

PEOPLE

In pictures: 'A tribute to a remarkable man and a social history of local retailing'



By Michael Jary | 25 May 2022



Maurice Dorfman in Jeannette Fashions, the longest-surviving independent retailer on London's Clapham High Street

Source: Jim Grover



On Christmas Eve 2019, Maurice Dorfman flipped the sign on his haberdashery shop door to 'closed', just as he, and before him, his parents, had on 60 previous Christmas Eves. This time he would never flip it back. He died two months later, at the age of 87.

What happened next, according to social-documentary photographer Jim Grover, was a remarkable local celebration of this man and his shop, Jeannette Fashions, the longest-surviving independent retailer on London's Clapham High Street.

Grover had photographed Maurice for an earlier project documenting Clapham High Street, and after Maurice's death decided to place some of these photographs in the shop window to mark his passing.

Each morning and evening, he noticed groups of local Clapham residents studying the photos and swapping stories of the man and his boutique. Grover interviewed more than 60 contributors who knew something of Maurice and gained access to the shop and to Maurice's own photo albums. Many provided their own family photos of weddings, parties, school plays and so on, where Maurice's fabrics, buttons, threads and friendly advice had brought colour to the occasion.

In an exhibition at Clapham Library and accompanying book, *Behind the Shop Façade*, Grover has lovingly curated the story of a modest man's extraordinary life.

A classic immigrant tale

The story begins with Maurice's grandparents, Hyman and Sarah Dorfman, who fled Ukraine to escape pogroms at the end of the 19th century. Arriving in London's East End, Hyman found work in a tailor's workshop. After success with his own garment manufacturing business and then financial collapse, the family eventually started the haberdashery business named after Maurice's mother.

Grover's meticulous research and beautiful photographs tell the story of Maurice's flourishing as a local entrepreneur, and then a long decline as home dressmaking went out of fashion. Maurice's carefully kept ledgers show the trajectory of many independent retailers – very profitable in the 1980s and 1990s, but in recent years barely covering its business rates.

What the exhibition proves, however, is that Maurice's fortunes were not measured by his financial success. He clearly loved the connection with the community.

We see tributes and photos from people involved in local theatres, from collectors of pattern books to mothers and children. We see Maurice at his large cutting table surrounded by colour: cloths, large rolls, fake furs, oranges and pinks. It's impossible to view these photos and not to exclaim, "Oh, my mum did that!" or "I had one just the same!"

The show is a tribute to a remarkable man, but also a social history of local retailing, its challenges and its importance to our civic fabric. Virtually to the end, Maurice continued to live in his time capsule of a flat above the shop. He opened the doors each day as his occupation, his social activity and his service to the community.

Through the exhibition, we get to know a conscientious, kind and generous man. He seems lonely in his vast and antiquated boutique, but still loved by more of his neighbours than perhaps he knew.

[Behind the Shop Facade: the life of Maurice Dorfman](#) is a free exhibition in its final days, running until May 28 at the Mary Seacole Centre, London.

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