a larger space a few blocks away at half his current rent.

One of the deli building's new owners, Martin Newman of Jonis Realty, said yesterday that he had tried to accommodate Mr. Lebewohl, who was a real estate lawyer before he was a deli man.

"All we know is we bought a lease that has this rent provision in it," he said. "Listen, we didn't want to put him out of business. I thought we were pretty fair."

Mr. Newman said he did not know if Mr. Lebewohl would really be unable to manage the higher rent. "I only know when you go in there at noontime, it's crowded, and he's charging \$17.50 for a tongue on rye," he said.

Across from the deli, the general manager of the Telephone Bar and Grill, Karyn Seltzer, bemoaned the deli's apparent demise.

"It would be a really sad statement to make that, basically, if you are not supported by a huge corporation, then you can't survive in New York," Ms. Seltzer said, ticking off the banks, the Dunkin' Donuts and the Starbucks that have sprouted on her stretch of the avenue. "That's certainly not what the East Village is about."

Yesterday, the stars in the sidewalk in front of the deli shone untarnished - Hymie Jacobson, Zvi Scooler, Max and Rose Bozyk, and the rest. But the restaurant, with its ancient-looking white-tile floor, was dark, and the silver tables were bereft of their heaping bowls of mustard and free pickles.

Mr. Lebewohl said that if he had to close the deli for good, so be it.

"This is life," he said. "Life goes on."

Jackie Mason, however, questioned whether it would be worth living.

"If the pastrami sandwich goes down the drain," he said, "there's no hope for this country at all."

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