

HAIRCUT

I always liked getting a haircut. I liked the feel of sitting in a grand barber chair and having the barber place that big sheet around me, put a strip of paper around my neck, straighten and pin the sheet, and adjust the chair.

I suspect that my mother followed Jewish tradition and I may not have had my first haircut until I was around three. I don't remember that haircut, but I do remember haircuts when I was five or six. I would go to the barber with my mother and the barber would put a booster seat across the arms of the barber chair, and I would climb up, feeling as if I was sitting on top of the world. I would then look in the mirror and was amazed that, since there were mirrors, front and back, it looked as if everything in it went on forever.

We lived on Fox Street, and around the corner, on Longwood Avenue, were all the stores a family needed: a candy store, a grocery store, a butcher shop, an appetizing store, a fruit store, a cleaning store, a drug store, a shoe repair store, and a barber shop. We knew all the storekeepers, and they knew us. (There was a bakery and a fish store, and even a dairy restaurant, but they were a few blocks away.) My barber was Mr. Shaikin. Years later, I learned that his first name was Sam, but I always called him Mr. Shaikin.

By the time I was seven or eight, I would walk to the barber shop by myself, and I no longer sat on a booster seat. There were three barber chairs, but only one barber, Mr. Shaikin. It was the 1930s, the depression, and I imagined that when times had been good, there might have been two other barbers, and the barber shop would have been filled with men waiting to get haircuts. There were about five or six seats behind the barber chairs, and a table with magazines, including one called *The Police Gazette*, which had pictures of half naked women. Before high school, when I went to the barber shop, I seldom had to wait, since I would go after school, so I did not get a chance to look through the magazines. I guess most of Mr. Shaikin's customers came after work or on Saturdays.

What really impressed me about the barber shop was the line-up of bottles containing all colors and sizes of lotions and tonics. I went to Mr. Shaikin for a haircut from before elementary school through college, and never once had I requested, or did Mr. Shaikin offer, to apply any of those lotions or tonics to my hair. Did anyone? Or were they just for display?

How much was a haircut? To the best of my recollection, 15 cents for children, 25 cents for adults, very much like ticket prices for matinee movies. And the idea of tipping the owner was unheard of. I liked haircuts, but there were children who did not, and who would squirm and protest. I felt that the barber should charge more for those kids, not less. I am not sure when Mr. Shaikin moved me into the adult category. It may have happened when I started shaving, and he began shaving the back of my neck and sideburns. Over the years, the price gradually increased to 50 cents, 75 cents and a dollar or more.

There was another change that took place: the transition from hand clippers to electric clippers. It was more efficient, and there were fewer occasions when the clipper pulled your hair. Of course, the top was cut with scissors, which he opened and closed rhythmically before actually cutting. When I sat down, I would say “a regular haircut.” No trims, no crew cuts. In addition to haircuts, all barbers provided shaves. I assumed you had to be pretty rich if you went regularly to the barber shop for a shave. You couldn’t give yourself a haircut, but you could give yourself a shave. A shave from a barber was a wonderful ritual.

I went to Mr. Shaikin for a shave on two occasions: in June 1949 when I graduated from college, and in December 1951, for my wedding. The ritual consisted of applying a hot towel to your face; then selecting the straight razor, and honing it on a strap attached to the barber chair; then taking a shaving brush, a cup with shaving soap, and after removing the towel, applying the lather to your face. And with a flourish, Mr. Shaikin began the process of shaving. It was luxurious. And after the last stroke of the straight razor, Mr. Shaikin reached for one of the bottles of lotions and tonics lined up on the shelf, and, selecting a bottle of after-shave lotion, poured a little into his hand and slapped it on my absolutely smooth cheeks and chin. I had told him about his role in the two upcoming special occasions. He wished me Mazel Tov, and shook my hand. Mr. Shaikin had been my barber for almost 20 years.

I don’t know if he retired first, or if I had stopped patronizing him when I started working downtown. It was more convenient to grab a haircut at one of the dozens of “cut-rate” (pun intended) barber shops on every other corner. By the 1950s and 1960s, the neighborhood shops were disappearing. The food stores were replaced by supermarkets; the independent drug stores, by chains. However, despite Supercuts, the Haircuttery and a few other chains, the neighborhood barber is still around. He is not a hair stylist, and you do not need an appointment; you just walk in. If there are two or more customers waiting, you leave and come back later.

Now that I am retired, I get much fewer haircuts, but when I do, I make my way to Brookline Village and Mike’s barber shop where Mike (a Russian Jew who came here 20 years ago) cuts hair at a price comparable to Supercuts: \$18 for adults, and \$15 for seniors. No prices listed for children. He has a table with sports and automobile magazines, and Playboy. He uses a couple different electric clippers, one of which does what Mr. Shaikin used to do with a straight razor. He does not have a mirror on his back wall. What he does is hold a hand mirror to show me what a great job he did on the back of my head and neck. I call him Mischa, (I don’t know his last name.) We shmooze, and I throw into our conversations the few Russian words that I know. When he finishes, I say spaseebaw, tell him it looks great, pay him, and give him a tip.

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