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# Dad's Store, 1920–1968

by Hilda Perl Goodwin



*For generations, commerce was the economic backbone of the Baltimore Jewish community. Many mercantile enterprises were small, family-owned retail stores like the Ideal Music Shop, which took on the character and quirks of their proprietors.*

*In this affectionate reminiscence, Hilda Perl Goodwin recalls her father's business on North Gay Street as it transformed through nearly half a century, closing only after the 1968 riots. She captures the particular ambience of her father's store—and the special flavor of its proprietor, employees, customers, and browsers.*

Above: Hilda Goodwin, c. 2000. Courtesy of Hilda Perl Goodwin.  
Opposite page: The 500 block of N. Gay Street, a busy commercial area. Courtesy of the Baltimore Museum of Industry.

The sound of Dad's store, The Ideal Music Shop, was a real hodge-podge of music and noise—with clinky ragtime numbers pumped from player pianos and operatic arias blaring out of Victrola horns all at the same time. And the hawkers, automobile horns, and streetcars rattling down the tracks on Gay Street added a few more sections to this outlandish "orchestra."

My father went into the Victrola and player-piano business in 1920, the year that he and Mother were married. Dad, who was born and raised in Norfolk, Virginia, and had that small town southern charm, ran the place like a country store. In no time, he surrounded himself with a group of customer-cronies, most of whom were Italian stone masons, brick-layers, plasterers, and day laborers.

Every Friday (which was payday) they came straight to Dad's store from the nearby Belair Market, set down their shopping bags stuffed with fresh produce, plopped into the wicker armchairs, and listened to Italian opera phonograph records. Dad didn't seem to care whether they bought the records or just listened, as he enjoyed singing along with the group and waving his arms like their conductor.

Besides listening to the music (and they did purchase some records from time to time), the group discussed current events and religion. And despite the fact that



Hilda (front) with her father and sister Lola, 1930.  
Courtesy of Hilda Perl Goodwin.

they were Catholic and Dad was Jewish, they listened to his interpretations of the Bible as if he were the Pope himself.

In the late 1920s, Dad eliminated the player-pianos from his inventory and stocked radios, the hottest item on the market. As a sales promotion, he installed a small radio on a high shelf in the long tile vestibule of his store and, during the prize fight nights, turned it on full blast.

Crowds gathered outside to listen. They seemed to picture every punch, as they screamed: “C’mon Sharkey,” “Kill’m, Tunny,” or “Knock’m out, Maxie.” (Jack Sharkey, Gene Tunney, and Max Baer were the popular fighters then.) The minute the fight ended, there was a near stampede to get into the store to purchase a radio. Dad’s business was booming.

During the Depression, Dad added refrigerators and washing machines to his inventory of electric record-players and radios. Unfortunately, those appliances, being big and white, made the store look almost like a health clinic. While these magical new products were expensive, the customers bought them on the installment plan. Thus Dad was able to weather the hard times of the 1930s.

When Mother’s father, Grandfather Mazor, died in 1933, Dad merged his business with that of Mother’s family, and The Ideal Music Shop became “Mazor’s Ideal Music Shop.” Several of his customers called him “Mr. Mazor” instead of his real name, “Mr. Fivel,” which didn’t bother him in the least.

Dad’s employees seemed to come from out of the blue. There was Aluisi, a former customer of his who was down on his luck. His nick-name, “Alley,” had nothing to do with the fact that he kept dozens of alley cats as house pets. It was, in fact, short for that proud Italian name, Alphonso.

Alley claimed that he had been an opera singer once-upon-a-time. However, he could hardly even talk—let alone sing—when we knew him. Since he lit every cigarette he smoked from the butt of the former one, he was constantly gasping for breath, coughing, and blowing his nose. Sometimes he dozed off even while writing up an order. (The strong whiskey smell on his breath explained a lot.)

Merling Mules was another hardship case that came Dad’s way. Merling, like Alley, was one of Dad’s customers who had been down on his luck. Dad had us in tears when he described that blustery winter day when he ran into Merling on Gay Street, the collar of his threadbare coat pulled up over his ears, and his near frozen hands holding onto his hat.

Dad really knew how to tell Merling’s story like it was out of Charles Dickens: how he was an epileptic and had a sick wife and three kids and a job that paid him starvation wages, and how he committed a crime in desperation—forging a check—was then caught and

sent to jail. I have always admired my father for giving Merling a job, never questioning his honesty. And Merling never let him down.

Dad had another employee who was also an epileptic. This was Mose Allen, a near-starving black kid who lived on Stirling Street, a rat-infested alley around the corner from the store. When Mose was nine or ten years old, he played hooky from school so he could earn a few nickels opening refrigerator and washing machine crates for Dad.

