



THE  
STORY *of*  
HILTON  
HOTELS

‘LITTLE AMERICAS’

Barbara Czyżewska

(G)

*For my Parents*

*Rodzicom*

# **The Story of Hilton Hotels**

**'Little Americas'**

**Barbara Czyżewska**

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## Welcome

This is a book of stories. Stories of a company which, at the time of writing, is turning 100 years old and keeps getting stronger year on year by opening new hotels around the world. These are also stories of people, and as in every person's life, there are ups and downs, successes and failures, battles, struggles and sheer luck. Success takes persistence, commitment and courage, and these few stories prove that Hilton, both the man and the company, had all of them.

It is not one linear story. Despite the fact that the company was founded by one man and for many years was under his direct supervision, every single property has had its own life and its own character. Each story has its own background, including social, political, economic and cultural conditions which all had enormous impact on hotels' openings, operations and, sometimes, closures. It is the very nature of hotels that they do not function in a vacuum but are deeply embedded in local settings, playing immense roles in the lives of travellers as well as of local people looking out and beyond the borders of their countries. Sometimes hotels open doors to the world which would, otherwise, be inaccessible. Throughout its 100-year history Hilton opened thousands of doors and welcomed millions of souls, workers and visitors, but this book looks in particular at stories of four of its early properties. These are hotels which were established in the early days of Hilton's internationalisation, in the 1950s and 1960s. They all played fundamental roles in Hilton's expansion and were instrumental in building the necessary experience, connections and expertise to consequently expand worldwide.

The 1950s and 1960s were decades of most interesting historical transformations and Hilton was often right in the centre of socio-political shifts which would, literally, change the world. Throughout these changes Hilton, as a company and simply as a group of people, had to find ways to operate in foreign, often hostile environments, by applying most innovative solutions and practices. We will see that in the early years of Hilton's expansion there was a relatively small circuit of individuals involved in most important decisions. Some of Conrad Hilton's closest colleagues, associates and friends



including Olive Wakeman, Curt Strand, John Houser, Dean Carpenter and Bob Caverly, as well as his sons, Barron and Nicky, will appear in all chapters. They were, effectively, the team responsible for setting Hilton on a pathway to becoming a global company. Sometimes they were correct in their judgments, sometimes they were wrong. Most of the times they succeeded but, at times, they failed. History has shown that, despite challenges, they prevailed. This is a book of stories, stories of struggle, success, failure and change. Welcome to Hilton.

It is my goal to tell the stories of Hilton's 'little Americas' by embedding them in the wider socio-cultural contexts of host locations. Hotels are unique institutions which serve as bridges between the host and the guest, between the local and the foreign, between the familiar and the unknown. They are, thus, deeply rooted in contexts of not only their home country but also the ever-evolving settings of the countries in which they provide their services. In order to fully understand the roles and unique positions of Hilton's properties in Madrid, Istanbul, Havana and London, I consider the key socio-political arrangements prevalent in these destinations at the time. I do not attempt to offer exhaustive insights into each of these situations as there is wealth of literature focusing on those in much greater depth. I urge readers who develop an interest in the rule of Francisco Franco, the role of the American Mafia in bringing Fidel Castro to power, or any other of the subjects discussed in this book, to refer to the specialist literature which I cite in the forthcoming chapters.

It is not the aim of this book to present the complete history of Hilton as a multinational hotel company. What I aim to showcase is a selection of early international properties which played instrumental roles in Hilton's global expansion. The selection of destinations is not accidental, as they all represent certain milestones in the company's history. I endeavour to document as truthfully as possible the decisions Conrad Hilton and his associates were making in the process of developing Hilton hotels abroad but I, in no way, suggest that my understanding cannot be challenged. It is feasible that information not previously available is, at some moment in history, brought to light, at which point researchers might want to revisit the situations I am describing on these pages. To provide as truthful account as possible, I use internal documentation and correspondence deposited in the Hilton Collection at the Hospitality Industry Archives, Hilton College, University of Houston or, when available, in collections of individual hotels, as in case

of the London Hilton and the Istanbul Hilton. I also make use of extensive press publications, magazine articles, television documentaries and popular literature. These were incomparable in their ability to bring the events from the 1950s and 1960s back to life. The reports on opening celebrations, public disputes and controversies surrounding not only the development of hotels but also Conrad Hilton's personal life took me on a fascinating journey back in time and across continents. I now invite the readers to join me on this journey and experience Conrad Hilton's 'little Americas' from the comfort of their own armchairs.

## **A note on referencing**

A note ought to be made on the referencing style this book follows. Consistent referencing proved to be a challenge because of the wide variety of sources utilised. Material ranged from published books, through to newspaper articles and unpublished documents such as letters or company memorandums. In order to achieve as much consistency as possible, footnotes are used throughout the book to refer to unpublished sources, newspaper clippings and other archival material. All these, unless otherwise stated, were collected at the Hospitality Industry Archives, Hilton College, University of Houston. In case of published material, i.e. books, academic journal articles or websites, the Harvard system, which is the most commonly adopted referencing system in British institutions, is adopted. The aim of using footnotes is to give as much information as possible on material which would otherwise be difficult to identify. For the sake of confidentiality, it was decided not to include names of customers appearing in the internal documentation, which it is perceived does not affect the quality of data. The names of employees of Hilton Hotels Corporation or Hilton International are cited, where publicly available. Therefore, a footnote which reads: "*Letter to Conrad Hilton on 23rd July 1974*" refers to communication between a customer and Conrad Hilton, whilst "*Curt Strand to Conrad Hilton on 12th January 1960*" refers to communication between two employees of Hilton Hotels Corporation.

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## Dramatis personae

**Conrad N. Hilton** – Founder of Hilton Hotels Corporation and Hilton International

**Gus Hilton** – Conrad Hilton's father

**Mary Adeline Hilton** – Conrad Hilton's mother

**Mary Barron Hilton** – Conrad Hilton's first wife

**Barron Hilton** – Conrad's Hilton son and Chairman, President and Chief Executive Officer of Hilton Hotels Corporation

**Nicky Hilton** – Conrad Hilton's eldest son and Head of Hilton International Division

**Zsa Zsa Gabor** – Conrad Hilton's second wife and celebrity

**Olive Wakeman** – Conrad Hilton's Administrative Assistant

**Curt Strand** – President of Hilton International between 1968 and 1986

**John Houser** – Executive Vice President of Hilton International

**Dean Carpenter** – Conrad Hilton's brother in law and Vice President and Director of Hilton Hotels International

**Robert (Bob) Caverly** – Vice President of Hilton International

**Arthur Elmiger** – General Manager of Caribe Hilton in Puerto Rico and Castellana Hilton in Madrid, the opening General Manager of the Beverly Hilton, General Manager at the Mexico City Hilton, later Head of Latin America

**William Irvin** – Vice President of Hilton International

**Gregory Dillon** – Hilton's in-house Counsel

**Carl Hilton** – Conrad Hilton's brother

**Jose Menendez** – General Manager of Habana Hilton

**Rodolfo Caspari** – Assistant to Hilton Hotels Corporation's Vice President (Havana)

**Andres Zala** – President of the Board of Directors of Inmobiliaria el Carmen

**Fred Joyce** – Hilton's Public Relations Adviser

**Rudy Basler** – General Manager of the Istanbul Hilton

**Louis del Coma** – the first General Manager of the London Hilton

