

The Zabar's Podcast

Episode 4: The Book

Willie Zabar (00:07)

Welcome to The Zabar's Podcast. I'm your host, Willie Zabar. I'd like to start by dedicating this episode to my aunt, Lori Zabar, who passed away this February. I can't begin to describe what a loss this was for my family and our community. What I can do though, is tell you about her passion for history. She was a master of uncovering obscure information and translating it into terms us non historians could understand. Lori spent these last five years writing a book about our store called "Zabar's: A Family Story with Recipes". It's equal parts historical text and memoir. Luckily, she was able to finish the book and take an active role in planning its release. One of her ideas was to make a special episode of The Zabar's Podcast to promote the book. So here we are. And to be clear, my goal isn't to make a long advertisement. Yes, I hope some of you decide to pick up a copy, but this episode is more about honoring the work my aunt put into researching and recording our family history. I hope this will also serve as a companion piece to the text, offering supplemental material to those who've already read it. So, enjoy this mix of book excerpts, original interviews, and rare audio recordings as we delve into the Zabar's story.

Part 1: The Early Days of the Store

To recap, Zabar's is currently owned and run by my grandfather, Stanley Zabar, and his older brother, Saul. They're the two eldest sons of our founders, Louis and Lily Zabar. We covered the story of how my great-grandparents came to America and started the store in episode three. As part of that, I recorded an interview with Aunt Lori back in March 2021. Only about one quarter of that hour-long conversation made it into the final product, so I've decided to share more of it here. Here's Lori speaking about our family setting up shop on the Upper West side.

Lori Zabar (01:58)

Louis, he always was in the fruit and vegetable business. Then 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 he would leave Brooklyn and leave the fruit and vegetable business and go into smoked fish. And then Louis and Lily were doing well enough that at point the owner of this store decided to sell and Louis bought the store from his original landlord. So anyway they moved to the Upper West Side from Brooklyn and they lived in a couple apartment buildings and eventually they ended up at 219 West 81st st which is that

white brick and terracotta building, it's between 81st and 82nd street on the east side of Broadway. You've seen it a million times. This was in 1938, they had really made it.

Willie Zabar (02:58)

Here's a story about Saul and Stanley growing up in that building from the official audiobook, read for you by Erin Bennett. Just a note, the book is written in first person from Lori's perspective.

Erin Bennet (03:08)

"If they forgot the key to their apartment, they could always walk a half block over to the store where their parents were working, but the boys came up with a much more creative approach. They'd knock on their next door neighbor's door, and from the neighbors balcony they could shimmy onto their own balcony and then slip into their apartment through an open window. My grandparents never knew about this innovation, which was probably for the best.

Willie Zabar (03:35)

I sat down with my grandfather to ask what it was like reading tales from his childhood all these years later.

There's a story about you and Saul climbing through one window to get back into your apartment. What was it like, reliving those memories?

Stanley Zabar (03:48)

Well, that was very interesting because I realized how scary it was. We were in full view of Zabar's from the window we were living in, but we didn't think very much of it in those days when we were seven, eight, or nine, didn't think that we could fall down. Although it was a narrow balcony.

Willie Zabar (04:13)

Here's a passage on how young Saul and Stanley spent their time in the store. And just a little background: at this point in history New York State still had stringent Blue Laws limiting business hours on Sundays. From page 40:

Erin Bennet (04:26)

"Saul and my father were still youngsters then, but they pitched in on Sundays, too, because Louis kept the store open beyond permissible hours. One of Paul's duties was serving as a lookout for police officers who patrolled in search of blue law violators. Other times he tended the dairy counter, selling sour cream and sweet cream by the Dipper and cutting thick slices from blocks of butter."

Willie Zabar (04:52)

I knew that grandma Lily had many responsibilities at the store, but I learned a new one on page 47 that took me by surprise:

Erin Bennet (04:58)

"A woman of many talents, Lily had a particular aptitude for law enforcement, serving as Zabar's one woman security force. If she spotted someone stuffing a can of peas or a bag of coffee into his jacket, Lily had no qualms about confronting the person and giving him a good talking to. Rarely did she need to summon the authorities."

Willie Zabar (05:22)

Fun fact: Zabar's still uses Lily's gefilte fish recipe, which you can find at the end of Chapter 10. I never knew Louis Zabar, but Lori's writing gives us some insight into what he was like as a person and his philosophy of business. On page 74, I learned that Great Grandpa Louis' professional slogan was

Erin Bennet (05:40)

"the highest quality at the lowest prices."

Willie Zabar (05:44)

Even today, my grandfather Stanley's Zabar strives for the same.

