

**Zabar's Podcast**  
**Season 1 Episode 3: Our Founders**

**Willie Zabar:** Hello and Welcome to the Zabar's podcast! As always I'm your host Willie Zabar.

Today we're focusing on our store's founders, Louis and Lilly Zabar, who also happen to be my great grandparents. Using original interviews, and previously unreleased audio from the Zabar family archives, we'll uncover how these two childhood sweethearts found their separate ways to America and built a business that's still thriving today. You'll learn about a daring escape from the programs, the early days of our store, and what these two legendary figures were like as people. Louis and Lillian's story began in a small town called Ostropol located in modern day Ukraine. Most people in my family refer to that place by its Yiddish name, Ostropolia. One such person is our family's official historian Lori Zabar.

**Willie:** Welcome, Aunt Lori

**Lori Zabar:** Hello! Willie, Nephew.

**Willie:** Why don't you just briefly explain to the people who you are and what your connection is to this family of people?

**Lori:** I am Lori Zabar. I am the oldest granddaughter of the founder of Zabar's- Louis Zabar and his wife, Lilly Zabar and I wrote a book, which will be published in spring 2022, about the family and the store. It starts in about 1880 and goes to the present.

**Willie:** I am so excited to see this book. Okay, let's start strong- who were Louis and Lillian?

**Lori:** Louis and Lillian were born in Ukraine in a small town in Ostropolia. Louis was born in 1901 and Lilly was born in 1902 and they were classmates in school. That's how they knew each other. That town- it was 10,000 people and of the 10,000 people, almost a third were Jewish. For most of the time, in Ukraine,

which was ruled by Russia, Jews were not allowed to own property. So they basically rented wherever they were. Louis was the son of Schlomo Zabarca- Louis' real name was Mortcolabe. Louis' father was actually a relatively wealthy man. He was a trader. He went all over Ukraine buying and selling goods.

**Willie:** For more context of the Zabarca household, here's Louis' sister Ada from a 1993 interview with my brother Ben.

**Ben Zabar:** What did your father do for a job?

**Ada Zabar:** merchandising- buying and selling

**Ben:** When you were young were you happy?

**Ada:** Yes- very happy. We were free to run around barefoot- it was nice living there. So Louis had a good time. Louis was the favorite.

**Lori:** Lilly's parents, her original name was Leschka, her parents owned a tavern in the town and Jews were really not supposed to run taverns. It was against the law. But, everyone looked the other way and it was a pretty lucrative business because they served not only Jewish people, but also, the gentiles. And there was a lot of market for vodka.

*\*Both laugh\**

**Lori:** But Lilly knew Louis because she was very good friends with one of Louis' sisters- and her name was Rose. Rose Zabarca. In the tavern, from time to time, there would be fights. There was a lot of antisemitism, of course, and a lot of the gentile customers would start fighting. Usually, they would get drunk after market day and then go to the tavern and then there was sometimes violence and sometimes they took it out on Jewish people as well. And Lilly got very frightened when this happened and she would run out of the tavern and run over to the Zabarca's to see her friend, Rose. So, I'm sure she saw Louis there, at the Zabarcas, you know, cuz, he lived there so I think they knew each other in many ways.

**Willie:** Now, there's a piece of family legend one of the things I'm hoping to accomplish with this interview is to kind of figure out the difference between what we actually know versus what's just a story that someone told me.

**Lori:** Yeah okay

**Willie:** Now you're familiar with the story of Louis, Lilly and the Calf?

**Lori:** No, I don't know that story

**Willie:** Oh okay this is my understanding. So supposedly, Lilly's family had a cow and the cow had a calf and the calf was sold to Louis' family and everyday the calf would walk across town to be with its mother. And Louis had to go retrieve the calf everyday and supposedly that is how Louis and Lilly got to know each other.

**Lori:** Alright that's a different story than I had heard. You're right the Zabarcas had a cow and Louis' mother Malca milked that cow every morning, and would bring out the milk, they had a lot of children. Schlomo had a son from his first marriage- his wife had died. I think there were 8 more children that Malca had so everyday she milked the cow and brought the milk up to the kids to drink. So I know they definitely had a cow but the source of the cow I'm not certain.

**Willie:** But I like that- the cow is confirmed. Confirmed cow.

**Lori:** It definitely is a confirmed cow. It's a sweet story that the mother and child would reunite everyday. It's possible but I don't know. I just don't know.

There was a war between Poland and Russia- It was called the Polish-Soviet War. From about 1918 to 1920. There had been pogroms in the Ukraine from time to time but it had been relatively quiet until the Polish-Soviet War. And that's when the soviet government decided that they were going to take over Poland and spread communism. See Ukraine was the buffer between Poland and Russia so they crossed over, and they were defeated and they had to retreat across Ukraine back to Russia and that was when when they were going back and forth is when a lot of the pogroms occurred because there was so much anti-semitism.

