THE NICKEL-PLATED APPRENTICE...

“The next thing I know I got two nickel-plated .45s jammed into my temples and I’m scared sightless!”

To look at him now several decades after the above incident you would think there wasn’t much that could rattle Tony Deutsch. In his early fifties Tony is robust and ebullient. He is a Minotaur of a man. He spent much of his youth and prime young manhood as the owner/operator of a Body Shop out on Rt. 9. This work is at once brutish and creative. Basically you take a tortured, twisted, dented metal/fiberglass wreck and re-shape and restore it to original form: Heavy Metal Sumo Wrestling. Then you add the delicate yet toxic points, polishes and waxes to the best of your feminine side ability. Ten or twenty years of this kind of work can turn you into a seething, wheezing, exhausted beast of a man... But not so with Tony Deutsch. He is very much alive and well and always, it seems, in the moment. I suspect what happened to him in the jungle of Venezuela over thirty years ago may have something to do with all of this.

Tony Deutsch is a son of Wildwood, New Jersey. He arrived on the Island full time in 1975. Before that he stayed there every summer from his infancy. He started to work as an adolescent. He continued to work non-stop from then up until now. Most of his employment in the first half of his life was with the then rapidly budding Morey Organization which now dominates the Boardwalk and other economic sectors of the Wildwoods by-the-Sea. In the early 1970s he was a teen-age poolboy for the just built Ocean Holiday Motel, a Morey Brothers showcase at the time.

From there he rode the ever-rising Morey wave of expansion well into the next decade. He worked the Boardwalk rides and stands in various capacities summer after summer. He learned and understood the operation inside out. He was not afraid to get dirty or strain his lower back. He met his future wife there as well. Tony also forged a solid and trusting relationship with some of the original Morey family principles, especially Will Morey Sr. According to Tony Will Morey Sr. was his mentor, rabbi, life coach, Dutch Uncle and role model all rolled into one. Morey Sr. made Tony feel like a trusted and valued employee which spurred the young man on. And because of all of this he was selected to go on a somewhat adventurous business venture with the Moresys that would alter the course of his young life and bring him to the brink of a violent death in an exotic and corrupt Third World country. In the hot house vortex of the Caribbean Sea.

AMUSEMENT PARK MACHINATIONS...

Sometime in 1979 the Morey Organization got involved with several other amusement park operators from Europe and Canada. They had hatched a plan to take their collective acts on the road in November. It was down time winter. Why let the rides sit idle when it is always summer in the Tropics? We will bring it to them and they will come. We will not bring an army or build another petroleum plant. We will bring them a traveling amusement park complete with popcorn, pizza, Curley Fries, cotton candy and Lime Ricky’s. What kind of people on the face of the earth could resist it?

The cost of the logistics of an overseas operation of this magnitude are significant, so much so that significant if not surreal profits might have been expected. And why not? Suffice it to say, the amusement park coalition must have been driven and motivated. And in the beginning, as is often the case, all went well.

MAMBO MARACAIBO

19 year old Tony Deutsch was blown away by Maracaibo. It was a blast. And a wiggly one at that. There was an edge. It was un-clear to him so it felt refreshing rather than ominous. It wasn’t Puerto Rico (their first landfall) but Venezuela, an entirely different place. Perhaps it was the light and space of it all. Or the oppressive 3 digit heat. Maybe it was a little bit of ‘Wanderlust or Innocent Abroad? There was the smell of jungle foliage in his nostrils. Wild bird calls and strange animal sounds were mixed in with diesel fumes and raw sewage. After a day or two Tony Deutsch had the feeling he wasn’t on the Boardwalk anymore... On the material side he was making a decent buck while being hosed-up in a good air-conditioned hotel with a meal tab and some other amenities all on the arm of the Morey Crew.

One of Tony’s favorite recollections of his first days in Maracaibo was going up to the hotel rooftop to sun bathe. After stepping out onto the skylit roof he found a bevy of beautiful young American women lounging about in bikinis. They glistened in oil from head to toe as they sauntered themselves in the equatorial oven-setting of 112 degrees.

“I thought I died and went to Heaven!”

Upon inquiry Tony found out that the women were the wives of some L.A. Dodgers doing some winter gig in Venezuela. Not standing a chance against millionaire professional athletes, he still got a big kick out of it all.

Another kick was provided by Will Morey Jr. Somewhere along the line Will Jr. decided to ship his Chevy Blazer down South America Way as well. Tony thought it was a great gas to tool around Maracaibo in a shiny new Blazer with New Jersey tags, the tags of course being the best part. In addition to all of the perks and kicks Tony Deutsch was a hard-working employee with serious responsibilities. He was respected by his peers and foreman and most importantly, Will Morey Sr. who was at the heart and soul of the operation. Barely out of his teens Tony Deutsch was told he had great mechanical chops by veteran Boardwalk hands. He was really feeling his oats. Then things started to change right under his feet and all around him. The Mambo was about to end and another very different dance was about to begin.