Stanley Zabar (05:47)

We find the best at the most reasonable price.

Willie Zabar (05:52)

Saul, Stanley, and eventually their youngest brother Eli, continued to work at the store in different capacities over the following years. While Louis and Lilly focused on developing the business and opening new locations, the older Zabar brothers began planning their own futures. None of them could have predicted that the store, and their lives, were about to change forever.

Part 2: The Rise of Zabar's

To kick off this section of the episode, here's more from the Lori interview.

Lori Zabar (06:24)

Louis got sick, and so he died at the age of 49 and Saul, who was 21 at the time, or 22, he took over the running of the stores even though he had never planned, Saul had never planned to run Zabar's. No. He felt that he was obligated to keep things going because my father, who was 4 years younger, my father was still in college, so Lilly asked Saul to work and try to keep things together and my father was in his 2nd 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. Yes. So the two of them, 22 and 18, were running the stores (laughs) there was more than one. So they really had a lot of responsibility at a very young age. Saul had always said he wanted to be a doctor or he wanted to be this or that, he thought he was just there temporarily (both laugh)

Willie Zabar (07:31)

The store continued to build a small local following through the early reign of Saul and Stanley, but it didn't hold anything near the amount of prestige it does now. I knew from my own research that Zabar's received almost no press coverage in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. As I went through newspaper archives, I noticed a greater volume of stories about us starting in the early 1960s and then a full on media explosion in the 70s. Through reading the book and talking to some of the people who lived it, I was able to piece together some of the reasons Zabar's gained so much popularity in such a short amount of time. The first person I asked was Uncle Saul, who was perched on his iconic chair at the front of the store by the registers.

Saul Zabar (08:10)

Who is this guy?

Willie Zabar (08:11)

This is Henry. Henry good friend of mine. He does the audio for the podcast. And then this is Emily, she's the producer.

Saul Zabar (08:17)

What is the podcast? I don't even know what it is.

Willie Zabar (08:19)

It's like a radio show, last year we made a few. We interviewed you for them. People liked it. You listened to it- yeah, you liked it.

Saul Zabar (08:24)

I did?

Willie Zabar (08:25)

yeah you liked it. When do you think Zabar's became cool?

Saul Zabar (08:29)

I don't know what that means.

Willie Zabar (08:30)

Like hip, fashionable—

Saul Zabar (08:33)

If Zabar's is cool and fashionable, I have no knowledge of that.

Saul Zabar (08:36)

Whether or not he'll ever admit it, Saul deserves much of the credit for the store's rise to prominence. Here with more is Lori's Daughter, Marguerite Zabar Mariscal. From the book:

Marguerite Zabar Mariscal (08:47)

By the early 1960s, Saul was focusing his energies on one store, Zabar's, on 80th street and Broadway. And now he had the time to do something he had been thinking about; adding new offerings to the old classics. Business administration may not have been his forte, but Saul did have a sense that the gastronomic times were changing and that what his customers wanted was about to change too. Saul's timing was perfect. An increasing number of Americans were beginning to travel to Europe as commercial transatlantic flights became more available. And when those people returned, they wanted to buy the foods that they'd been introduced to overseas. And so Saul began to import a range of

condiments, all kinds of oils, vinegars, mustards, honey and spices from England, France, Ireland, Italy, Australia and the Netherlands.

Willie Zabar (09:32)

Saul's experimentation with new products coincided with the beginning of what's now known as the culinary revolution. It was around this time that he began roasting coffee, a product which remains a cornerstone of the business. Here's Stanley with more info on his brother's role in those critical years.

Stanley Zabar (09:48)

Saul my brother is going on 94 and he's here almost every day. I don't know, maybe he doesn't have anything else to do, but he watches and he's the one who developed the coffee. We went once to California and he met somebody who was roasting his own coffee and he realized it wasn't difficult and he could do it. And he taught himself the roasting of the coffee and how to buy the best coffee. Over 50 years, he's producing a coffee that he considers like a fine wine. How it's to be ground and how do we ship it and we send. So we are producing somewhere near or roasting somewhere near 8,000 or 9,000 pounds of coffee.

Willie Zabar (10:42)

But what's Saul really like as a person? Even though you've heard from him throughout the series, there's a side of my great uncle that not everyone gets to see. Here's longtime employee Adela Palmer with more.

Adela Palmer (10:55)

I work with the accounts payable Department and I'm also Saul's assistant.

Willie Zabar (10:59)

How long have you been working here?

Adela Palmer (11:01)

Oh, my gosh, 35 years.

Willie Zabar (11:02)

Wow, that's awesome.

