

COVER STORY

IN depth profiles ON THE WHO'S WHO



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J. Claudio Stivelman On His Watch[©]

By Aliza Davidovitch

Of all of Claudio Stivelman's possessions—and he has many—it is a gold pocket watch his 84-year-old father, Michael, gave him just a few years ago which he treasures most. For certain, he does not need it to give him the time of day as this Miami real estate developer owns over 100 watches. But this particular ticker, with its pleasing alarm chimes, was often used to lull him when he was a child. And though this antique timepiece, uncommonly, did not hang by a long chain, now knowing Stivelman's story and that of his father, I nonetheless imagine it swinging like a symbolic pendulum, not from left to right, but from the past to the present as a perpetual parley between then and now.

With a harsh clang, the pendulum takes us back to 1941. Seventy-one years ago Stivelman's father also received a beautiful watch as a gift. He prized it and hoped to wear it proudly after his bar mitzvah. But fate would have it that his wrist would remain bare, his stomach would go empty, his heart would be broken, and his family and people would be murdered as the Nazis marched across Europe and smashed hope off the face of every watch. As for his own watch, an Omega, it was bartered for a few morsels of food to keep him alive.

"The hands of time caress us one moment and then pickpocket what we cherish most the next."

Yes, perhaps God cracks a smile or even laughs when man makes plans. But watches certainly keep a straight face while the hands of time caress us one moment and then pickpocket what we cherish most the next. And though the hands of Jews have often been tied so that they could not fight back, Jews tick tick tick in defiance of those oppressors who try to impose expiration dates upon them. Their indomitable force does not yield to time and neither does Claudio Stivelman, the man with over 100 watches, who ironically is known for always being late, as he was, characteristically, for our interview and our follow-up interview as well.

So what does a journalist do as she sits alone at a long conference table in a ceiling-to-floor-windowed room waiting for someone who, from the onset, was reluctant to be interviewed? She looks out upon the munificence of the deep blue waters of Miami's Intercoastal and holds a board meeting with her thoughts. One never knows what to expect with the very rich. Will he be self-absorbed, as some often are? Will he think he knows it all, as some often do? Will he be short of patience, as some can be?

But then, the conference room door opens and a smile as bright and warm as Florida's sunshine glares in and puts an end to my board meeting. Kindness is all over his face. With a charming Brazilian accent, Stivelman apologizes for his tardiness; it's apparent that it was more bothersome to him than to me. The lay psychologist in me later surmised that his lateness might be his way of trying to control time and spurn its grip on him; but the professional journalist in me let him answer the question for himself.

"I live very intensely and put my heart and soul into everything I do and always try to maximize the benefits and best of each moment," Stivelman says. "In those efforts to use time wisely, passionately and productively, I don't leave myself enough time to travel from one destination to the next."

With the final analysis in, however, the results show that on his watch he has leveraged his minutes to great worth, both as a businessman and as a mensch.



Photograph by Andrew Goldstein

J. Claudio Stivelman, and his business partner of 12 years, Gilbert Benhamou, head one of the fastest growing real estate development companies in South Florida. With over \$2 billion in sales, they specialize in high-rise luxury residential condominiums, single family homes, retail and mixed-use projects. This duo of developers believes that Aventura is destined to be the Beverly Hills of Florida. But what invigorates Stivelman most is not merely the profitable returns of his business, but rather the facts on the ground. "A smart entrepreneurial individual can make money selling almost anything, but once the item is sold, it's gone forever," he shares. "But in real estate development, what you create is always there. It becomes a perpetual and standing monument to one's ideas, hard work and dedication, one that people can continually enjoy for generations and one

that I can proudly point to. And that gives me great satisfaction."

Indeed, with Stivelman's high style, what started out as ambitious and visionary ideas have manifested into first class state-of-the-art super-structures that have changed the Aventura skyline. His company, Shefaor, ranks among the best on the South Florida CEO 500 Private Companies List, has been the winner of six Florida's Best Awards and continues to receive thumbs-up recognition as a trend-setting real estate development company. Stivelman was also recently nominated as an honorary member of the Board of Directors of the Developers and Builders Alliance.

