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George Lang, Mastermind Behind Café des Artistes, Dies at 86

By **WILLIAM GRIMES**

George Lang, a restaurateur and cookbook writer who in the 1970s transformed Café des Artistes into one of New York's most romantic, beloved dining spots and in the 1990s helped restore the historic Budapest restaurant Gundel to its former glory, died on Tuesday at his home in Manhattan. He was 86.

His death was confirmed by his wife, Jenifer Harvey Lang, who said he had been treated for Alzheimer's disease.

Mr. Lang, a native of Hungary who escaped a forced-labor camp and imminent execution during World War II, came to New York in 1946 with a few dollars, no English and dreams of becoming a concert violinist. A mesmerizing concert by Jascha Heifetz convinced him that his future lay elsewhere; he found it in restaurants.

He ascended quickly through the business as a chef, a banquet manager and then a developer of new projects for Restaurant Associates, the pioneering company, then in its heyday, that created the Four Seasons and other innovative restaurants. In 1970 he formed one of the first restaurant-consulting businesses in the United States, the George Lang Corporation.

In 1975 the media consultant David Garth, a board member of the venerable Hotel des Artistes near Lincoln Center, asked him to take over the ground-floor restaurant. Originally conceived as a room-service operation for the hotel's resident painters and musicians, it had fallen on hard times. In his memoir, "Nobody Knows the Truffles I've Seen," published in 1998, Mr. Lang described it as "a dark, dingy little place that was empty most of the time."

Mr. Lang cleaned the Howard Chandler Christy murals, with their pouty nymphs, renovated the interior and let light into the dining room. At the same time, he recast the menu to feature updated versions of trattoria and bistro dishes, many of them included in "The Café des Artistes Cookbook" (1984), written by Mr. Lang.

"I wanted to avoid the intimidation factor that was so prevalent among the more fashionable restaurants in New York at the time," Mr. Lang told Nation's Restaurant News in 1985. "I wanted to create something more along the lines of an elegant bistro."

Caviar was out, replaced by seafood gazpacho, tripe with prunes, the Provençal fish stew known as bourride, and Ilona torte, the flourless chocolate cake that became the cafe's signature.

His formula proved to be an enduring hit with performers at Lincoln Center and a long list of actors and celebrities. Labor troubles and a sour economy forced him to close the restaurant, at 1 West 67th Street, in August 2009. Under new owners and a new name, Leopard at des Artistes, it reopened this year.

Gyorgy Deutsch was born on July 13, 1924, in Szekesfehervar, in central Hungary, where

his father ran a successful custom-tailor shop. Since his last name meant “German” in German, he adopted his mother’s maiden name around the time he left for the United States.

A promising violinist, he moved to Budapest as a teenager to study at the Franz Liszt Music Academy, but World War II threw his life into disarray. The family was Jewish, and at 19 he was sent to a forced-labor camp in Komarom, on the Czechoslovakian border. After the war, he learned that his parents had died at Auschwitz.

With the connivance of a friendly guard, Mr. Lang escaped from the labor camp using false papers and made his way to Budapest, then in chaos, as the German and Hungarian forces mounted a last-ditch defense against advancing Soviet forces.

Mr. Lang, as a last resort, joined the fascist Arrow Cross militia but used his position to assist Jews in hiding. In the final days before the Soviets entered Budapest, his subterfuge was discovered and he was imprisoned in a coal cellar to await execution.

When the Russians took over the city, he was arrested as a suspected fascist, tortured and put on trial. Ultimately, he was acquitted after several of the Jews he had helped testified on his behalf.

After escaping to Austria hidden in a coffin, Mr. Lang made his way to New York, where he worked as a busboy at Reuben’s, turned pages for accompanists at Carnegie Hall and, after spending a summer on a scholarship at [Tanglewood](#), became a violinist with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra.

After putting down his violin, he found lowly employment at a series of restaurants before being hired to sell wedding banquets at a converted Greek Orthodox church on Houston Street that looked, he wrote in his memoir, “like a muted version of Frankenstein’s castle circa 1898.”

Mr. Lang showed flair and ingenuity in a tough, competitive business. One master stroke was to install a grand spiral staircase that allowed the bride to make a Hollywood-style entrance and descend gracefully in the admiring illumination of a spotlight. Soon he was plying the banquet trade in more luxurious surroundings, at the Waldorf-Astoria.

His sense of showmanship and an innovative approach to menu creation caught the eye of Joe Baum, who hired him in 1960 to develop and direct new projects for Restaurant Associates. He oversaw more than a dozen restaurant operations at the 1964 New York World’s Fair and, beginning in 1967, spent three less than happy years as the director of the Four Seasons before establishing his consulting business.

He also opened the Tower Suite at the top of the Time-Life Building, a restaurant that projected the illusion of dining in a private apartment. The servers, dressed as butlers and maids, introduced themselves by name to diners, an innovation that, Mr. Lang admitted sheepishly, became one of the more tiresome clichés in the restaurant business.

Mr. Lang’s first two marriages ended in divorce. In addition to his wife, Jenifer, he is survived by a daughter, Georgina, known as Gigi, and two sons, Brian, of Manhattan, and

Simon, of Los Angeles. Another daughter, Andrea, died in 1990 while trying to flee a wildfire closing in on her home in Santa Barbara, Calif.

In 1991, the philanthropist and art collector Ronald S. Lauder, of the cosmetics family, asked Mr. Lang to combine business and sentiment by rescuing Gundel, the once-grand Budapest restaurant that had declined badly, both in physical condition and food quality, under the Communist regime.

Mr. Lauder, whose grandparents had emigrated from Hungary, was keen to re-establish a connection with his roots. Mr. Lang, who had once dined at Gundel when he was a violin student, saw the restaurant as a golden opportunity to return to Hungary in triumph.

After a multimillion-dollar renovation, Gundel reopened in 1992, serving classics like sauerkraut baked with catfish and fish sausage; goose liver baked with onion; and palacsinta, the Hungarian walnut-stuffed pancakes in chocolate sauce.

An avid student of culinary history, Mr. Lang wrote “The Cuisine of Hungary” (1971), the first serious work in English on Hungarian cooking, and “Lang’s Compendium of Culinary Nonsense and Trivia” (1980), a collection of historical anecdotes and odd dishes, like elephant schnitzel.

Mr. Lang often enjoyed constructing fantasy meals, including his last. The ideal final meal, he told [The Village Voice](#) in 2007, would include some of the great dishes from his restaurant career but above all his Hungarian favorites: fisherman’s soup, stuffed goose neck, sour cherry soup, layered cabbage, stuffed peppers, plum dumplings, pancakes with apple meringue, and whipped-cream strudel.

“And then I will have what it takes to get to another world,” he said.