Adela Palmer (11:05)

I like working with numbers. I like calling my vendors. And believe it or not, I like to deal with Saul. To me, it's like a challenge. Yes, I love that man. I do. He's awesome. Very smart man. If you really get close to him, he has a beautiful heart. He does. He has a beautiful heart. You just have to understand him.

Willie Zabar (11:31)

Here's Master Sandwichmaker, Aktar on Saul.

Murray Klien (11:35)

Saul has a heart for his employees. I miss my parents in Bangladesh, but when I see Saul, I don't miss anything.

Willie Zabar (11:41)

Saul's efforts would soon pay off, as Zabar's quickly became a shopping hub for prominent New Yorkers.

Erin Bennet (11:46)

"By the mid 1960s, Zabar's had become a fashionable place to shop for both gourmet offerings and traditional Jewish appetizing and delicatessen. Actors, musicians, and

intellectuals who lived and worked nearby, as well as neighborhood residents congregated at Zabar's on the weekends to socialize while stocking up for Saturday and Sunday brunch. Saul had another reason for all this updating. He was hoping to sell Zabar's and wanted to make the package as attractive as possible to potential buyers. He had given running the store his best shot, but despite the enticements of the expanded gourmet offerings, the profit margins were extremely narrow and expenses were still higher than income. Zabar's was losing \$200,000 a year. My uncle and my father realized that they could not keep Zabar's going by themselves, so they appealed to Murray Klein, who had left their employ in 1957, to come back and help them turn the business around.

Willie Zabar (12:50)

Here to read from the book is Lori's son Henry Zabar Mariscal. Here's more about Murray from page 106.

Henry Zabar Mariscal (10:29)

Saul and Stanley succeeded in getting Murray to agree to return to Zabar's, where he was put in charge of the day to day operations, opening up the store every morning at 6:00 a.m.. Three years later, he became a full one third partner. A stinky, balding man with close cropped graying hair, heavy lidded green eyes, and a thick Russian-Yiddish accent, Murray often sardonically referred to himself as a peasant or as one of the proletariat, in contrast to the Zabar's, whom he called Jewish royalty. But ultimately it was working class Murray who rescued Zabar's from financial ruin and transformed the store into what it is today.

Willie Zabar (13:40)

Here's Murray, in his own words.

News Anchor (13:41)

We're at Zabar's on Broadway near 80th street, and we're with co-owner Murray Klein.

Murray Klien (13:46)

In 1950, I got my first job at Zabar's as a delivery boy on Broadway. I take care of the people because I'm one of them. I don't think you're going to see another store like Zabar's.

Willie Zabar (13:58)

This next clip is from a 1975 real to real audio tape I had digitized. It features a young Stanley Zabar discussing the store's newfound success with a TV reporter.

Stanley Zabar (14:07)

Business has never been better. People are coming in more often, maybe buying slightly less each time, but they want to treat themselves.

Willie Zabar (14:17)

This tape shows how our store went from nearly going under to thriving under the supervision of Mr. Klein, even during a recession. Now let's hear from people who knew Murray. Here's Zabar's general manager Scott Goldstein on his predecessor.

What was Murray like as a person?

Scott Goldshine (14:34)

One of the toughest SOB's I've ever met in my entire life. He came from the Ukraine, I believe. He had family- he was at a displaced persons camp. He lost all his family. He was incredibly tough. It didn't matter. He was in a car accident once, he was in the store the next morning in a wheelchair with two casts on an arm and a leg, and ten minutes later I had to pull him off a delivery man that he was getting into a fight with. That was the best way to describe Mr. Klien. He's the one that basically hired all the old timers that are here, the managers, the older managers. He was the one.

Willie Zabar (15:12)

My grandfather's take on Murray.

Stanley Zabar (15:14)

It was tough, strong, fair, and he worked very hard, and each person had their own knowledge. Saul was particularly knowledgeable in the smoke fish and the caviar and certain other things. Murray was in the housewares and cookwares and other parts of the operation, but he also put together a very strong operational store.

Willie Zabar (15:48)

Lori also went on to quote Murray as saying:

Erin Bennet (15:51)

“If I walk out onto Zabar's floor and I can see my shoes, it's not busy enough.”

Willie Zabar (15:57)

Here's my brother Danny speaking on the Murray era.

Danny Zabar (16:00)

I think the 1970s really changed Zabar's. I mean, both from a brand recognition standpoint, from an operational standpoint.

