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A Lifetime Amid the Lox and Rugelach

By [TINA KELLEY](#)

Nowadays, most tales of longstanding and beloved family businesses in New York seem to end with a sniff and a final mop of the floor. But as Zabar's, the venerable West Side purveyor of New York noshes, approaches its 75th anniversary next year, it is flourishing and still very much in the family. Overseeing aisles of smoked fish, a [United Nations](#) worth of cheeses, and the iconic coffee and rugelach is the firm's president, Saul Zabar, who will celebrate the 75th anniversary of his 5th birthday next week.

Mr. Zabar says that he does not remember the grand opening of the original Zabar's but does remember his own role in the early days: As a lookout posted on Broadway because of the Blue Laws, when stores were ordered to — but did not always — close from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Sundays.

"I was supposed to notify my family if the police were coming," he recalled. "But when I saw a policeman I could not make myself run. I walked right back to the store, and the policeman followed right afterwards." His father, Louis, was not pleased, and frequently reminded him of the incident until his death in 1950.

That was when Saul, who had little interest in the family business and had hoped to become a doctor, quit the [University of Kansas](#). His youngest brother, Eli, who later would split from the family and create a rival fancy food empire on the East Side, was barely in grade school then.

"I came here to be of some help," Saul Zabar said. "I really came into Zabar's as a temporary assignment."

It lasted a lifetime.

If Mr. Zabar was thrust into the family business reluctantly, like George Bailey in "It's a Wonderful Life," any movie about him would surely star [Dustin Hoffman](#), to whom he bears a strong resemblance. His unofficial uniform is a polo shirt and khaki pants — there are 20 of each in his closet — with black running shoes.

Mr. Zabar's office, behind a housewares department where one can find two varieties of pink toaster, is decorated with pictures of his four grandchildren and a needlepoint rendition of the storefront. Fourteen closed-circuit televisions monitor the store, and the smell of coffee is strong enough to keep awake anyone assigned to watch them.

Saul Zabar's office doubles as the coffee "cupping and tasting" room, where sample beans are roasted and brewed to see if they are worthy of the family's orange-lettered bag.

Forty years ago, he apprenticed himself to a coffee expert. "My wife said, 'What are you wasting your time on?' and I said, 'Give me time. Give me 20 years,'" Mr. Zabar recalled. The store now sells \$50,000 to \$60,000 of its own coffee each week.

What grew into a \$50 million annual business recognized worldwide as an icon of a certain slice of quintessential New York began as a simple smoked-fish department inside a Daitch food store, just north of Zabar's current location. Louis Zabar, an immigrant from a shtetl in what is now Ukraine, soon expanded to five small stores on the Upper West Side.

But a few years after Saul took over, he consolidated the business into what became today's sprawling gourmet bazaar at Broadway and 80th Street. It "was like having five separate children with separate personalities, sales and bookkeeping," he explained. "I wanted to do one thing and do it well. I wanted to take care of it in a way that it survives and becomes famous."

The Zabars own the large building that houses the landmark store, as well as several others along Broadway, filled mostly with independent retail shops that lend the neighborhood character. They are active local philanthropists, having given \$5 million to the Jewish Community Center for a nursery school. For decades, Mr. Zabar and his brother Stanley were joined by another partner, Murray Klein, now deceased, who had started at the store as a stockman in 1953.

Many of the store's 250 employees have worked there two or three decades. Mr. Zabar recounted tales of workers who proposed marriage in the fish department or in the cafe, and he got emotional while describing how some struggled to pay off high-interest loans.

"We try to break this pattern by telling them to come to us," he said. "We lend them money to pay off the principal, and they pay us back \$15 a week." He estimates the company has lent out more than \$50,000; his wife of 40 years, Carole Zabar, recalled how her husband paid half the tuition for an employee's disabled son to attend boarding school. (The son now works for Zabar's, as do two of the Zabars' three children.) "I consider all the people working here as family," Mr. Zabar said.

Rabbi Joy Levitt, executive director of the Jewish Community Center on Amsterdam Avenue at 76th Street where the Saul and Carole Zabar Nursery School is housed, recalled a disagreement she once had with Mrs. Zabar over a program. "I ran into Saul on the street — that's how you run into Saul, he's always on the street — and he said, 'You need to call your friend Carole,' " Rabbi Levitt remembered. "That was code for, 'That disagreement was more important than you realize.' It struck me how deeply he cared about her, about me and about the relationship."

"I think more community goes on inside Zabar's than in a lot of places," she said. "There are people you know and people that want to help you."

[Eli Zabar](#), who left the family business in the 1970s out of frustration with what he saw as the company's reluctance to pursue new directions, compared Saul, 15 years his senior, to the best of politicians.

"He's the most special man and he's the common man," said Eli Zabar, who has repaired once-strained relations and now supplies Zabar's with breads from his East Side bakeries. "He's able to drill down and begin to know little things like nobody else."

Saul Zabar is not planning any public celebration on Wednesday. He rejected a plan to give away free coffee on that day, but he did think about retiring.

“It doesn’t go on forever,” he said. “I suddenly realized, maybe there’s something else. And then I got over it. I guess what I’m doing is what I’m going to be doing.

“We recently just developed a very wonderful rye bread that I think is the very best in the city,” Mr. Zabar added. “That was fun.”

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