**Willie:** And just for our listeners who don't know what a pogrom is could you just give a brief overview of that word?

**Lori:** Basically, a pogrom is a violent attack on a particular group of people. In this case, it was Jews. In 1918-1920, there were quite a number of pogroms in different towns in the Soviet Union.

**Willie:** So, my understanding is there was one pogrom in particular that led to Louis and Lilly moving to America.

**Lori:** Yes, that is correct. Lilly left before Louis and she left before the pogrom that we are going to talk about. She left because she was unmarried and young and her family wanted to protect her against pogroms. There was a wave of pogroms in Ostropoolia and the Cossacks, who were Polish horseback riding fighters, had joined with the Soviet Army. The Cossacks were also mostly involved in the pogroms. The Soviet army was not supposed to be because it was against the law and then, of course, the local bandits I would call them joined in. So, they were going from house to house and one time they went into the Zabarca house. So, these soldiers and thugs entered the house, and one of them I guess threatened to molest Louis' mother Malca and so, Schlomo, her husband- Louis' father, stepped in front of her to protect her and try to fight them off but they actually pierced him with a sword.

**Willie:** Oh, wow.

**Lori:** and he collapsed- bleeding and they shot a couple of neighbors who were in the house at the time. And then one of Louis' sisters whose name was Chana, who was 16, entered, she heard all this noise and she went into the living room and she screamed and one of the soldiers shot her, and she died. So Louis was not in the house at the time. He was in the outhouse and he heard all this screaming and yelling. He ran into the house and he had a rifle. He hid it under his bed and he grabbed the rifle he ran to chase these soldiers and they were leaving and he ran after them with the rifle. Nobody really knows whether he actually used the rifle or they just ran away but it was against the law for Jews to have weapons so he was then

known to have an illegal weapon and the soldiers and the local peasants who had joined the pogroms were after him and he had to leave.

**Willie:** Louis was a wanted man, and sporadic antisemitic violence continued to claim lives of people in the village. This was the catalyst for many family members to leave Ostropolia in hopes of a better life in America. Louis' mother convinced him to flee the country. She hired an armed peasant to smuggle Louis out of Ukraine and into Poland where he could book passage to the new world. At this point Lilly had successfully made it to the United States. But, by the time Louis was ready to leave Europe, the U.S. had just passed its first immigration quota legislation, which limited the number of people from specific parts of the world who were allowed to enter the country. This law and its successors were the reason that, a few years later, the U.S would turn away ships full of refugees attempting to flee the Holocaust. Louis ended up in Canada, snuck across the border, and made his way to New York City. Here's how he made his living in those early days according to his oldest son Saul:

**Saul Zabar:** He landed in Brooklyn...he had no papers, and so he had to work for himself and so he worked in an open air market...and he sold produce."

**Willie:** Louis and Lilly finally reconnected when they ran into each other on the street. Family legend has it that she was walking with another man at the time, but Louis simply said, "you're coming with me," to which she replied "yes." The two of them got married and found a place in Brooklyn. They were able to start a store of their own, and they had to put everything under Lilly's name since Louis was still undocumented.

**Lori:** Louis and Lilly had a shop in Brighton Beach at that point and that's where Saul was born. I think Lilly always wanted to live in Manhattan so they sold the Brighton Beach store and they then had another store in Flatbush and it was called Confidence Fruit and Vegetable.

In 1934, he heard about a counter that was available to rent on the upper west side between 80th and 81st street. And he decided that he would leave Brooklyn and leave the fruit and vegetable business and go into smoked fish. They moved to the Upper West Side from Brooklyn and they lived in a couple of apartment buildings and eventually they ended up at 219 W 81st street. So, the Upper West Side between Riverside Drive and Broadway was, despite the depression, a very prosperous Jewish neighborhood.

**Willie:** Here's more on that from Saul in a 2005 interview:

**Saul:** "And that particular area...was a comfortable area during the depression, and there were people who could afford the smoked fish and the various products that he was selling in the store, so did very well, and in the midst of the depression he was very comfortable"

**Willie:** Eventually, Louis and Lilly were able to go from renting the fish counter to owning the entire store. Here's more from Saul:

**Saul:** "Zabar's was an individual store and it grew into the current space, it's really housed in 5 separate buildings, and we were able to obtain those buildings. As the tenants moved out or the lease expired, we were able to expand into the various buildings."

**Willie:** Even though they were now the owners of the store, Louis and Lilly continued running day-to-day operations.

**Saul:** My father worked, my mother helped him in the business, we lived across the street...and Stanley and I worked here on Sundays.

