

Calcalist (Yedioth Ahronoth)

Things I Learned at Home

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“My parents, Simon and Rose, were born in a shtetl in Poland and experienced antisemitism frequently; every few months there was a pogrom. They looked for a safe place for their family and left Poland for Canada. My father entered the retail business, like his brothers, who already lived in Canada, but the store they opened went bankrupt. From there the family moved to Cleveland, Ohio, following one of my father’s brothers, and that’s where I was born.

“In Cleveland, my father opened a similar store but it was unsuccessful. He didn’t have the instincts to identify what the customer needed and give it to him. Since then, my mother had to support us through door-to-door sales, which was what she knew how to do. My father was an intelligent man, who was destined to be a teacher. He was a mensch, and he wasn’t tough enough to succeed in a competitive atmosphere. He unfortunately developed sclerosis in his forties and passed away at age 57. In the last years of his life he was handicapped, and my mother became sort of a mother and a father.



Morton Mandel, age 19, and his mother Rose. Cleveland, Ohio, 1941

“We never went hungry, we had clothes to wear (I wore my brothers’ hand-me-downs) and we had a wonderful childhood. Only when I was 20 did I realize that we were pretty much poor. When I was 13 I sold popcorn and hot dogs at a

stadium, and I brought the money home to my mother. The idea to spend the money on something for myself never occurred to me.

“My parents fled from antisemitism but I came across it anyway, and sometimes I still feel it even today. In the Polish neighborhood where my father had his store, the kids called me “kike,” a derogatory term for a Jew. By the age of seven, this turned me into a good streetfighter.

“My mother wanted us to have in America what she and my father had never had in Poland: a decent education and that we would grow up to be something. She always insisted ‘work hard and don’t miss out on any of the opportunities you encounter in America’ and when I asked her how I would recognize them she said, ‘you’ll know.’ She gave me the feeling that whatever I wanted would happen, and I always felt inside that I could do anything.

“It was important to my mother that I go to college. And I was the only one of my brothers who did, thanks to a scholarship I got from the army in 1943 to study chemistry, but I just finished my studies recently, in 2014. I stopped my studies at Case Western Reserve University to join my brothers in their auto business when I had just 16 credits left to finish my degree, and when I turned 90 and was the university’s biggest donor, they suggested I finish my degree. The university decided to count the hours I had studied business administration and social work, and the last six hours I got in recognition of the book that I wrote. When they asked me if I wanted to get my diploma at a special ceremony, I declined. And when, at the graduation ceremony, a 91-year-old walked alongside all those kids – and the 2,000 people invited gave me a standing ovation – I was moved.”