

Mansfield Importers founder Michael Mann 'loved selling'

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Michael Mann was nine years old when the Nazis murdered his parents and most of his siblings.

Born into a Jewish family in rural Poland, he was sent one day by his mother to buy a loaf of bread. When he returned to the family farm, it was empty. His relatives had been taken to the concentration camps, never to be heard from again.

Despite the childhood trauma, Mr. Mann never lost his faith in people or his sense of charity. He used those qualities to become one of Edmonton's best-known salesmen, making his business, Mansfield Importers and Distributors, a downtown institution for close to 50 years. Mr. Mann, who had Alzheimer's and Parkinson's disease, died April 16 from pneumonia. He was 78.

"He loved selling. He loved being around people," said Syna Uram, the eldest of his two daughters. "He was friendly to everyone. It didn't matter who you were, he was always genuinely curious to learn about you."

Mr. Mann, along with an older brother and half-sister, rode out the Second World War by hiding in neighbours' basements and homes for five years, often with no more to eat each day than a single egg or potato.

After the war, he was sent to an orphanage in France, then sent at age 16 to Toronto, where he was adopted by a wealthy family.



Michael Mann shows watches and jewelry in a travelling Seiko display.

The family offered to pay his way through engineering school, as long as he married their daughter and changed his last name to match theirs.

Mr. Mann refused, deciding instead to head to Edmonton because he loved the idea of the "Wild West frontier," said his youngest daughter, Terri Mann.

Mr. Mann arrived in the city about 1950 and immediately started selling odds and ends, eventually earning enough to start up Mansfield Importers in 1956 with friend Sid Baker. The two forged a successful lifelong business partnership, complementing each other's skills with a kind of "good cop, bad cop" routine.

While Baker played the tough guy making sure no one messed with the business behind the scenes, Mr. Mann was the friendly, smiling sales-

man out front, Terri Mann said.

Mansfield, named after 1950s-era blonde bombshell Jayne Mansfield, quickly became a downtown institution with its eclectic selection of goods.

The store, on 108th Street just north of Jasper Avenue, was best known for its jewelry and diamond rings, but offered a wide assortment of items ranging from luggage and tools to violins and bison-hair coats. It also attracted a wide assortment of clientele, including celebrities Jamie Farr and Tommy Hunter.

"There was definitely an odd collection of people who came there," Uram said. "It was kind of a weird variety store. It was advertised as being a wholesale business, but people would come in to engage in some old-fashioned haggling."

Mansfield became famous not only

for the great deals, but also the lithe extras Mr. Mann provided his customers.

Over the Christmas season, Mr. Mann would ship in \$2,000 of authentic Montreal smoked meat and would offer to make customers a sandwich in his upstairs lunch room.

"The store's goldsmith, when he wasn't fixing jewelry, he was slicing meat," Uram said.

For those who bought a ring, Mr. Mann had a tradition of taking them out for a Chinese dinner. He would often bring his own fish, getting the chefs to steam it for him or asking permission from the restaurant to cook it himself.

He also had a habit of helping fellow businesspeople, some down on their luck, by lending them money.

One of those beneficiaries was Bill Comrie, who used help from Mr. Mann to start up his first furniture business.

Mr. Mann told his daughters that Comrie once offered to make him a partner in the operation, but he declined. Comrie's idea of holding midnight sales seemed crazy.

"My father said, 'No thank you, Billy, you play too much hockey, and how are you going to make money selling furniture?'" Terri Mann said.

Comrie later went on to found The Brick.

Mr. Mann waited until he was 33 to get married. On a business trip in Montreal in 1964, he was introduced to a 20-year-old woman, Cita, from an orthodox Jewish family.

The age difference was not the only

thing striking about the couple. At the wedding later that year, the bride, at five-foot-six, stood taller than the five-foot-two groom.

Mr. Mann brought his new wife back to Edmonton and the couple raised their two daughters in the Crestwood home where Cita still resides.

In addition to Mansfield, Mr. Mann was involved in a number of other commercial and retail interests.

Among them, the best-known was Saveco. He and Baker again partnered on the store, which was an "early London Drugs" that sold pharmaceutical products along with toys, cameras and other goods, Uram said. The original location was on Jasper Avenue near 107th Street, but other outlets eventually appeared in Hinton and Kamloops and Prince George in British Columbia, she said. "In the 1970s, there were huge line-ups."

Saveco was sold in the mid-1980s, but Mr. Mann maintained Mansfield, working there six days a week throughout the year.

The store lasted for 50 years, finally closing in 2005 with one last blowout sale. By that point, Mr. Mann was beginning to show symptoms of Alzheimer's.

"He was a humble person but also unbelievably outgoing," Uram said. "When the store closed, people were sad. They said, 'What are we going to do? Who are we going to trust?' They always knew my dad would treat them well."

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