With so much to brag about one may wonder why he was reluctant to give an interview. In fact, try googling him and you'll find that Stivelman has given very few interviews. Therefore we can here knock out the first question I asked myself at my private board meeting: "Will he be self-absorbed, as some often are?" The answer is, no! He is a family man of great humility who is reluctant to talk about himself at all, leaving many aspiring interviewers with many a blank page. But there is one thing Stivelman cannot resist doing, and that is turning darkness into light. For one thing, he is a worthy role model for a scrambling new generation and he feels obligated to share some light. Secondly, his father marched through history's blackest years, the Holocaust. Consequently, Stivelman feels a strong sense of obligation to keep the memories alive and to show that Jews are still burning bright despite those who tried to snuff them out.

Did I say Stivelman's father "marched" through history? Well that verb may be a little too robust for prisoners who all but collapsed at the end of human strength and human will as they were forced to walk endless and aimless distances—sometimes hundreds of miles, in the bitter cold, with a scarcity of food, and no respite. Those whose strength petered out and could not keep up were whipped into being "reenergized." Others, perhaps the luckier, were shot to death. You see, being the creative murderers that they were, the Nazis had found another means of killing Jews—Death Marches.

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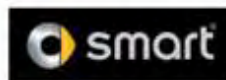
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“People and life can rob you of your dignity, but your integrity is yours alone to give.”



In his book, *The Death March*, Michael Stivelman writes:

“At 10 a.m., we started our march, our first steps in an ordeal with no end, designed to drain us, to torture and kill, a slow, sadistic murder, an execution with no sentence, a diabolical way of bringing about our death without having to kill us, a gradual extermination, cowardly and vile, in which, hypocritically, the murderers would not take it on themselves to deal the death blow. That’s not how it was for everyone though. The old, the sick and those unable to walk were taken off in carts that never reached their official destinations. Most were executed on the way....”

By the war’s end, about a quarter of a million Jews had died on death marches. Claudio's grandfather, Yaacov, once a prominent lawyer, was among them. He had been a friend of Revisionist Zionist leader Zeev Jabotinsky, as well as his legal advisor. But like 6 million others, Yaacov died with Zionism in his heart, the Holy Land forever to be but a dream. At the age of 42 he was shot by the Nazis and then tossed into a mass grave.

It is after his murdered grandfather that our interviewee and real estate mogul gets his Hebrew name. And it is not only for mnemonic purposes. Judaism teaches that there is great prophecy in one’s name. The biblical Yaacov was a role model who was persistent in “rising up” along his life’s journey, always aiming to make himself and the world a better place. The extremely philanthropic Claudio Stivelman tries to do the same in all that he does. He was recently honored by Chai Lifeline Southeast, an international organization that provides health service programs to families with children suffering from life-threatening illnesses. Although Stivelman is particularly active with that organization, he gives generously across the board to both Jewish and non-Jewish causes and has set up his own charitable foundation. When I asked him how much money he gives to charity each year, he asked me to stop my MP3 recorder. After we discussed the matter, I turned it back on. On the record I can say: “Holy cow, he gives a lot!”

“A primary teaching of Judaism, which my parents taught me is to help all others without discrimination,” he says. “It is written to be kind to the stranger because we too were strangers in a strange land.”

“In any relationship there is always a negotiation going on.”

Indeed if blessings are to be found in Hebrew names, it is thus fitting that Stivelman’s ever-so-successful company, Shefaor, is comprised of two Hebrew words, *shefa* and *or*, which respectively mean “overflowing abundance” and “light.”

The name was chosen by Stivelman’s dearest friend, the world famous Rabbi Sholom Lipskar of the The Shul of Bal Harbour, who incidentally is also a developer—not of bricks and mortar, but rather of Jewish souls, Jewish identity and Jewish responsibility. It may be a clue as to why Stivelman, who is not religious, has a mezuzah on every door in his office. The rabbi, with his beautiful woman of valor, Rebbetzin Chani Lipskar, has spent a lifetime rebuilding The House of David, one *neslama* and one mitzvah at a time.

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But as far as what Shefaor is building, or not, Stivelman has said that the professional accomplishment he is most proud of is knowing which deals not to do. “You’ve got to know when to walk away and when to run.” It is those instincts, apparently, that have kept Shefaor strong and standing even during the worst real estate downturns in U.S. history.

But when Stivelman is actually set to negotiate a deal, beware. Since childhood, he has been a master chess player who will efficiently get his opponents into checkmate. “I learned that before I make any move, I should put myself in my opponent’s position and anticipate his strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats,” Stivelman has said in a past interview. “I employ this advice each time I step into a negotiation.”

