

MENDELSON'S is a secondhand shop on Craig Street in Montreal. "We Buy & Sell Everything Of Value." Lots of coins, lots of gold and lots of action, especially these days, when Hymie and Harry must be thriving, although they'd never come right out and say it.

Mendelson's is situated on one of the ugliest streets in the country between a fire station and a bus terminal and opposite the back of a bank. "Ask any director of the Bank of Montreal. In fact, go to the vice-president and ask him who's behind the bank of Montreal. He'll say Mendelson's." Harry G. Mendelson knows his place in the cosmos. The "G", he says, stands for God.

"Hey, Leonard," he says to an old friend who comes into the store every afternoon, "you got a couple of hours? Tell this man how wonderful I am."

Harry is one half of Harry and Hymie, the two senior Mendelsons now running Mendelson's. It was their father, Morris Mendelson who was a legend of Craig Street. There was never an official apostrophe in Mendelson's but, from the day he opened its doors in 1906 until he died in 1964, it was most assuredly his store.

Morris Mendelson used to say, "Leave it lay. It doesn't eat bread." If it didn't eat bread it was entitled to gather dust and, sooner or later, there would be a customer who would want precisely that item and then the merchandise and the buyer would go happily off into the sunset and another sale would be rung up. Harry Mendelson is an expert on the subject of gold. The newspapers call him up to discuss price fluctuations and what does it mean, Harry?

"An expert," says Harry, "is a jerk who's not afraid to shoot off his mouth." But the thing about experts shooting off their mouths is that Harry doesn't. Not, anyway, about those subjects on which he has a genuine expertise. Not, certainly, about gold. Instead he just jokes, mostly about himself and his place in the universe.

"Harry," I said, "Harry, what's the most valuable thing you've got in the shop?"

"Harry Mendelson," he said.

I decided to do a story about Mendelson's. The next day I went back again and said to Harry, "Harry, I'd like to do a story about Mendelson's."

So he told me about the time in the 40s or 50s when a big-time magazine writer came from Toronto to do a story on Mendelson's. She stayed three days and just before leaving she said to Harry's father, "Mr. Mendelson, I want to thank you for three of the most fascinating days of my life." Harry's father responded courteously to the compliment and then said he'd like her to show him the typescript of her article before it was published. She said, no, she was sorry, she couldn't do that. Harry's father reached over onto the counter where the lady had placed a large folder full of the notes and observations she had meticulously transcribed during three days of hard work on the story at Mendelson's. He picked up the folder, took out her notes and tore them all up into little pieces.

Harry's eyes narrowed as he told me this story.

"I want to see your story before they run it," he said.

"No way," I said. "I'd be compromising myself."

"So let's compromise," Harry said.

I said no, but I still wanted to do the story, and he said he'd have to consult with Hymie who had suddenly upped and gone to Florida until the week after next, which is when he said I should come back, which is what and when, I agreed to and did.

The week after next. Hymie had a terrific tan and his teeth looked whiter. He wanted to know why I wanted to do a story on Mendelson's. I said because he and Harry are funny and Mendelson's is fun and, besides, gold is topical these days and he and Harry were rumored to have some. Hymie became very serious and said, OK, he'd trust that I wouldn't do a shylocking-merchant type of story. He said he would prefer that I refer to him as Hy, rather than Hymie. I tried to use Hy once but it didn't feel right. It felt the way it would have felt had Harry suddenly decided to be addressed as Hal.

VISITING the store that afternoon was Joseph Mendelson, a Montreal lawyer and first cousin to Hymie, and Harry. The ties are interesting. His father, Morris's brother was the late Harry Mendelson, not to be confused with the present Harry. The late Harry was Honest Harry of Honest Harry's, another secondhand shop just up the street from Mendelson's. Business there isn't as good.

"My family," said Joseph, "produced one doctor and one lawyer. But—[and here he paused]—but all the wealth in the family is right here." Joseph is the lawyer son of the late Honest Harry. His only brother is a doctor. This means that none of the sons took over Honest Harry's up the street, while here in Mendelson's the sons begat by Morris were able to keep the business going well. Joseph said that the reason there is wealth in Mendelson's is that Morris knew a long time ago that gold would do what it is now doing. He told his sons to hang on.

"My father," said the present Harry, "was the smarter one." Harry always says such things in such a cool-caustic, wry-winsome manner that nobody is ever offended by him. Always, he says these things like a bit of a joke. So he was a little surprised when his cousin Joseph responded seriously and agreed with him. "Yes," said Joseph, "the two brothers weren't on good terms. My dad always thought the sharper brother clipped him."

It is now another generation. There are no brothers clipping brothers. There is in fact great filial solidarity. Look at Hymie and Harry. Even Joseph, the son of the brother who didn't get along with their father, is a good friend of Hymie and Harry. It looks that way, at least as much as an outsider can tell these things, which you never can. But this certainly does appear to be one of those nice stories that you read sometime.

There wasn't, however, much point in going to Mendelson's to talk to Harry about gold. He knows gold with his eyes closed, by the feel. He's confident—because it's happened—that if a customer argues with him about the value of a certain gold coin and he tells the customer to call so-and-so on the other side of town