

Tremont History Project/Museum

# The Hotz Café: Hosting Friends in Tremont for Nearly a Century



For the past 92 years, Hotz Café has been known as the place “Where good friends meet”. Located at the corner of Starkweather Avenue and West 10<sup>th</sup> Street, this Tremont mainstay has been an enduring institution in the neighborhood, is regarded as the oldest tavern in Cleveland, and is now in its fourth generation of management. Current owner John Hotz recollects with pride and nostalgia on the generations that preceded him—his father and grandfather—in establishing the Café and the Hotz family name is iconic to the community’s identity.

The Café was founded in 1919 by John Hotz Sr., grandfather of current owner, John Hotz. John Sr. was born in 1889 and emigrated at the age of 16 from the “White Russia” hillsides, says Hotz. Many immigrants into Tremont from this area at the time were specifically from the Carpathian

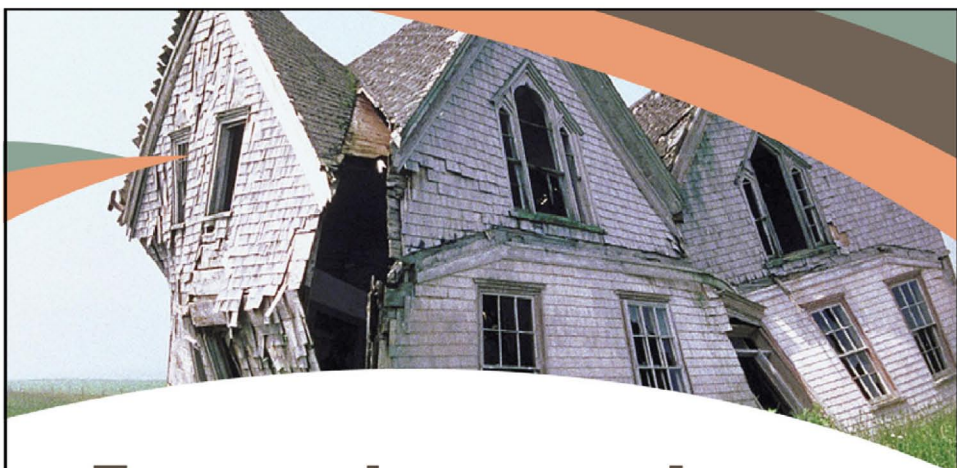
mountain region, and included the ‘Rusyns’, Carpatho-russians and Lemkos. The Hotz family was deeply entrenched in their ethnic community at the time, and attended St. Theodosios Russian Orthodox Church, while John Sr. also spoke numerous languages and dialects of the diverse Southside enclaves. John Sr. initially worked on the railroad lines of the burgeoning steel mills along the Cuyahoga River, but at the age of 30, opened Hotz Café with the intent to create a place of comfort, leisure, and fraternity for fellow countrymen and local laborers. Hotz’s quickly became a ‘home-away-from-home’ for its blue-collar patrons, who appreciated the warm hospitality and camaraderie. Amenities included a ‘shoe-shine boy’, Blind Robbins herring, and such fine cigar brands as White Owl and R.G. Dunn. Regulars gathered for card

games such as the popular ‘66’. In the 1920’s, the Café survived the Prohibition Era as a speakeasy, and attracted some high-profile characters, including baseball legends Ty Cobb, Lou Gehrig, and Babe Ruth, among others. The Mighty Babe, in fact, once bought a round for the entire house, and later wrote a check—which John Sr. never cashed and the family still owns to this day! The 1930’s brought the end of Prohibition, but also the Great Depression. John Hotz Sr., always offering affordable fare, was known to show exceptional concern for his patrons who were hit hardest during these years, sometimes buying bread for their families or finding other ways to help them along. The Café became a place where downtown politicians, judges, and detectives could find anonymity and refuge from the populace and foster private congregation. Elliot Ness was known to patronize the Café, and even Franklin D. Roosevelt was once in attendance prior to his election as President.

The Hotz family at the time lived in the large house which featured the storefront café. John Sr. and his wife Barbara had six sons, all of whom attended Tremont Elementary School and either St. John Cantius High School or Lincoln High School. During World War II, all six sons served in the war overseas and returned. Sons Andrew and Mike joined the family business after the war, and the growing family expanded into the house next door (now the pizza parlor). By 1952, these sons had officially become Café owners, and the second generation was underway. Andrew, father of current owner John, became known as ‘Big Guy’, and he and Mike brought their own personality to the Café while maintaining their father’s vision for the place’s integrity. Andrew demonstrated the balance of maintaining personable hospitality with a strong sense of order, “running a tight ship,” John says of his father. In this post-war era, the Café reinforced itself as a haven and destination for steel mill workers and laborers stopping in after a shift, before a shift, or just to pass the time, while the regulars also included war veterans affiliated with local Posts, as well as many local police officers. “They’d treat it like it was their own house”, says John today, “even helping to clean the place up.”

Readers may recall some of the tavern’s most memorable characters during these years—two Myna birds named ‘Billy’ and ‘Gabby Girl’ who would talk to customers, and a spotted Dalmatian named ‘Tony’ who was donated by the Cleveland Fire Department. When Tony would be let outside to lounge near the front steps, customers would know the Café was open for business! In 1967, Andrew’s wife, Betty, opened a beauty salon in the family’s house-storefront next to the Café, which would remain open for twenty years. ‘Betty’s House of Beauty’ became as popular among Southside women as the Café was among local blue-collar men, offering not just fantastic service, but a communal place to gather and appreciate friends. Andrew, who became the sole owner of the Café in the 1970’s, felt a sense of devotion and protection to his loyal customers and to the integrity of the establishment. He adamantly disallowed any deviation of the character of the establishment during the 50 years of his tenure. In 1977, when the movie ‘The Deer Hunter’ was being filmed in Tremont, the director Michael Cimino approached Andrew with the request to use the Café for the now-famous bar scenes in the film. Cimino brought in Robert DeNiro and Meryl Streep to assist in the persuasion. Andrew was not impressed with the pushy Hollywood intruders, and ultimately threw them out!

The closing of numerous area steel mills and declining population brought transition to Tremont, and with Andrew’s passing in 1991, the end of an era had come for Hotz Café. However Andrew’s legacy of ideals, principles, and vision was fully embraced by his son John Hotz, when John assumed ownership in the 1990’s. “My father was very committed to his family and to the Café as our family legacy” John relates, and he was determined to carry on in his father’s and grandfather’s tradition. The tavern continued to remain a hub of activity and social life for many neighborhood locals, holding true to the Café’s hallmark ethics, while introducing festive new events such as the annual ‘Gangsters’ Night Out.’ In 2003, the family opened Big Guy’s Pizza, in honor of Andrew, located in the venue of what was formerly the family’s beauty salon business. This pizza parlor features Betty ‘Ma’ Hotz’s famous ‘Pierogi Pizza’, and like the Café, intends “to treat everyone who enters our doors as though they were guests at our home” says Ma. John’s children, now involved with daily operations, represent a remarkable fourth generation of management of the Hotz Café. While the faces have changed, the physical elements of the Café—the original bar and sodapop-style barstools, the 24-foot long 1936 shuffle-board game, the nostalgic photos and vintage decor—remain the same. As does the atmosphere and service: it is still truly a place ‘where good friends meet’. The Hotz Café has withstood Prohibition, the Great Depression, several major wars, regional economic and population declines, and fierce competition, but Hotz Café has endured, and remains a thriving Tremont/Southside institution. John Hotz remains both wistful about the past and optimistic about the future, as he declares, “The Priest still comes by to bless the place, just like in the old days.”



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