

SIGMUND MANDELBAUM



The house where Sigmund Mandelbaum lived in Działoszyce, Poland, is still standing, but it is locked and empty.

Once, 5,600 Jews lived in Działoszyce, more than 75 percent of the town's population. In 1942, the Nazis took the elderly Jews of Działoszyce, including Sigmund's father and stepmother, to a pit and shot them. The rest – Sigmund, his sister and brother-in-law and their children among them – were marched to trains and sent to concentration camps. Only Sigmund survived.

The Mandelbaums were a multi-talented family. Sigmund's parents, Chaim and Esther Mandelbaum, ran a ready-to-wear business and made shirts and underwear on the first floor of their home. They leased the downstairs to a bakery.

Sigmund's mother minded the store. His father traveled to Łódź to buy goods. He also painted signs, handled occupational licenses for the government, served as president of two welfare organizations and was a synagogue *chazan*, cantorial chanter of prayers, for more than 40 years. On Friday nights, people stopped outside the Mandelbaums' balcony to hear the family singing *zmirot*, Sabbath songs. Sigmund left school after the third grade to help in the store and was tutored at home.

At 13, finding Działoszyce too small, he went to Łódź and worked for his sister-in-law finishing ladies' clothing. At 15, says Sigmund, "My heart told me to learn a trade." To his family's embarrassment, he became a painter. In the concentration camps, the skill saved his life. Sigmund attempted but was unable to reach Palestine in 1928.

During the war, he and his family were sent to concentration camps. Sigmund escaped from the Płaszów camp and hid on a farm. He departed however, upon learning that farmers sometimes killed families they hid and stole their belongings. Sigmund walked to Krakow, but there he was recaptured. He spent the next three years in concentration camps – Auschwitz, Stuttgart, Stutthof, Buchenwald and finally Theresienstadt, from which he was liberated.

After the war, Sigmund discovered that only two second cousins and his nephew, Jack Mandelbaum, had survived.

Sigmund and Jack came to Kansas City together in 1946. Within two years, Sigmund married Helen Lewkowicz and owned a grocery store at 24th Street and Woodland Avenue. "I didn't know the language, I didn't know the goods," he said, "but Helen told me: 'Honey, I trust you. You'll make it.'"

Helen was pregnant when Sigmund bought a home at 72nd Street and Troost Avenue for \$17,250. Within six years, the store did so well he invested in a larger store at 79th Street and Prospect Avenue. In 1969, he sold it to Les Jacobson, a kosher butcher.

For the next 25 years, he kept busy investing in real estate, managing a Hen House and a warehouse, and selling paint. Sigmund and Helen have two daughters; Elaine, who died in December 2000, and Cherie.

Sigmund loves America. He doesn't even mind paying taxes.

"This country has been good to me," he says. "You live in a home, you pay rent. You live in a country, somebody has to pay for it. The difference between here and Poland is that here, the people are the government."



Portrait by Gloria Baker Feinstein

Excerpt from *From the Heart: Life Before and After the Holocaust ~ A Mosaic of Memories*

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