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The real-estate developer, pictured in Miami in January 2009, envisioned the city's downtown as a place to live, play and work. MICHAEL FRANCIS MCELROY/ZUMA PRESS

By *James R. Hagerty* June 7, 2024 10:00 am ET

When he arrived in New York as a Holocaust survivor in 1948, Tibor Hollo took a first job in a curtain factory on the Lower East Side for 45 cents an hour. He found a tiny apartment for \$2 a week.

“Do you speak English?” the landlady asked. “Almost,” he said.

The apartment had furniture “from 1820, more or less,” he recalled in a [2018 speech](#) to students at Florida International University. The landlady informed him that his quarters came with a balcony. That turned out to be the fire escape.

Hollo (pronounced “hollow”) soon turned himself into a building contractor and later became a real-estate developer in Miami, where he transformed the skyline with luxury apartment towers and hotels over the next six decades. In the 1990s, he had surgery for skin cancer that disfigured his face. He died May 1 at the age of 96.

A vertical vision

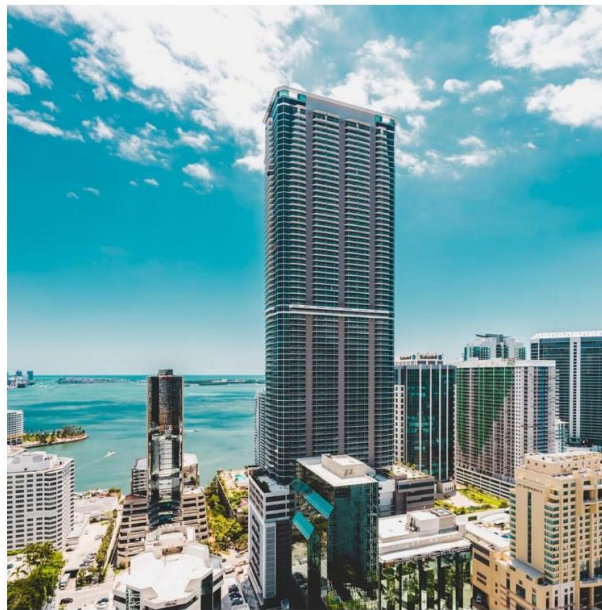
After moving to Miami in 1956, Hollo began envisioning the city's downtown as a place to live and play as well as to work. He started buying plots of land, some of which he was still developing in his old age.

Given the narrow stretch of land between the Atlantic Ocean and the Everglades, he saw one possibility: "We can only grow vertically," he told the Miami Herald in a 2016 review of his career. "We cannot decimate the lands that we have by going into the Everglades to build homes."

In speeches, he deplored suburban sprawl as wasteful, both in terms of the environment and time lost to commuting. In the 1950s, returning GIs were willing to accept a long commute to allow themselves their own plot of land and driveway, even if that meant spending time with their children only on weekends, he said. His bet was that more people in succeeding generations would choose vertical living in city centers over long commutes. At least in Miami, that proved true.

"We came a long way from the dream of G.I. Joe," he said in 2018.

In the 1970s and 1980s, his company, Florida East Coast Realty, developed residential and commercial buildings, a hotel, a marina and a mall in downtown Miami. In the 1980s, Hollo's firm owned the Eden Roc hotel in Miami Beach.



The projects of Hollo's development firm included the Panorama Tower in Miami, pictured in 2018.
PHOTO: NOTIMEX/NEWSCOM/ZUMA PRESS

In Miami's Brickell neighborhood, the firm has developed office, hotel and residential projects, including the 85-story Panorama residential tower, whose amenities include theaters and daycare for pets. Hollo also developed buildings

elsewhere in Florida, in the New York area and in Nevada, North Carolina and Michigan.

His firm—now run by his sons, Jerome and Wayne Hollo—aims to build a tower called One Bayfront Plaza in downtown Miami on land Hollo acquired in the late 1980s. That project would be the firm’s biggest and is likely to include residences, a hotel, offices and retail space.

