

# Chapter 1

## A Chip Off the Ol' Block

**H**enry Bloch sat on the edge of his seat in the darkened movie theater. Though he had seen many films in his 13 years, this story of Louis Pasteur inspired him in a new way. He admired how Pasteur had saved thousands of lives and made a difference in the world. And sitting there in Kansas City, he knew he too wanted to make such a difference. But he had no idea how he would do it.

“Go into business with your brothers,” his mother always said. Henry tried to listen to his mother. She was a woman passionate about her sons, her husband and Ralph Waldo Emerson. She believed in thinking for herself, and she tried to teach her sons the same. “Don’t go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail,” his mother told him, quoting Ralph Waldo Emerson.

She looked at Henry and saw his potential to start a new path. But in the 1930s most people would not have looked at the shy and wiry Henry and seen a world-changing kid. In school his teachers labeled him as average, and even he admitted his brothers were smarter.

Born in 1922, Henry Bloch was the middle son of a middle-class family smack in the middle of the country. He was a conscientious, hardworking student, even though his grades put him in the middle of his class.

“Math was the only subject I was good at,” he acknowledges. “I couldn’t do foreign languages. I flunked French and German in high school.” Besides math, he was interested in science, though his grades didn’t always reflect his eagerness to master the subject.

Henry might say that his parents, Leon and Hortense, proved a scientific law: opposites attract. Leon had a voracious appetite for travel. Horthy, as she was better known, was a consummate homebody. He was frugal and she enjoyed spending. Both were raised Jewish, but only Leon practiced the faith. Horthy said, “I believe in Emerson,” a devotion made apparent by the collections of Emerson’s essays, journals, and poems in her sitting room.

Among the countless Emerson maxims that Horthy quoted, one in particular stuck with Henry. “Every institution is the lengthened shadow of one man.” Little did he know when his mother uttered these words that they would become intensely appropriate to him.

Horthy and Leon may have been opposites, but both of them enjoyed card games. “My parents played lots of bridge with their friends,” Henry recollects. “The only time I ever heard them come close to having an argument was over a card game. Dad would say, ‘Horthy, Horthy, how could you do that!’”

But Leon never let an imperfect bridge game stand in the way of a near-perfect marriage. In a 1945 letter to his sweetheart, Leon wrote, “Started to figure just how many times my love for you has increased and how precious you have become, but failed to find the figure.”

Horthy and Leon had three children. Leon Jr. was the oldest. Henry was born two years later, the middle son. Richard, better known as “Dick,” was born more than three years after Henry. Horthy named her second son after her beloved uncle Henry Wollman, a prominent New York attorney. Aside from occasional spats, the three Bloch



Henry's parents, Hortense (Horty) and Leon

brothers benefited throughout their youth from a remarkably close relationship.

Leon Sr. was a fair but strict father. Horty was an easygoing and tolerant mother. "Mom tried to spoil her children," Henry says. "It was not unusual for her to slip us extra spending money."

"Don't tell Dad," she always counseled. It was a good thing she was generous because the boys never received an allowance.

Henry remembers his father as an authoritarian figure. "When it was time for dinner, he'd come to my room and say, 'Come downstairs.' Then he would turn out my light and walk out. No matter what I was doing, I was expected to follow right behind him."

Leon Jr. says, "If we failed to mind Father, we'd definitely regret it."

## Childhood Lessons

With three boys who could each show a mischievous streak, it was a good thing that their father was firm. Once Leon Jr. chased Henry around the breakfast room table. Henry ran past his dad's tool drawer and grabbed a small handsaw with a pointed blade. He threw it over his shoulder and the blade went through Leon's nose. Now, at age 89, Leon still exhibits a scar as a reminder of that childhood incident.

But turnabout is fair play. "Once I got locked out on the second-floor porch by one of my brothers," Henry explains. "I used my fist and broke the window to get back in." He too displays a permanent mark.

The three boys loved to scale the massive chestnut trees in the vacant lot next door. Sometimes they dislodged the prickly chestnuts, and other times they climbed in the house through a second-story window. Their mother often warned them, illogically, "If you fall and break both legs, don't come running home to me."

Henry had an insatiable curiosity. "I had a chemistry set when I was a kid, and I figured out how to make ammonia. I showed the flask to Mom, and I told her to smell. She collapsed. Dick yelled, 'You killed my mother!'"



The Bloch brothers (left to right): Richard, Henry, and Leon

The ammonia didn't kill her, nor did endless cross-country road trips with her husband and three sons. On their first such trip, the five Blochs drove to California. Henry was thrilled to see the Grand Canyon and the Pacific Ocean. The vacation, as it turned out, was more eventful than any of them could have imagined. They got a flat tire in the middle of nowhere. "We determined that a filling station owner had sprinkled tacks on the highway. Like other victims, we were stuck paying him to patch the tire," Henry recalls. That wasn't the only mishap.