Even as a kid, this real estate mogul would conquer the Monopoly board, putting up “Stivelman Developments”

on every avenue, albeit plastic ones. He would bet on each game, which he usually won. The die had been cast in his infancy. He was born to be an entrepreneurial maneuverer. In fact, he is set to write a book about the art of negotiating with the working title: *They Are All Opponents*.

“In any relationship, whether it be in business or even between a child and parent, a husband and wife, and even with God, there is always a negotiation going on,” Stivelman feels. “In life, we are always receiving and giving, giving and receiving. It is a constant negotiation even when we are not aware of it.” He suggested that even where we sat during our interview was a negotiation, which made me wonder what he would have done if I’d plopped myself down in his office chair and put my feet up on his desk.

Artech a Shefaor development





Nonetheless, as far as negotiations go, he says he knows how to lose graciously, increasingly so as the years go by. Still, he much prefers to win. He also says that the only chance he might have had to survive the Holocaust himself would have been because of his ability to negotiate. However, as a child born and raised in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where Jew hatred and envy was not lacking, he used his fists not his art of negotiating to fight off kids who hurled anti-Semitic slurs his way.



Stivelman's father had left Europe for Brazil after the war to start a new life in a new continent that wasn't irrigated with Jewish blood. It was there that he met his wife and started a family. But how could he forget the life he left behind? Though it was righteous and brave gentiles who saved his and his mother's life, who could have known in Secureni how deep the hatred went while gentiles smiled kindly upon their neighbors in day-to-day life. But then the pogrom broke out a week before the death marches began, and all neighborly and civilized masks dropped. When the Romanian soldiers entered Secureni, they



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gave the villagers seven days to "loot all the properties belonging to Jews, rape their girls and women, kill whomever they wanted." And they did so with glee.



While in hiding, the Stivelmans could hear the shrill shrieks of their 16-year-old neighbor being raped by a group of Romanian soldiers; she was then tossed onto the ground like garbage. Bleeding profusely, she later died from her wounds. Then there was the 18-year-old local musician, a percussionist who played with a Jewish orchestra. One day he was their confrere, and the next he led a gang of thugs to their houses, made them undress and run through the streets naked while whipping them and humiliating them. With the exception of one musician, they were all killed. And then there was the devoted butler



"We must dream as if we are going to live forever and live as if we are going to die tomorrow."

who worked for a Jewish family and helped them build a hidden cellar where they would be safe from the oncoming Nazis. When the looters came, he was the first to lead them to the hideout and expose the family. They were then paraded into the street where they too were stripped naked and humiliated by the frothing mob of haters. Consequently, the entire family committed suicide. Who cared? Jewish life was cheap.

But our profilee, Claudio Stivelman's life, apparently was not. His was held at a premium and he had to leave Brazil in 1991 for Miami because of repeated plots to have him kidnapped. He hadn't waited to reach North America to live the American dream. While living in his native country, with degrees in civil engineering and economics, he had already established a development and construction company and built more than 15 multi-family residential buildings in Rio's most luxurious areas. The sales generated more than \$1 billion in revenue. He lobbied directly with government officials when he became president of Brazil's Consumer Credit Association (ADECIF). He also became president of the country's largest and most prominent young businessman's association. He was also his father's son.

With a determination that many Holocaust survivors share, Stivelman's father took Brazil by storm and began his march toward life, becoming a very rich man in the process. He began by selling jewelry door to door, grew a very successful business specializing in pearls, and then, in a full pivot, decided to take advantage of the opening up of Brazil's capital markets. He pursued his economics degree at night, founded his own house of finance in 1964, and to this day sits as chairman, president, and CEO of his own bank, Banco Cédula.

Claudio, too, worked as CFO at the family bank until his own ambitions led him up his own ladder of success. "My free-spirit rebelled against corporate norms," Stivelman says. That character trait fired up the entrepreneur in him. He always knew that whatever he did, it would yield big returns. In the banking world, credit was the limit; in building high-rises, the sky was the limit.

As for Stivelman's own children, of whom he is extremely proud, they too have branched out on their own. His eldest daughter, Alessandra, is a lawyer; his next daughter, Daniela, who studied business at Emory University and worked in business, is now pursuing her Ph.D. in psychology; and his son, Leonardo, the

youngest, with a degree from NYU Stern School of Business is working at Deutsche Bank Group in New York.

