

SAN DIEGO jewish JOURNAL

Education Issue

SDJA Sees Big Growth For 2021/22



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PUBLISHERS

Mark Edelstein and Dr. Mark Moss

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Jacqueline Bull

ASSISTANT EDITOR

Nathalie Feingold

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT EDITOR

Eileen Sondak

CREATIVE DIRECTOR

Donna D'Angelo

OFFICE MANAGER

Jonathan Ableson

SENIOR CONSULTANT

Ronnie Weisberg

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Emily Bartell, Linda Bennett, Leorah Gavidor, Emily Gould, Judith Fein (Senior Travel Correspondent), Paul Ross (Senior Travel Photographer), Patricia Goldblatt, Pat Launer, Sharon Rosen Leib, Andrea Simantov, Marnie Macauley, Rabbi Jacob Rupp, Saul Levine, Rachael Eden, Sybil Kaplan.

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVES

Jonathan Ableson | Senior Account Executive
Alan Moss | Palm Springs

EDITORIAL

editor@sdjewishjournal.com

ADVERTISING

marke@sdjewishjournal.com

CIRCULATION & SUBSCRIPTIONS

jableson@sdjewishjournal.com

ART DEPARTMENT

art@sdjewishjournal.com

LISTINGS & CALENDAR

assistant@sdjewishjournal.com

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(858) 638-9818 | fax: (858) 263-4310

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From WWII Romania to Baja California

The Impressive History of Jewish-Owned Wellness Spa, Rancho La Puerta

by Nathalie Feingold

In the summer of 1940, Deborah Szekely and her husband Edmond embarked on the wide-sweeping search for a home to call their own. Edmond, known affectionately as “the Professor,” was a Romanian citizen whose U.S. visa had just expired. Going back to his home country of Romania, where his Jewish heritage would be a death sentence during World War II, was not an option. So, together, with limited options, they crossed the Southern border bringing with them their shared vision.

“We crossed the border into Mexico and created a new home on a scrap of land while living in primitive conditions with visions of a new life that would be rooted in mindfulness,” Deborah described.

Their vision was to share their land and teachings with fellow health-seekers through what they called a “health summer camp.”

At the time, Edmond was already a respected intellectual who developed a dedicated following of European health-seekers after the publication of his book “Cosmos, Man and Society.” Because of this following, Edmond knew there would be many like-minded individuals interested in joining him and Deborah in their health camp which is now the internationally esteemed wellness spa Rancho La Puerta.

“We thrived on this land, which ultimately became more and more permanent as a haven for health-seekers

from the U.S. and England in particular due to the beauty of the land and the Professor’s message during wartime: live simply, respect the body’s inherent wisdom and embrace a life in nature,” Deborah said.

Rancho La Puerta had humble beginnings; guests were encouraged to bring their own tents and pay the small fee of \$17.50 a week if they agreed to help with chores around the site.

Although it started as only a health camp, the land quickly became a haven for guests who had no safe homes in Europe during World War II. And now, it is often recognized as one of the best-known spas and fitness resorts in the world.

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“Over the years, Rancho La Puerta evolved into what it is now: since the 1950s, we have been referred to as the progenitor of the modern fitness resort and spa movement,” Deborah said.

Today, Rancho La Puerta stretches out over 4,000 acres of private land. The resort offers a varied fitness program of over 80 fitness classes and organic meals with ingredients from their garden on-site. Guests can also explore miles of hiking trails winding through the mountains and meadows of Baja California. Additionally, they offer spa treatments and therapeutic sessions.

Guests who are seeking an escape from everyday stressors typically stay for a week and leave feeling reset.

Rancho La Puerta has undoubtedly developed a strong and loyal following; many weeks, nearly 75% of their guests are returnees. Some guests have returned over 50 times.

Although Rancho La Puerta has evolved astronomically since its modest beginnings, Deborah’s profound history has undeniably shaped her approach to wellness. Deborah, the proud daughter

Today, Rancho La Puerta stretches out over 4,000 acres of private land and is commonly referred to as the “original fitness resort.”

The resort offers a varied fitness program of over 80 fitness classes and organic meals with ingredients from their garden on-site.

of Jewish immigrants, carries their wisdom, along with the wisdom of her late husband, within her.

“My mother Rebecca, an immigrant nurse from Austria, always told me, ‘Never give with a closed hand.’ Her wisdom has served me well, as wellness — of the self and others — relies on the open-handed gifts of knowledge, inspiration, caring and sharing, which are all very present at Rancho La Puerta,” Deborah explained.

Deborah is now 99 years old and immensely proud of the resort’s growth that she helped cultivate throughout the years. She attributes her many successes to constant innovation and hard work. Deborah’s legacy is now under the leadership and guiding hands of her daughter Sarah Livia, who serves as president of Rancho La Puerta. ✨



One of the villas on the Rancho La Puerta grounds.