

Max Mandell, Founder of Nursery School, Is Dead at 90

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Max Mandell, who grew up with a mother who didn't love him and a grandfather who did, died on Saturday at Cabrini Medical Center in Manhattan. He was 90 and as the founder of the Mandell Nursery School and Kindergarten had devoted his life to making up for a mother's rejection by passing on a grandfather's love to generations of young children.

To suggest that Mr. Mandell wore his psyche on his sleeve would hardly do justice to a man who attributed his entire life's work to his feelings of rejection at the hands of an overbearing mother who lavished all her maternal love on his older brother.

That and the example of the counterbalancing love of his grandfather helped explain why, for more than half a century, Mr. Mandell was a weekday morning fixture in front of his school at 127 West 94th Street.

Inside, the 50 or so children from 3 to 6 received a more or less conventional preschool experience, perhaps with an extra emphasis on positive reinforcement dictated by Mandell policy.

Outside, they received total, unconditional acceptance of their very beings, greeted daily by Mr. Mandell with whoops and hugs and piling laughing into the open arms of a man who made a point never to close off a child. But then, how could he? With his snow white hair and bushy beard, he was a West Side incarnation of Santa Claus.

The daily greetings, Mr. Mandell once explained, provided a consistency that inspired a copycat consistency in the children's school work.

But that, he admitted, was mere pedagogical cover for a deeper and more personal motive. "This is for the satisfaction of my own soul," he said.

Mr. Mandell's soul was tested almost as soon as he was born in Romania in 1908 into family circumstances shrouded in mystery ever since his mother abruptly brought him and his older brother, Harry, to the United States three years later. Because the two boys were such striking physical contrasts, there were inevitable whisperings that they had different fathers, but no one in the family seems to know for sure.

What they do know is that Mr. Mandell's mother, who eventually opened a candy store in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn, so preferred his older brother that Mr. Mandell grew up feeling slighted and inadequate, or would have if his mother's father, a master carpenter, had not provided a consistent antidote of love and affection.

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While it is not unusual for a mother to prefer a firstborn son, Mr. Mandell's mother seemed to have carried the preference to extremes. Until someone provided an extra ticket, for example, she had been prepared to leave her younger son behind in Romania.

Then, years later, after Harry had been allowed to attend regular high school, Mr. Mandell was forced to work as a packer at a hat company during the day while attending Brooklyn Evening High School at night.

Although he studied business at City College, from the beginning Mr. Mandell focused on children, serving as a Scoutmaster, working for four years with disturbed adolescents at Bellevue Hospital, and in the late 1930's opening an afternoon recreation program on West 91st Street.

The program, in which Mr. Mandell drove children to parks, museums and other attractions, was such a hit that parents in the neighborhood clamored for him to open a nursery school.

During World War II, Mr. Mandell worked at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, but as soon as the war was over, he opened his school.

In what appeared to be a startling, if momentary, maternal thaw, his mother actually lent him the \$14,500 it took to buy the brownstone on West 94th Street, but almost immediately undercut the gesture. Within days after the closing, she demanded her money back, camping on her son's doorstep until he arranged alternate financing from loan sharks at a crushing 20 percent interest.

For its first two decades, the school limped along, as Mr. Mandell, his wife and their two children, who lived above the school, spent weekends cleaning classrooms.

Since then, Mandell, believed to be the last privately owned nursery school in Manhattan, has flourished in the hothouse atmosphere of parental ambitions. Seen as a sure stepping stone to Harvard or Yale, the school, which charges about \$8,000 a year, regularly receives 120 applications for a dozen openings.

Although his daughter, Barbara Rowe, has ostensibly run the school for years, Mr. Mandell continued to review virtually every expenditure and until late September could be found at his familiar post outside the school, passing on a grandfather's love and receiving his share in return.

Besides his daughter, Mr. Mandell, whose wife and brother died several years ago, is survived by a son, Paul, a professor at the University of Brazil in Brasilia; five grandchildren and four great-grandchildren.