Dad kept preaching to him about the importance of his getting an education. But Mose refused to go to school on the grounds that he would be placed in “the crazy class” because of his “fits.” Mose soon learned how to fix radios by watching the regular repairman. And by the time he was about 16, he was doing most of the repairs in the store.

Aunt Beck, Dad’s cleaning woman, who wore a rag wrapped around her head and went barefoot in the summer, seemed as though she had just come out of slavery. She hummed spirituals while she sloshed her wet mop across the store’s linoleum floor.

Most of us kids in the family worked for Dad at one time or other in order to earn some extra money. Even my cousin, Bobby Goodman, the family prince, claims that he “worked for Uncle Sam.” (But it’s hard to picture him in such a low-down setting.) Of all those transient kids, I was the only one who stuck despite the frustrations of the job, mostly caused by Dad himself.

Yet I knew deep down that he couldn’t help messing up everything he touched. For example, if a customer needed a radio tube, Dad would yank one out of its slot on a shelf and all the rest came tumbling down along with it. Then, he would order me to put them back, causing me to curse him under my breath. And, oh, those Victrola records that I carefully filed alphabetically which Dad shoved back in any old place!

I had to look the other way when he demonstrated one, slamming down the needle, and giving it a couple of good scratches. Those unfortunate records, which repeated over and over at the wounded places and were unfit for sale, were the very ones that Dad brought home for my sister Lola’s and my record collection.

I like to tell myself that I learned something by working in that store, though I can’t put my finger on exactly what. Yet, I did develop a knack of figuring out exactly what it was that a customer wanted. And sometimes this took imagination. For example, if someone came in asking for “The Moonlight Sinatra,” I knew at once what that person had in mind and considered it a real compliment to Beethoven.

During World War II, people had plenty of money to spend, but there was hardly anything to spend it on since the bulk of production was for war materials. Dad, however, used his ingenuity to keep his business



The Belair Market. Courtesy of the Baltimore Museum of Industry.



Clipping from the *Baltimore News American* showing Dr. Martin Luther King's motorcade on Gay Street, 1968. Mazor's shop can be seen in the background. Courtesy of Hilda Perl Goodwin.

going. He re-conditioned old radios and appliances, and sold God knows what—anything from portable commodes to chopsticks.

When the war ended, Dad could hardly wait to sell the television sets, dishwashers, dryers, freezers, and air-conditioning units that came on the market. The large discount stores, however, gobbled up the retail trade leaving slim pickings for small merchants like my father. Rather than give up, Dad moved into a somewhat larger store down the street and stocked it with cheap furniture. Since there was not a single music item in stock there, the name, "Ideal Music Shop" was dropped, leaving only the name of "Mazor's."

No one would recognize Gay Street in the 1960s as the place it had been in the past. The streetcars were replaced by buses. The outside stalls of the Belair Market were moved indoors to a generic-looking brick building. And the stores—with the iron grates on their doors and display windows—looked like jails.

The shoppers were no longer the working-class Italians, but mostly poor black people. With race and

color of no consequence to my father, his "congregation" was simply transformed from the Italian Catholics to the Black Baptists. It didn't occur to Dad that he did anything unusual by employing Celestine Thompson, a young black woman, to work in a sales position—probably the first of her race to have such a job on Gay Street.

In late March of 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. visited Gay Street and preached to a crowd directly in front of Dad's store. Dad was honored that his sign, "Mazor's," appeared in a newspaper photograph as part of the background. The crowd cheered, wept, chanted amens, and sang, "We Shall Overcome."

A week later came the terrible assassination and the fury that followed: the window smashing, the looting, and the fires. Parts of the city looked like a war zone. Dad was heart-sick when he saw what happened. Although Gay Street suffered little damage, and his store was not touched, Dad decided to close up for good. He had no more heart for this place where he had spent almost half a century.

His customers begged him to stay in business, claiming that it was just "those young hot-heads" who took part in the riots. But Dad stuck to his decision. He sold off his merchandise, gave Merling, Mose, and Celestine bonuses and found them jobs.

Mother was all choked up when she described to me the last time at the store: it was a Sunday night, and Merle, Mose, Celestine, Mother and Dad assembled for one final look. No one said a word as they stared at the silent, empty store. Then Dad turned off the lights, locked the metal grates, and they all walked out onto the dark street.

Opposite page: Interior of Louis Mazor and Son's furniture store. Mr. Mazor was Hilda Perl Goodwin's maternal grandfather, and his store was later merged into "Dad's store." JMM 1992.274.1.