It was a hot day in the California desert, and cars didn't yet have air conditioning. "We kept a thermos in our car. Mom filled the top full of water and handed it to Dad, who was driving. After taking a sip, he threw what was left out the window. But he had forgotten to open the window and the water splashed back on him."

In a nondescript town in the Nevada desert, the family stopped at a roadside cafe. Horthy recognized Herbert Hoover sitting at the next table. A courageous Henry asked the former president for his autograph and Hoover complied by writing it on a guest check.

Henry always enjoyed family vacations. Once, though, he convinced the family to cut short their travels. They had driven to the 1933 World's Fair in Chicago. Eleven-year-old Henry, who was keen on going to the movies, was eager to see a highly anticipated adventure film. *Tarzan the Fearless*, starring the athletic Buster Crabbe and the popular Jacqueline Wells, was to be released in Kansas City before their scheduled return. The family consented to come home early so Henry could watch the amazing Tarzan and his companion Mary (instead of Jane) swing through the trees.

The Tarzan series was among Henry's favorites. Other than *The Story of Louis Pasteur*, though, nothing Henry absorbed from the surreal world of the silver screen could touch the long-lasting impact made by some real-life incidents of his youth.

"I was maybe 12 years old and home alone when the doorbell rang. A salesman was pushing magazine subscriptions. I ran up to my room where I kept a few dollars. I paid him five dollars for a one-year subscription to *Spur*, a magazine in which I had absolutely no interest. After shutting the door, I thought to myself, 'What have I done?' I was awfully disappointed in myself. When my mother came home, I told

her about my blunder. I thought she would be furious. ‘Wonderful!’ she said. ‘You’ll never make that mistake again.’” Thriftiness would become a hallmark of Henry’s style throughout his long business career.

Henry made a different mistake the day his namesake, his great-uncle Henry Wollman, died. The 13-year-old had recently taken up golf and was particularly fond of the sport. A fierce competitor who loved to win, Henry worked hard to hone his game. “It was Friday the 13th. I was in the front yard chipping golf balls over my parents’ car. One ball went right through our dining room window.” Henry braced himself as his mother opened the front door, her face awash with grief. But suddenly he felt a different kind of anguish when she broke the news of Henry Wollman’s death.

Henry Wollman was a big man with a big personality. He loved a fine cigar, even if the ashes frequently landed on his large stomach. Having never married, he took an immense interest in his nieces and nephews. He always brought them a dollar, although he would first pretend to have no money. Young Henry didn’t know his great-uncle well, but he always enjoyed hearing his mother’s stories about Henry Wollman’s warmth, his concern for family, and his significant philanthropy. In so many ways, Henry Wollman Bloch would take after Uncle Henry Wollman.

At age 15, Henry Bloch ventured to Colorado on his first trip without the family. He and his pal Maynard Brown caught a ride with friends of their parents, who were heading to California on vacation. The boys decided to hitchhike back to Kansas City, a common form of travel in the 1930s. A pleasant-enough stranger picked them up, but he had clearly been drinking. Henry asked the drunk driver to drop them off at the next town. Standing on an empty street corner late at night in Manhattan, Kansas, the boys realized that they wouldn’t be able to find another ride until morning. Worse, after turning their pockets inside out, they discovered there wasn’t enough money between them for a motel room.

They remembered passing a field with haystacks just before entering the town. Surely the hay would make a satisfactory mattress for one night. But getting to that field on foot took considerably longer than they thought. They were bushed when they got there. “We climbed on a haystack, determined to use it as a bed,” Henry recalls. “The problem was that we couldn’t get comfortable and the haystacks smelled awful. We slid down and walked aimlessly back into town. A police officer

stopped us, thinking we were vagrants.” The officer wasn’t angry with the boys. In fact, he did them a favor by locking them up for the night. At least the jail cots smelled a bit better than the haystacks.

Early the next morning, a still-weary Henry noticed signatures of past prisoners scribbled on the cell walls. With nothing else to do, he innocently added his own autograph to the collection. “You shouldn’t have done that,” an inmate in the adjacent cell cautioned. “It means you’ll be back.”

Those words were forever etched in the teenager’s mind. “Since then,” Henry admits, “I’ve always been extremely careful to do the right thing.”

The following summer, Henry decided that earning money was the right thing to do. He looked for physical work, hoping to add muscle on his lean frame. Searching the classified ads, he landed a position with the city as a ditch digger. Entirely unimpressed with her son’s career choice, his mother, perhaps intentionally, forgot to wake him up on the first day. Having lost his job before he had started, Henry didn’t dig a single hole.

