

## Download This To PDF

It's Free to Download and Convert. Get It In Seconds, Download Now. Go to [fromdoctopdf.com](http://fromdoctopdf.com)



**Christopher Helman** Forbes Staff

*Big Oil, Big Energy*

ENERGY 1/07/2017 @ 3:48PM | 8,529 views

# The Holocaust Survivor Who Built Houston's Hot New Hotel For Super Bowl LI



*Lazy river at the Marriott Marquis. Photo by Chris Helman.*

## Make Recruiting Your Company's

Build a Workforce of Talented Professionals. Schedule a Demo Today!

[icims.com](http://icims.com)



DAVID MITZNER SURVIVED the Warsaw ghetto and 8 years in the Soviet gulag before coming to America in 1949 and making his fortune, first in fishnet stockings, then real estate. He died in September, at age 101, just a few months before completion of his final project — the new \$350 million, 1,000-room [Marriott Marquis](#). He considered it a gift to his adopted hometown.

When the NFL rolls into Houston for Super Bowl LI, Commissioner Roger Goodell will take up residence at the new joint. From his 28th-floor Presidential Suite Goodell will have a great view of downtown, and of the hotel's outdoor pool, which features a "lazy river" in the shape of Texas. Underneath all that water is the hotel's Grand Ballroom, at 39,000 square feet the biggest in the city. Its chandeliers hold 60 tons of crystal. You've never seen a hotel with a bigger lobby.

“He kept telling me, I want a big lobby with beautiful chandeliers,” says Laura Mitzner, a director at family-held [RIDA Development](#). In 2014 Mitzner celebrated his 99th birthday at its [groundbreaking](#), and he was involved in every aspect, until his health finally went into a decline a year ago. In the center of the lobby you’ll see a large portrait of Mitzner’s wizened old head, made out of bullets — a work by artist [David Palmer](#). “He was tougher than bullets,” says Laura. [William Mack](#), formerly with Apollo Real Estate, now chairman of Mack-Cali Realty, began partnering with Mitzner in real estate two decades ago. “He may have only been 4’10”, but he had the character of someone 6-foot-6,” says Mack. “He was larger than life. And he wasn’t afraid of taking a risk.”



After surviving 8 years in the Soviet gulag, what did he have to lose? When the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, Mitzner’s hometown soon became the Warsaw ghetto. Brought up in the family garment trade, Mitzner brought in money by smuggling sweaters he’d sell to German and Russian soldiers. According to his autobiography, Mitzner refused to wear the [Star of David armband](#), and he took to traveling around without his papers, to obscure his ethnicity. That didn’t fly with the Russians who arrested Mitzner in 1940. He was loaded with hundreds of men on a train to Siberia, where their first labor was to build their own concentration camp. Mitzner spent the next 8 years in the [Soviet gulag system](#). He toiled at lumber camps, dug graves for countless prisoners. He survived in part by trading his tobacco ration for extra bread. “If he had been a smoker, we wouldn’t be here today,” says lucky grandson Steven. Most of Mitzner’s friends and family likely perished at the [Treblinka](#) or [Janowska](#) death camps.

Released in 1948, Mitzner made it to Moscow, then Sweden, where a jail cell felt like heaven. Posing as a Rabbi he got a visa to the U.S. The 34-year-old arrived in New York with \$17 and promptly blew half of it on a cab to his uncle’s meager apartment. Mitzner had lived much better back in Warsaw and was determined to do so again. “There’s something special about the immigrant,” says son [Ira Mitzner](#), who now runs RIDA. “They marvel that America gave them this chance. So they feel like it’s on them to never give up.”



David Mitzner. (Courtesy RIDA Development)

Mitzner followed his uncle into hosiery, then went off on his own, borrowed all he could to buy some machines, then the factory, and by the mid '60s had made a fortune in fishnet stockings. "He was such a hustler," says Ira. "He didn't have a country club lifestyle. Who has time to play golf?" Mitzner [preferred to watch professional wrestling](#). He was an extrovert, and fearless (both the opposite of his late wife Ruth). The family never took vacations, unless the trip was business related. Mitzner first came to Texas around 1970, looking for hosiery buyers. He was shocked by how much product he could sell on the Mexico border at Laredo.