Willie Zabar (16:10)

Zabar's continued to gain popularity through the rest of the 70s into the 1980s. Murray Klein brought the store even more attention through a series of highly publicized price wars. We don't have time to cover them in this episode, but it's all in the book

As we move on from the Murray Klein Era to the modern day, we're going to focus on an iconic employee whose career spanned both. I'm talking of course about celebrated fish slicer Sam Cohen. Here's more from Henry, from page 95:

Henry Zabar Mariscal (16:38)

Few employees exemplified Zabar's as it was from the 50s through the 1990s like Sam Cohen, a Holocaust survivor of slight build, great charm and considerable intelligence, who was hired in 1953. Clad in a white coat, he would take his place behind the appetizing counter where he masterfully sliced lox and smoked salmon 60 hours a week for 46 years. Zabar's was Sam's stage, and the customers were his audience. He flirted with the women and kibitzed with the men in Russian, Polish, Hebrew, Spanish and English.

Willie Zabar (17:16)

Here's a recording of Sam from the Zabar's archives discussing a caviar shortage.

News Anchor (17:20)

Sam Cohen is the caviar expert here at Zabar's. Is this disastrous news for those who love caviar, the shortage?

Sam Cohen (17:27)

I would say yes, because people who like caviar will go a long way to get it, especially the high quality caviar.

Willie Zabar (17:34)

For more on Sam, here's prominent fish slicer Len Berk.

Sam Cohen (17:38)

I was waiting on a customer and the customer said, I want a quarter pound of Nova, but not over. So I sliced it, put it on a scale, and it was a point or two over. So I was about to take off a slice and Sam Cohen said, what are you doing? I said, the lady only wants a quarter of a pound. This is a slice over a quarter of a pound. He said, you never take anything off. You give it to her, she'll take it, I said. But she told me specifically that she

didn't want more than a quarter of a pound, and I don't think I should give her more than a quarter of a pound. Sam Cohen said to me, well, you may not be wrong, but you're not right either. I'll always remember those words. One of his favorite sayings was when he sliced the salmon too thick because he was not a thin slicer. He was a thick slicer from the old school, and when he sliced it too thick for the customer, and that happened quite often, he'd say, take another man.

Willie Zabar (18:56)

Some people have described being a counterperson as kind of being a performer because you're talking and you're saying things to the customers all day long. Would you agree with that?

Len Berk (19:05)

Sometimes I feel like I'm working, and sometimes I feel like I'm playing. When I feel like I'm playing, that's fun.

Willie Zabar (19:16)

Here's Scott with more on Sam.

Scott Goldshine (19:19)

Sam was a lot of fun. He actually had two roles. In addition to being at the fish Department. We used to be open until midnight on Saturday nights and around six or seven I would clean all the money out of the registers and put them in a brown bag and escort Sam upstairs to the office- the store was laid out differently, obviously—and Sam is a bookkeeper. Customers loved him. There was always a line of people waiting for him, even when he got older, when maybe his slices were a little bit thicker than perhaps the others, nobody cared. He was one of the nicest men I ever met, just a great guy.

Willie Zabar (20:04)

Part 3: The Future of the Business

Now that we've looked back at the legends of Zabar's past, I want to share some of Lori's writing about the key figures of today and the likely leaders of tomorrow. From my 2021 conversation with Lori:

Lori Zabar (20:20)

As you know my brother, your father, has been working there many years, and now some of the next generation like you and your brothers. So we're at a time where there's a real transition.

Willie Zabar (20:23)

Stanley and Saul are still very much in charge of the business, but as time has gone on new leaders have risen through the ranks. Here's more from the book.

Erin Bennet (20:40)

Although they are both in good health for men of their ages, the question becomes more pressing with every passing year. What is the future of Zabar's? My brother David, now 65 and the store's executive director, has had many roles at Zabars and knows the business from all sides. Along with the store's longtime, dedicated management staff, David will be the link between the old regime and the new. Aaron Zabar, Saul's 48-year-old son, has also been with Zabar's for many years as a front-end manager, and will also be part of the family's transition to the next generation.

Willie Zabar (21:20)

Here's a rare 1996 recording of my father, David Zabar, discussing changes in food trends at this time.

David Zabar (21:26)

At this time the biggest trend is towards prepared foods, dinners that people can come and pick up on a daily basis. They're always looking for something new. What people were eating in restaurants the last two or three years they want to make it home. And I think these stronger flavors lets them get away from the fat, the oil, the salt, all the things that you're not supposed to eat these days. Vinegar is very big. People are going away from the oil and towards the low fat flavorings. Along with coffee, we've had a phenomenal growth in loose tea. People want to try a different tea every week.

