



Max Hassel the “Beer Baron” of Reading, PA

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If there ever was a story waiting to be turned into a screenplay it’s the one about Reading’s “Millionaire Newsboy/Beer Baron,” Max Hassel. Born Mandel Gassel in Latvia, his main alias was James “Jimmy” Feldman. During prohibition he developed a syndication of breweries that rivaled any of those that developed at the turn of the last century in pre-prohibition days.

We open with a scene inside a classroom at Reading’s Hebrew school where Mandel excels in learning English. A scrubbed and smiling “Max” (“Don’t call me Mandel”) eagerly raises his hand with the answer to a question. At recess we see him networking with the other kids, not given to pushing and shoving matches. After school he is across the street at his best friend Izzy’s house where Max does quite well at marbles, winning prized “cat’s-eyes” from his friends.

The next scene opens with an exterior view of the **Berks Bottling Works** on South Sixth Street. Inside, Max and Izzy are sipping a well-earned soda, listening in rapt attention to Izzy’s dad trying to impress on them the value of a dollar. Hyman Liever runs the place and is not beyond pressing the boys into service hauling empty cases or pulling bottles off the bottle washer. You could say Hymie became a sort of business mentor to the boys, a gatekeeper who stressed the importance of both hard work and connections.

We switch to a crane shot of a busy Reading street on a chilly fall day. We notice a corner that is literally a bee hive of activity. The camera gradually zooms in on a newsboy doing a brisk trade. Even at this age we can tell by the way Max engages his customers that this kid is headed for success in whatever he pursues. He seems to know everybody and everybody knows him, from the shoe shine boys to the shop keepers, cops, politicians and power brokers of Reading, the seat of Berks County. “Service with a smile” is Max’s motto.

We switch to cramped quarters, a street light barely illuminating a rented room on the second floor of a house in downtown Reading. Max and his brother Morris are rolling cigars using discarded molds from a defunct cigar manufacturer. They spend hours into the night making as many cigars as they can wrap before tying them up in bundles using scavenged waste ribbon. These cigars miraculously bypass any taxes on tobacco products and can be sold at a discount price but still earn a higher profit margin than the ones bearing a tax stamp.

We return to the Penn Avenue street scene and follow a well-dressed businessman as he ducks into the Colonial Cigar Store. We enter a blue-hazed environment, littered with spittoons and raucous conversations, a bastion of male culture to be sure; phones ringing off the hook; young runners delivering slips of paper before quickly returning to the streets. Were it more