He found Texas refreshing after two decades in the crowded, cold Northeast. "The climate was fantastic, and everything was so alive, so big," he wrote in his autobiography, "[Nesim All Around Me](#)." The family moved to Houston. In the mid 1970s, when he was about 60, Mitzner decided to phase out of hosiery — too much competition from Asia — and into real estate. First it was shopping centers in Houston, though the early 1980s oil bust erased his equity and left Mitzner deep in debt. So he doubled down; with a \$40 million loan from Barclays he placed more bets. The best: 137 acres between Orlando and Tampa on the only I-4 interchange that Disney didn't already own. "This can be something," he declared. By 1989 he had 1,200 acres there. He held them for more than a decade, then teamed with Apollo Real Estate to build the \$900 million [Champions Gate](#) resort — RIDA's biggest project. "He loved big projects, loved creating jobs," says grandson Steven Mitzner. As he used to say, "It takes the same effort to do it bigger."

Meanwhile, Mitzner had made a sober return to Poland. The country had long been an anvil between Russia and Germany, but now with NATO protection, Mitzner was convinced it could thrive. Partnering with Apollo, he got in early, buying up \$900 million of real estate there. Mitzner's good timing helped revitalize Warsaw, and in 2006, landed him on the front page of the [Wall Street Journal](#) at age 90. But he wasn't investing out of nostalgic nationalism, and started selling Polish holdings while others were still piling in. Apollo-RIDA sold the Warsaw Trade Tower for \$150 million, a nearly \$70 million gain. They



*The new Marriott Marquis. Photo by Chris Helman.*

reinvested, and in 2013 recapitalized their 28-property Polish shopping center portfolio, selling \$650 million in senior debt. A separate banking consortium financed the [Marriott Marquis](#). The majority partner in many of Mitzner's projects is now publicly traded [Ares Management LP](#) (NYSE:ARES), which absorbed the Apollo real estate portfolio.

Mitzner came to believe that the only things worth owning are hotels and shopping centers, in the right locations, of course. In his autobiography, Mitzner said he regretted not bidding quite high enough to acquire the Warsaw Marriott (coulda had it for \$97 million). "I've learned my lesson: if you think something has real value — go for it. Even overpay if necessary, the property will pay you back the difference, if its value and location is really right." The Mitzners, through RIDA, are managing partners on some \$5 billion in real estate worldwide, including the Gaylord resort hotel in Aurora, Colo. and the Hilton Orlando.

In 2012 RIDA bid aggressively to beat out 5 other developers in a city bidding process to build it. The hotel is in a prime spot — downtown, adjacent to the convention center and a great park. It's a few blocks from [Toyota Center](#) (Rockets), [Minute Maid Park](#) (Astros) and [BBVA Compass Stadium](#) (Dynamo soccer). Super Bowl site [NRG Stadium](#) is a short ride away, as is Houston's art's district and the world-class [Texas Medical Center](#). Restaurants at the Marriott Marquis include [Biggio's](#), featuring a 20-foot tall TV screen, and [Xochi](#), a new [outpost](#) of superchef Hugo Ortega.

Building a hotel in Houston was Mitzner's way of giving back to his adopted hometown, says son Ira. The city needed it. [Mayor Sylvester Turner](#) says the [Marriott Marquis](#) "makes our city exponentially more attractive to the largest and most prestigious conferences and trade shows in the world."

Houston can be a hard city to love, especially during the hot months. (The city's unofficial slogan: "[Houston. It's Worth It.](#)") So why did Mitzner love it here? With its pro-growth attitude, no state income tax, and ease of doing business, Houston draws people seeking opportunity. It's the [fastest growing](#) big city in America, adding a million residents in the past decade. And [it's also the most diverse](#) at 6% Asian, 17% black, 36% latino and 40% white, according to the 2010 census. The city loves people with skin in the game — doesn't matter if you're from Vietnam, Colombia or a 4'10" refugee from the Siberian gulag. Says Ira, "He appreciated the sense that once you're here you're part of us." **F**

\*\*\*

*Senior Editor Chris Helman is based in Houston, Texas.  
Contact him on Twitter @chrishelman.*

#### **RECOMMENDED BY FORBES**

[Houston Texans Make \\$100 Million Mistake With J.J. Watt](#)

[2017 NFL Playoff Picks: Oakland Raiders Vs. Houston Texans Wild Card Odds Against...](#)

[Oakland Raiders Face The Houston Texans In First Playoff Game Since 2002 S...](#)

[2017 NFL Wild Card Picks: Houston Texans vs. Oakland Raiders Advice From Vegas...](#)

[The Richest Person In Every State](#)

[Thank You, Meryl Streep](#)

[The World's Highest-Paid Models 2016](#)

[Super Mario Run Is Coming To Ios On December 15](#)

---

This article is available online at:

2017 Forbes.com LLC™ All Rights Reserved