Determined to find another job, Henry saw an ad for a grain tester. (Kansas City has long been one of the largest rail hubs and agribusiness centers in the country.) But that job didn’t work out much better. “It was so dusty inside those cars, you could hardly breathe,” he recalls. Henry could hardly wait to quit. From that short and unsatisfying summer experience, Henry learned about the kind of job he *didn’t* want to make into a career. Sitting behind a desk seemed much more appealing.

## Without a Road Map

Throughout high school Henry had no definite idea about what he wanted to study in college. “I often rode my bike to Loose Park, sat on a hill overlooking the pond, and asked myself what I wanted to do. My father told me he did the same thing when he grew up in Minneapolis, Kansas,” Henry says. “I knew I wanted more than a job. I wanted to contribute something to society.”

Meanwhile, an uncommon entrepreneurial curiosity overtook one of his brothers. “Dick was always a businessman,” Henry says, “even

as a kid.” Rummaging through an uncle’s attic at age four, Dick had stumbled on an old hand-powered printing press, which he found fascinating. In high school, he ran a genuine printing business with three automatic presses on the second floor of the family home. “Mother would have a mahjong game,” Henry remembers, “and Dick would solicit stationery orders from the women.” But his primary market was serving the printing needs of area schools. Although the business was a small moneymaker, there was a downside. Every time Dick turned on one of the presses, the house shook as if it was at the epicenter of an earthquake. When he finally sold the thunderous machines to a small college in Iowa, the family rejoiced over the renewed tranquility of their home.

In another of a string of entrepreneurial pursuits, Dick converted the family’s front yard into a used car lot. He would buy malfunctioning cars, fix them, and then put them up for sale. Once again he produced a profit, which he used to defray his college expenses.

Dick pursued entrepreneurial activities the way other students engaged in sports and other extracurricular diversions. He didn’t hit the books as hard as his two brothers, but he managed to make high marks. He also managed to skip school—with parental permission and without sacrificing his educational footing. Whenever Leon Sr. asked his sons if they wanted to take a trip with him during the school year, Dick was usually the only volunteer. While his brothers were hunched over their textbooks, Dick was beginning to envision a career that entailed extensive travel.

Not interested in going away to school at age 16, Henry attended the University of Kansas City. Early in his first semester he decided to become a chemist. (After all, he knew how to make ammonia.) Art, a friend from high school, also attended UKC and wanted to be a chemist. “He was brilliant,” Henry recalls. “We took the same courses, and his grades were always better. But once I somehow got a B on a paper and Art got a C. He went straight to the professor. ‘How could you give Henry Bloch a better grade than you gave me?’ By the end of the semester, I had given up on becoming a chemist because I couldn’t keep up with Art.”

After freshman year, Henry was ready to venture away from Kansas City. Settling on the University of Michigan was an easy decision because his great-aunt Kate Wollman offered to pay his tuition. She made good



on her brother Henry Wollman's promise to pay for his grandnieces' and grandnephews' college education at his alma mater. Only Henry and two of his cousins accepted her generous offer. Leon Jr. attended the University of Missouri. Dick set off for the Wharton School of Finance at the University of Pennsylvania, and his parents paid his way.

At the University of Michigan, Henry majored in mathematics. "It was the only subject that mattered to me," he says. "Sometimes I would sit up all night trying to work problems." He was so skillful at solving complex equations that when one of his math professors needed a substitute instructor, he figured Henry should be his replacement.

Henry thought about becoming a math teacher himself. But his mother wasn't fond of the idea. "Our family doesn't have ambition," she told him, noting that her husband, a self-employed lawyer, never aspired to have a highly successful and prosperous career. "I hope you do. And I hope you'll go into business with your brothers."

For the moment, Henry was making a small business out of playing bridge at Michigan. Like his parents and brothers, he was passionate about the game. "There was a regular match at midnight in my dorm," Henry recalls. "My roommate agreed to pay all of my losings for half of my winnings. The only problem was that I couldn't sleep afterwards. One hand after another would go through my mind."

Without a roadmap for the future in mind, Henry embarked on his last year of college. It was 1942 and the world was in turmoil. Adolph Hitler had invaded Poland, war had broken out throughout Europe, and the horrific conflict had become global. Dark and grim days lay ahead. But as Oscar Wilde once said, "What seems to us as bitter trials are often blessings in disguise." Henry's life was about to change during the bitter trial of World War II. It would shape the rest of his days.

### HENRY'S DEDUCTIONS

- Don't settle for a job. Find your calling and follow your heart.
- Keep growing, learning, and changing. There's always room for improvement.
- Don't do anything that wouldn't make your parents proud.



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