

MY FIRST DENTIST

Everybody I know has a dentist. He (or she) is almost as important as a doctor, who is also called a physician. In fact, dentists are doctors. I called all my dentists "Doctor." They used to say that a dentist is a doctor who flunked out of medical school. But that is not always the case. I am sure that lots of dentists wanted to be dentists. When they were asked, "what do you want to be when you grow up?" they answered, "dentist."

I had a memorable dentist, and a number of years ago, I wrote a piece about him. Unfortunately, I cannot find it, so I decided to write this. If I find what I had previously written, I will compare it to this, decide which I like better, and will either keep it and discard the other, or vice versa, or combine the two.

"DR. SOLOMON MAGGIN, DDS." His name conjures up for me a larger than life figure. No other dentist can even come close to him. The story of his life that my mother told me, is the story of a legendary human being. It was living history. Dr. Maggin never revealed anything to me about his early life. However, when I was in my teens, and was imprisoned in his chair, unable to speak, he went on non-stop about contemporary politics. I therefore concluded that all dentists are political and harangued their patients. It came with the territory.

Solomon Maggin was from Kishinev, which is where my father was from. It is possible that they knew each other, or more likely that my father learned about him through a "landsmanshaft." My father was born in 1884 and came to the U.S. around 1904, the same year that my mother left Vaslui, Romania and made her way to Toronto. Dr. Maggin (I cannot refer to him as anything else but Dr. Maggin) may have been a few years older and was a teacher in the Kishinev schools. When my mother told me this, I found it hard to believe. I thought all Jews were poor and the only education they received was in a Talmud Torah or Yeshiva. Here was a young man who graduated from the Gymnasium with teaching credentials and was teaching the children of Kishinev in a public school. That was a very prestigious position for a Jewish young man.

Apparently, Dr. Maggin was also active politically at the time. He was a Socialist and took part in the 1905 revolution. The Czar put down that attempt to overthrow him, and Dr. Maggin was sent to Siberia. He escaped, made his way to the US, landing somewhere in California. Then he made his way to New York where he earned a living peddling, and went to dental school at night.

He was tall, or I thought he was tall when I was small. He stood erect. He had a big bushy moustache. He spoke with a distinct Russian accent. He read two papers a day: the Russian paper and the NY Times. He was a right wing Socialist. He was on the board of the Rand School. He was convinced that the well-meaning Democrats were unaware of the evils of the Communists and the Soviet Union and of Josef Stalin. He was even upset with Norman Thomas. He knew all about the Moscow trials, and Trotsky and Soviet anti-Semitism. He once said the difference between Stalin and the Czar, was that one could escape from the Czar.

When I first started going to Dr. Maggin, his office was on Southern Blvd. and 149th Street. It was the mid-30s. Like every other child, I did not want to go to the dentist, but it was carved in stone that we must brush our teeth twice a day and see our dentist twice a year. And it turned out that I had poor teeth and required fillings almost every time I visited him. I know that he charged my mother very little. By the early 40s, he moved from Southern Blvd to the Grand Concourse. I believe it was 1235. (I can't remember what I had for lunch but I remember that Dr. Maggin's office was 1235 Grand Concourse, near 167th Street. Where I used to walk to his office, I now took the trolley.

His was a one-person office. He did everything. He had no secretary, he had no assistant. He booked appointments. He did the cleanings. He took the x-rays. He drilled, and he filled. He also did extractions. However, on one occasion, I had an impacted wisdom tooth, and he decided that it required a specialist, so he sent me to some hot shot who had a fancy office and an assistant.

This "specialist" took several x-rays, studied them carefully, gave me novocaine, and proceeded to extract my wisdom tooth. He had a whole bunch of tools that looked more appropriate for a wood worker or carpenter: pliers and hammers and chisels. He pulled and pulled, and kept looking at the x-ray. Then he took the chisel and proceeded to hammer, apparently trying to separate the wisdom tooth from the adjoining molar. Back to pulling. He then triumphantly pulled out the wisdom tooth. Unfortunately he pulled the adjoining molar, which Dr. Maggin had spent a great deal of time trying to save. No way to put it back. I was almost hysterical. On top of that, his idiot of an assistant, when she saw that two teeth had been pulled, asked the dentist if she should charge me for two extractions.