Willie Zabar (22:00)

We can't talk about the current state of the store without reflecting on the role of Scott Goldshine. As general manager, he's responsible for all day to day decisionmaking. He answers only to Saul and Stanley, so in their absence, Scott is in charge of the store. Here's a bit about Scott from the book.

Erin Bennet (22:16)

Scott has seen it all since he started working at Zabar's in 1977 at age 17. Over the years, this lifelong New Yorker and chief troubleshooter has managed almost every department, including housewares, grocery, coffee and front end. As General Manager, he presides over his staff of 230 in seven departments with a calm and cheerful demeanor, and he maintains personal relationships with the store's many suppliers and tradespeople. Scott appeared in *You've Got Mail* as an extra, and to this day he smiles when he overhears customers talking about the movie.

Willie Zabar (22:55)

What was your first job here?

Scott Goldshine (22:57)

Garbage.

Willie Zabar (22:59)

Garbage. How do you like that?

Scott Goldshine (23:00)

It's great. It taught me how to be humble and how to treat people, that's for sure.

Willie Zabar (23:04)

You want to talk a little bit about *You've Got Mail*?

Scott Goldshine (23:06)

That was a bit of a struggle. Nora Ephron, who lived across the street, was a regular customer and wanted to do a scene in the store. Convincing Saul was a massive, massive undertaking. He just didn't understand any of it. And it was a huge shoot. Most movie shoots or TV shoots have to be done at night because we do not close the store under period. But this was probably the biggest thing that we ever shot here because they wanted a store full of people and they had to be out by six-o'clock the next morning. So we had negotiated a price with them and there was a \$5,000 penalty for every ten minutes that they were late past six-o'clock. And I was obviously here and amazingly so 5:55, they came to me and said, okay, we're ready. Go take a look and see if we screwed anything up. They were out by six. It was a ton of fun. That was a huge bit of publicity for us. There are people to this day, every week we get people that come in and say, "is this where the cash only line was?" They all ask about the movie still and the movie is what, 20 years old or something like that?

I've known as Zabar Family since before I started to work here and I'm here 44 years. So in many ways I'm part of the family, which means I can get yelled and screamed at like they do and vice versa. I have had massive screaming matches with Saul and Stanley over the years. I've quit five times on Saul. Each time he runs down the block and tackles me and eventually. It's okay.

Willie Zabar (24:47)

This is a good time to start talking about the family dynamic. Here's my brother Danny again.

Danny Zabar (24:53)

I mean, one time I got into a tiff with the general manager and we had a big blowup fight and he sent me home early. Not a big deal. I've been fired many times from Zabar's and somehow they keep rehiring me even though 90% of my resume just says Zabar's on it. And I think that night was Passover or Hanukkah. So I show up at my grandparents house after this big troublesome day at work and the first person to come up– I didn't even tell my parents. I didn't tell anyone this happened–my grandmother comes up and just Pats me on the shoulder and goes, "don't worry, everyone gets sent home early, it's not a big deal." I mean, my grandmother knew about my fight at work before anyone else did, so it's hard to separate, to turn your business brain off when you're dealing with family because they're also your bosses and your coworkers.

Willie Zabar (25:44)

I included this bit to stress the fact that we're still very much a family business. Everyone from my generation has worked at the store at one point or another. Towards the end of the book, there are some great photos of us all in our work uniforms.

As we wrap things up for today, I want to share a clip from the end of my 2021 conversation with Lori. We had finished the interview but hadn't cut the microphones yet, so what you're about to hear is completely candid. I can't think of a better way to show you what she was really like.

Aunt lori thank you so much for doing this, this was great!

Lori Zabar (26:14)

You're very welcome. And so anyway there's lots more details in my book. Obviously I can't give you all the details, I have to save some things for people to discover.

Willie Zabar (26:26)

Of course, and we'll cross promote, we'll promote this book

Lori Zabar (26:30)

Yeah O would hope so!

Willie Zabar (26:34)

That brings us to the end of our episode. I'll be honest, this was not an easy one to put together. When I started out Lori was still with us and available to help guide me through the process. She really only had one one stipulation: don't give away all the good stuff. She'd repeat this every time I saw her. Luckily, the book has so much good stuff I couldn't fit it all in one episode if I wanted. One of the main reasons I started this podcast was to preserve and share my family's history. Little did I know Lori was quietly working towards the same goal on a much more impressive scale. I don't know how many people will listen to this, and I'll never know how many will go on to buy the book. But what I do know is that no matter what happens, people will be able to find my Aunt Lori's book in libraries, book stores, and living rooms for generations to come, and if they choose to pick it up they too can learn our family's story. That's all for now. I'm Willie Zabar, and I'll see you at the store.

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