

SHOPPING FOR CLOTHES

When you are a pre-teen, it goes without saying that your parents buy your clothes for you. For one thing, you don't have any money. For another, you don't know the first thing about shopping for clothes. It was during the depression, and though my mother knew about shopping for clothes, we didn't have much money. Whatever new clothes I remember getting were bought at either Pesach or Rosh Hashanah. It almost made the acquisition of new clothes a religious experience, and it didn't happen too often.

I have one vivid memory of my being taken to the shoe store on Southern Blvd. when I was about nine. (Yes, it was just before Rosh Hashanah and the start of school.) The salesman measured my feet and my mother picked out the style of shoe I was to get. I had no say in the matter. They were high shoes, not oxfords, and I really didn't like them. When we arrived home, I told my mother I didn't like the shoes, especially since all my friends wore oxfords. She became very angry and asked me why I didn't say something in the store. I didn't think I could voice an opinion. Adults made those decisions. Those were the last high shoes I wore. And my mother never bought me sneakers. She read somewhere that they were not good for your feet.

Elsewhere, I mentioned that those of us who were lucky enough to be on relief were also the beneficiaries of surplus food and occasional clothing handouts. The only piece of clothing that I remember is the jacket my mother obtained for me when I was 13. Whether my mother was able to get other clothes—pants, shirts, sweaters, or anything for herself-- I don't know. I suspect that the clothes made in WPA factories were given to the poor. They certainly weren't sold.

My mother did most of her clothes shopping in shops in the neighborhood and at Hearn's at 149th Street and Third Avenue. She required special shoes and bought them at a store called Enselows. And of course, she made her own clothes. I didn't realize how impressed I should have been to see my mother take material that she had bought and a pattern, lay them out on the kitchen table, cut out the cloth and then sew it all together and end up with a skirt, a dress or a coat. When she had material left over after having made a coat, she might make a hat or a purse to go with it. One time, she created an "envelope" purse and embroidered a name and address on it. I thought it was corny and said so. I am almost in tears as I write this, remembering how I minimized my mother's creativity. But this is supposed to be a story about my early experiences shopping for clothes.

When I was 14, I started attending Stuyvesant High School located at 15th Street and Second Avenue. I would get off at 14th Street and walk to school passing S. Klein "on the square." Again, it was years later that I realized how clever their slogan was. It was a double entendre. It meant "on Union Square" and "on the level." A digression: As a youngster, I thought that Union Square was named after the union that had its headquarters there—the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. Union Square was also the gathering place for left wing speakers, and where the annual May Day parade ended. It turns out that it commemorates the Union of the Civil War. In any event, S.

Klein became the supplier of all my clothes from the age of 14 until I left New York for Washington, DC in 1965.. From my first days at Stuyvesant, I had a part-time job, which meant that I had my own money to buy whatever I needed—including clothes, with no adult supervision.

S. Klein was the Filene's Basement of New York. I didn't realize it then. I thought it was unique unto itself. Where else was there a store filled with bargains? Announcers would come on every few minutes telling shoppers that something was going on sale in a certain department for a limited time, and hordes of people would rush there, whether they needed it or not.

I suspect both Kleins and Filenes buyers were in fierce competition to buy up all the left over suits and coats and shirts and ties and slacks and sports jackets from the manufacturers that sold to stores like Brooks Brothers, and the fancy department stores and specialty shops, as well as the clothes left over in those stores at the end of the season. Years later, I asked a friend who had become a lawyer and who started to buy suits from Brooks Brothers why he didn't buy his suits from Kleins. He asked me how long it took me to find something there. He was right. For him, time was money. I didn't have the money but I had the time, and if I didn't find it today, I was sure I would find it the next time.

I must admit that I would deviate from time to time, and check out Macys and Gimbels when I was around Herald Square (commemorating the newspaper the New York Herald, not someone's name.) It turns out that Gimbels had a pretty good basement. It couldn't match Filenes, but they must have cornered the market on discontinued and quality seconds shirts. Through high school, college, and until I moved to Washington in 1965, I dressed well and for very little. My mother made me aware of quality: the feel of the fabric, the closeness of the stitching, were the button holes hand made or machine made, how well the stripes matched, and whether the garment was union made.

When I was going to graduate from high school and was about to buy my first suit, (no I didn't have a suit for my Bar Mitzvah) I intended to brave the aisles and racks of S. Klein. However, my mother had a better idea. There was a small men's clothing store on Fifth Avenue and 22nd Street owned by a man named Sam Zimbler. My father had done business with him, until my father died in 1931. My father's business was buying left over odd lots from manufacturers and selling them to retailers, almost like the Filenes and Kleins buyers I described. My mother told me to go to Mr. Zimbler, tell him I am Louis Schlitt's son and that I want to buy a suit for graduation. She said that he would sell me a good suit at a fair price. I felt awkward and embarrassed, but I did as my mother said. Mr. Zimbler was very pleasant. He showed me several suits in my size. I picked one out. He explained that the price on the ticket was not the price that he was going to charge me. He measured me for the cuffs. I paid for the suit and returned the following week to pick it up. My mother confirmed that it was well made, quality material and worth the price.

Other than that suit, all my clothes came from Kleins. But from 1965 to 1979, I was like the Israelites wandering in the desert—in a land without a real discount clothing store. Having to wait for sales at Hechts or Woodies. Phooey! What do Washingtonians know about real bargains? I even found myself patronizing men's specialty shops like Raleigh's. What have I become? I was afraid I was going lose my ability to find a bargain among the jumble of "shmatas."

But then the Lord looked down upon me, took pity, and arranged for me to be transferred to Boston, in an office a block away from Filenes, and in 1979 I began shopping in Filene's Basement in Downtown Crossing. I found the shoppers' Promised Land. I hated to admit it: Filenes Basement out-Kleined S. Klein. With the extra added attraction of mark-downs. It was in 1957 that Julie Bernstein took me to Filenes Basement for the first time. I refused to recognize that a Boston store could be better than a New York store. Just as I am a convert from the NY Yankees to the Boston Red Sox, I have to admit I became a convert from Kleins to Filenes. I shopped Filenes Basement for 28 years. I almost never bought anything without a mark-down, How I loved to find an article with TWO mark-downs And now it too is gone.

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