And though his own children are well on their way in life, it doesn't mean he didn't usher them forward with great values and advice. "Success cannot come at the price of honesty, character and integrity," Stivelman strongly believes. "If you forsake integrity to make it, you give up everything that you are." People and life can rob you of your dignity, but your integrity is yours alone to give. Consistent with his views about the usage of time he also likes to share the following sound bite as guiding words: "We must dream as if we are going to live forever, and live as if we are going to die tomorrow."

This inspiring developer says that unyielding persistence should be the driving force behind success. He advises youngsters embarking in his own field not to fear being different, to take chances and to dream big, even if they have to start small. And though he believes that God's help can go a long way in advancing success and big dreams, he also believes in pushing destiny, making things happen and seizing opportunity.

Despite Stivelman's vast experiences and ready ability to offer sound advice, I was glad to discover the answer to the second question raised at the "board meeting" in my mind. "Will he think he knows it all, as some often do?" The answer is, no! I had finally found him, the interviewee of my dreams, the man who doesn't have an answer for everything (only Jewish mothers have such a hefty database). Throughout the centuries philosophers have questioned the purpose of life. Yet, I've never interviewed a rich man who didn't believe he knew the answer, until I met Stivelman.

"God establishes what man's purpose is," he says. "But man establishes what his obligations are." For Stivelman, those obligations are to be kind and help others and to always seek the road to happiness and to simply "be happy." His philosophy echoes not only the sentiments of the famous Bobby McFerrin song, "Don't Worry, Be Happy," but also the

Hasidic teachings of Rav Nachman who said, "Always remember: happiness is not a side matter in your spiritual journey—it is essential." Being happy is considered a mitzvah, and mitzvahs bring light into the world.

Yes, Stivelman was born into wealth, but it doesn't necessarily mean that he was born into happiness. Though his beautiful and classy mother, Raquel, filled their home with warmth, love, compassion and culture, the first life lesson, and oft repeated one, that he learned from his father was: "There are no friends in this world." That isolationist mantra put reins on Stivelman's heart, a big passionate life-loving heart that was meant to embrace the whole world without fetters. But for

*"Always remember:
happiness is not a side
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his father, the mark of the Holocaust ran too deep for him to trust again. Yet, it is not a number on his arm that reminds him of man's ability to turn so mercilessly on his fellow man, but rather a dog bite on his hand that reminds him of a friend's ability to turn so hatefully on a friend.

Just because he survived the Holocaust, doesn't mean that parts of him didn't die. His childhood best friend, a gentile boy named Alex, who also happened to be the son of his father's law partner, helped dish out the lethal blow. The two families were very close and the lads were almost like brothers. They ran youth's fields together, played together, laughed together and for a time even lived together. They appeared lovingly inseparable until Europe's foundations shook and revealed chasms between people that must have been there all along. When a pogrom broke out in his town and provisions were scarce, Michael Stivelman snuck out of the family

hiding place and at great risk ran to his friend's house to get food. Alex was extremely generous—with his hate. The moment he spotted his lifelong friend, he screamed out: "You dirty Jew! Get out of here, go away, or I'll kill you! You Jews are worse than poisonous snakes and ought to be exterminated. Long live our great leader, Hitler! Heil Hitler." Then he sicked his dog on him. The scars are still there. Oh yes, the scars are still there. To this day, Claudio Stivelman's father very cautiously admits friends into his life and with great discernment.

But Claudio cannot walk that lonely road, even if it would be lined with his magnificent building developments. Without joy and friendship, can one really define oneself as successful? The kind-hearted Claudio was always prone to being popular, loves people and says that he has many great friends of all religions whom he trusts completely. "I have not gone through what my father did, thank God, and I therefore have great faith in humanity," he shares.

It is that optimism that lies at the core of Jewish continuity. The callous hands of time have never been able to choke the hope out of the children of Israel. Without forgetting his father's history, he has learned to live, to laugh and to love again. Yes, Stivelman may point to his buildings as the monuments of his success, but the Jewish people, the victims of the Holocaust, can point to him, to his children, and to the trees he has planted in *Eretz Yisroel* as our triumph of light over darkness, of hope over despair, of life over death, of Jewish perpetuity despite all those who tried to unwind our watch.

Tick, tick, tick. The hour is getting late. As I close my recorder, I get the answer to my final question. "Will he be short of patience, as some can be?" The answer, by his own admission, is yes! Whether it's his Latin temperament or not, I was glad to discover he wasn't perfect after all. I don't know what he had next on schedule that day, but Claudio Stivelman has chosen to set his watch for happiness. Let's just hope all 100 of them are in sync.