UNDER THE VOLCANO FAIR GROUNDS

Back in 1979 Tony Deutsch was (as I have suggested and he has admitted) an Innocent Abroad. He did not know the Dark Side of Venezuela or the rest of South and Central America for that matter. First off there is the bloody boot print of the Conquistadors which will never go away. More than the land of Magical Realism it is the land of Black Magical Surrealism as well: steaming jungles, mutilated Indian ghosts, extreme wealth/crushing poverty, seething resentment, rabid generals, police chiefs and civil guardia sergeants, political vulgurances, vampire ceos, nightmare narcocorridors... And sudden violent death at the hands of people who would give you a machete epidermal for a Lime Ricky and a free ride on the Tram Car. It was all out there but yet to be seen. Or called upon. At least not by Tony Deutsch. But the slimy black worm was already beginning to hiss and turn just outside of the abandoned airport where the Colossus of the North had staked its amusement park claim.

It was a full-fledged North American/Western European Amusement Park. The coalition had set it up on an abandoned airport on the outskirts of Maracaibo. Some of the
According to Tony Deutsch everything went well at the Fair Grounds at first. It was a well-oiled machine at every level. There were other things that weren’t going so well but they appeared to be minor nuisances with the locals. Someone in the upper echelon of the Coalition may have promisedmenial jobs to the locals. Promises or not, locals kept showing up for work telling Tony and others that they were sent by someone in the front office. But there were no jobs; there was no more work to do. This did not sit well with the job seekers. They shuffled back out the gate disappointed or seething.

Several days later a wild-eyed professor took center stage on a platform adjacent to the roller-coaster. He whipped up the locals with some fiery oratory. The angry crowd grew bigger and stormed the grounds. Deutsch bolted for a pizza trailer. The crowd began lighting company mopeds with the fireworks Deutsch had left his passport behind as well as the usual din he heard several small trucks pull up and stop with a screech. Without turning or locking up he felt two nickel-plated .45s jammed into his temples. He let the plate down easy and rose up slowly with his hands in the air. The darkest part of a very strange trip was about to begin.

At single gunpoint Deutsch was taken to one of the capped Toyota pick-ups. He was guided into the bed with one of the managers, Jack Silar. There were about twelve hostages in the other vehicles.

As they caravanned down the midway he could see a big crowd of Fair workers walking towards them. The caravan jammed to a halt with automatic weapons coming out. The crowd stopped in its tracks. The men with guns got back in the trucks and drove out of the Grounds.

From this point on there is an endless stream of questions and speculation on the near paralyzed mind of Tony Deutsch. The inside of the truck was like a pizza oven. The fear has all of them parched, hoarse, silent. This was no Boardwalk ride that would end soon with laughter and a frozen coke. Discovering that he had left his passport behind as well as the usual din he heard several small trucks pull up and stop with a screech. Without turning or locking up he felt two nickel-plated .45s jammed into his temples. He let the plate down easy and rose up slowly with his hands in the air. The darkest part of a very strange trip was about to begin.

Somewhere along the rutted dirt road to nowhere the trucks stopped. Next to the road was a ditch in the jungle. His heart did a somersault. “This is it. They’re gonna shoot me and throw me in that hole. They do it all the time.” He was confident they would think he was some kind of undercover military type. They laughed at his Rambo histronics and sent him back upstairs.

“Where are you from?”
“North Wildwood, New Jersey.”

“Working the Fair Grounds.”

“What are you doing here?”

They asked him another series of questions that frightened and irritated him. He spoke briefly with the captors then provided the hostages with cigarettes and sandwiches. Almost immediately Deutsch pounced on the man and imprinted him to contact Will Morey Sr. Deutsch knew without a doubt that Will Sr. would not leave Venezuela without them. It was his last best hope in the preceding 13 hours of organizing terror and limbo.

A relatively short period of time elapsed following the strangers’ departure and the arrival of Will Morey Sr. Tony Deutsch first saw him after being lined-up on the stairs to the first floor. Will Morey Sr. was with another man, the captors and some hostages. Will Sr. was counting money—American Cash Dollars—and handing it over to one of the captors. The captor then instructed one of his cohorts to release one of the hostages. Will Sr. did this several times over, freeing one individual after another. Tony Deutsch is profoundly relieved yet still a little insane. While going downstairs he reaches another almost comic conclusion which he keeps to himself: I gotta find a place to hide! They’re gonna snatch Will Sr! He’s got all the money! This passed and he was released. One by one they were led to a van and driven away from their jungle prison. The long strange trip was over. Bouncing along in the black jungle night Tony Deutsch felt the light, once again, shining all over him.

“I remember like it was yesterday, I did not talk about it for all those years until the book came out [Morey’s Wild Ride]. The reason was because I did not think people would believe it, because even when people read the book they still asked me, ‘did this really happen?’ Like it sounds too far fetched for some people to believe it. I just say ‘yes, it did.’ I received some calls about my story the past 2 years, but I did not want to do any interviews. Afterwards I thought about it. I wanted to tell my story to The SUN before anyone else printed it and got it all wrong. And I am glad that before I die, I had the chance to tell my story, and tell what a great guy Will Sr. was and how he saved my life.”

~Tony Deutsch

Joanne and Tony on their wedding day in April 1986

Tony, Joanne and Tony on vacation in Ocean City, MD

Outside the office in Puerto Rico, Nov. 1979