

Jack Mandelbaum

Jack – Janek in Polish – grew up in a secular Jewish home in the Baltic Sea port city of Gdynia, Poland.

Because Gdynia had a small Jewish population and no private Jewish school or synagogue, Jack attended the public school, which was oriented toward Catholicism. At Christmas, he joined his Catholic school friends going house to house singing carols.

On Passover, he remembers eating matzos, and being fitted, along with his brother and sister, for new clothes and shoes. Jack was 12 when his parents hired a bar mitzvah tutor. His father, Mejloch Mandelbaum, had been drafted to serve in the Baltic and stayed in the region to start a fish cannery. His father wanted to immigrate to Australia but did not in order to avoid a six-month separation from his wife.

The Mandelbaums' large two-bedroom apartment, which was in the most prominent spot in the city, was a 10-minute walk from the beach. The housekeeper arrived each morning in time to bring in still-warm milk delivered fresh from the farm. Jack entered bicycle races and collected stamps from foreign consulates in town. In the cold winters, he and his siblings warmed themselves under down bedspreads his mother heated against a coal-burning tile oven.

In August 1939, afraid Gdynia would be bombed, Mejloch Mandelbaum sent the family inland to Dzialoszyce, Poland, where he had been raised in a Hasidic home. Jack was shocked to meet his Hasidic grandfather in a caftan. His grandfather was similarly shocked to see his grandson in short pants, suspenders and no cap.

A month later, they received notice that his father was in a concentration camp. They had no idea what a concentration camp was. Meanwhile, 13-year old Jack helped support his family by substituting for people who paid him to take their place in forced labor. A document verifying his work as the mayor's electrician saved him – but not his mother, sister, or brother – from the gas chambers.

Years later, Jack learned that his father had been arrested on Sept. 14, 1939, with 400 Polish intelligentsia – many of them non-Jews – and survived almost to the end of the war, dying in Stutthof in 1944.

Jack Mandelbaum was liberated from Dornhau in May 1945. He and his Uncle Sigmund Mandelbaum traveled together to American in June 1946. Jack had dreamed of coming to America ever since he heard stories about it as a boy. Given a choice of where to live, they chose Kansas City because it was “not too big and not too small.”

Jack found a job at Rose Mercantile, a dry goods wholesale house he later bought. He and his American-born first wife have four children: Sharon, Mark, Barry and John. He is now married to Claudia. Together, they have 12 grandchildren. “I am grateful to be here,” Jack says, “and thankful to all those that lent a hand to bring me to this great country.”

He rarely spoke about the Holocaust until 1975, when a neighbor asked him what sports he played in the concentration camp. Jack then realized that many people knew nothing of what happened in the Holocaust.

He and Isak Federman founded the Midwest Center for Holocaust Education in 1993.

From www.andreawarren.com, courtesy of the author.