A boxcar to Auschwitz

Tibor Hollo, an only child, was born July 13, 1927, into a Jewish family in Budapest. His father, Julius Hollo, was a lawyer. The family moved to Paris in 1933. After the German occupation of France during World War II, Tibor Hollo and his parents were sent to the Drancy internment camp in a suburb of Paris. Prisoners there, many of them foreign-born Jews who had sought refuge in France, languished behind barbed wire in a U-shaped structure built in the 1930s as a housing project, according to the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum.



After the German occupation of France during World War II, Tibor Hollo and his parents were sent to the Drancy internment camp in France. PHOTO: ALAMY

Like many of the inmates at Drancy, the Hollos were sent by rail to the Auschwitz concentration camp in Germany. “Fewer than 2,000 of the approximately 64,000 Jews deported from the Drancy camp survived the Holocaust,” according to the museum.

In a 2018 speech at Lynn University in Boca Raton, Fla., Hollo recalled being packed so tightly into a boxcar on the way to Auschwitz that it was difficult to breathe. “Traveling to Auschwitz in those small boxcars made me appreciate the little things like fresh air,” he said. “I did not know where Auschwitz was, but I knew I was being sent there to die.”

At Auschwitz, he said, he was assigned to clean soldiers' quarters. He and his father were separated at the camp from his mother and never saw her again.

Hollo and his father later were forced to join a march to the Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp in Austria. "It was so cold that when prisoners fell, their cheeks would freeze to the ground," Hollo said. U.S. troops liberated the surviving inmates in May 1945. Hollo was 17 years old and more than 6 feet tall. He weighed about 90 pounds.

To New York with \$18

Back in Paris, Hollo studied architecture and was a member of a water polo team. When he arrived by ship at New York's Ellis Island in 1948, he had about \$18 in his pocket.

After working briefly in the curtain factory, Hollo found a job as an estimator for a general contractor. He noticed that few contractors were interested in the difficult and dirty jobs of building or repairing docks and other port facilities on the New York waterfront. He created his own contracting firm and began winning those port contracts. Then he diversified into other types of building contracts in New York, Detroit and other cities.

During a business trip in Florida, he was so impressed with Miami—then a "sleepy little town," as he put it—that he decided to move there and switch from construction to property development.

Hollo tried to avoid overextending himself by focusing on only one or two projects at a time and holding down debt whenever possible to 40% of a project's cost. Even so, he was caught with too much debt during the real-estate slump of the late 1980s and early 1990s, when he lost control of several of his properties, including the Eden Roc hotel.

"In those days, I lost lots of money of mine, tens of millions of dollars," Hollo told the Miami Herald in 2008. "I didn't lose anybody else's money. That's all I can tell you about it."

'Don't borrow too much'

At the end of his talk at Florida International University, Hollo asked: "Any questions? I'm delighted to answer, even if I don't know the answer."

A student asked for advice on what not to do. Hollo offered only one suggestion: "Don't borrow too much money."

Later in his career, Hollo foresaw trouble and scaled back his development ahead of the 2008-09 recession, which left Miami with a glut of unsold condominiums. In 2009, he took advantage of steep discounts to buy prime space on Brickell Avenue in Miami.

Hollo's survivors include his wife of 57 years, Sheila Hollo, along with five children, 11 grandchildren and 14 great grandchildren. An earlier marriage ended in divorce.

Hollo liked to look forward, projecting robust demand for space in whatever building he was putting up. He rarely mentioned his Holocaust experience. When he did, in the final few years of his life, tears flowed more readily than words.

In old age, he worried that the lessons of the Holocaust were fading from memories. He funded educational programs designed to preserve those lessons. In January 2022, he agreed to [sit down in a replica](#) of the kind of boxcar that carried him to Auschwitz. A television reporter asked Hollo what message he wished to convey. Again, his answer was concise. "Love thy neighbor," Hollo said. "Love thy neighbor."

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