**Willie:** Do you remember what your first job was here?

**Saul:** We didn't have first jobs, we had only one job. He and I worked behind the cheese department which was on the opposite wall of the fish, and we sold the cheese.

**Willie:** As the store continued to grow, so did the family. Louis and Lilly had a third son named Eli in 1943. Things seemed to be

going great for the family until Louis fell seriously ill in 1949.

**Lori:** Louis got sick. He had lung cancer. He was a very big smoker; he smoked four packs a day. He died at the age of 49 and Saul, who was 21 at the time, took over the running of the stores even though he had never planned to run Zabar's, no. He felt he was obligated to keep things going cuz my father my father's four years younger, my father was still in college. My father was in his second year of University of Pennsylvania in the Wharton undergraduate business school so she asked my father to transfer to NYU and come back to the city to help Saul. So, the two of them, 22 and 18, were running the store.

My father, while he was going to school, was running back and forth. So he was going to school then he would work- the Zabar's at 2245, up to 92nd Street, and then they had another one at 96th Street, and then they had one at 110th street and then he would finally go home.

**Willie:** How old was Eli?

**Lori:** Eli is 15 years younger than Saul and 11 years younger than my father so in 1950- he was only 7 years old. So, he was living with Louis and Lilly had remarried but she wasn't really involved day to day with the business at that point but she would make sure that Saul and Stanely were meeting with all their partners and they were all doing their job. By 1960, the store was not profitable. Saul actually put the store up for sale in about 1960 but nobody wanted to buy it.

**Willie:** Eventually the family closed all of its stores other than the 80th street location. Although Lilly no longer worked at Zabars, she remained a presence in the store for the remainder of her life. She could often be seen walking down Broadway greeting total strangers, saying "hello! I'm Mrs. Zabar." Lilly passed away in 1995. To quote the NY times, "she was 90, or perhaps 92, or 93." Her exact age couldn't be calculated for a few reasons. First, She claimed to be younger

than she really was on her immigration papers, and second, her actual birthday is still unknown. All she knew was that she was born on Hanukkah.

For the last segment of this episode, I wanted to find out what Louis and Lilly were like as people. From my grandfather Stanley:

**Stanley Zabar:** Well they were hard working people. My mother and father worked in Zabar's from 1934- they had a good following and they were known from early days for having top food and for being very involved with customers.

**Willie:** Here's my father David Zabar who never got to know Louis but worked with people who had:

**David Zabar:** When I was purchasing the smoked fish, I would meet people that said they sold to my grandfather in the 40s so of course this is in the 80s so it's about 40 years later. They said he was a tough customer, but he knew quality and he was a fair customer. I think he demanded a lot. So, uh I mean, he was a hard worker. He asked a lot but I think he very much enjoyed his family but I know he worked very long hours. And you know, that was his focus- was providing for his family.

**Willie:** Here's what my dad had to say about grandma Lilly, who he did have the pleasure of knowing.

**David:** Yes, Grandma Lilly

**Willie:** Grandma Lilly

**David:** She was a very social person, she was a little flamboyant. If you watch green acres a little like the Gabor sisters.

**Willie:** Is Zsa Zsa one of them?

**David:** Or her sister. You knew when she was in the room she wanted everybody to be together. She wanted everybody to be happy, she wanted everybody to eat. Eat!

**Willie:** And she was big into cooking?

**David:** Yes! I think we had the holidays at her house. There was always chicken soup and brisket and traditional foods. The



kitchen- the steam was coming out of the kitchen and there was a lot of noise. And we all sat around the table and ate.

**Willie:** Speaking of food, my mother Tracey Zabar shared the following memory of Grandma Lilly

**Tracey:** She used to go in the kitchen, and there would be a great big pot of perfectly wonderful chicken soup and she would water it down I think she was maybe expecting 100 extra guests, and then Uncle Saul and David, my husband, would say "oh this soup tastes like the chicken walked through it on stilts!" And so one time, we managed to keep Granda Lilly out of the kitchen and she didn't water down the soup, and David said "this is amazing! The chicken fell off the stilts!"

**Willie:** That's it for this episode of the Zabar's podcast! It also concludes our first mini-season of three episodes. Now we're doing this as kind of a trial run and they're only gonna let me make more of these things if the show performs well. So, if you've enjoyed what you've heard, and you want to hear more of it, please consider leaving us a review and sharing the podcast with someone you think might enjoy it. As always, I'm your host Willie Zabar and I'll see you at the store.

The Zabar's podcast is produced by Emily Charash with sound editing and mixing by Henry Butler. All funding made possible by Zabar's.