

SMOKING

An article about the possibility of a merger of two tobacco manufacturers in today's NY Times, led me to think about my experience with smoking. I can't believe I haven't already written about it. (I may have, but can't remember. I am getting more forgetful; I am getting old, and I attribute the fact that I am still around to having stopped smoking.)

Growing up in the '40s, smoking was about the coolest, hippest, sexiest thing you could do. Everybody who was important, or famous, smoked. From FDR with his cigarette in a holder, held at a jaunty angle, to every motion picture actor, and to doctors (or somebody) who would walk a mile for a Camel.

My mother made it clear, when I was a teen-ager, that she did not want me to smoke. She said that my father smoked, and she believed there was a connection between his smoking, and his dying at 47. There were a few guys in high school who smoked. They were the macho guys who were already making out. The really tough guys wore T shirts and had a pack of cigarettes rolled up in their sleeve. Those were not the guys I hung out with. In the mid-40s, a pack of cigarettes cost about 15 cents, and you could buy a single cigarette in the neighborhood candy store for a penny. No age restrictions.

Smoking was not limited to tough teen-agers and movie stars. In my neighborhood, almost all the men smoked. These were Jewish workers, and they must have learned how to smoke in Europe as teenagers, though I am sure they didn't have cigarette packs rolled up in T shirt sleeves. An early memory was leaving shul at the end of Yom Kippur, walking through a haze of smoke, and hearing the men say they didn't mind fasting, but the hardest part was going an entire day without a cigarette.

Some time in my teens, I learned to smoke. After a bit of coughing and tearing eyes, I got the hang of it. It was no big deal, and I had trouble figuring out what need it fulfilled. It was not like wanting something to eat or drink, but it made me look cool. It wasn't until my last years of college that I started buying cigarettes. (Prior to that, I bummed them off a friend or accepted them when offered.) I made sure that my mother did not know I smoked.

By 1950, I was a confirmed smoker. I tried Chesterfields and Camels, until I settled on Pall Malls. Why, I have no idea. I smoked a few cigarettes a day, more on weekends, when hanging around, or on dates. There was a ritual about smoking: remove the cigarette from the pack, tap it, put it in your mouth, strike the match, light the cigarette, inhale, release the smoke, hold the cigarette, look cool and debonair. Possibly blow a few smoke rings.

In May 1950, I was part of the ILGWU Training Institute. Our classroom came with ashtrays on our desks, and most of us had a pack of cigarettes next to our ashtray. I was still buying my cigarettes by the pack. The following year, I started buying cigarettes by the carton.

My closest friends were not smokers. Not Phil, Mel, Sid, or Alex. Bob tried a pipe but gave it up. Sol was a real pipe smoker. Among the women, Sylvia, Rose and Berna smoked, possibly Martha. Through the '50s and '60s, at least half the people with whom I came in contact were smokers.

In June 1954, I was drafted. My favorite story about cigarettes and the Army may be apocryphal, but I was sure it happened: It was the start of Basic Training. We had been assigned to our bunks and were waiting around. One of the GIs went over to each of us and gave us a pack of cigarettes. A surprising and wonderful gesture. For the next eight weeks, he never bothered to carry a pack of cigarettes. He simply asked one of us. In the Army, it was assumed that we were all smokers. Sergeants would call, "Fall out. Smoke if you got 'em." Cigarettes were included with C and K rations. Cigarettes cost a lot less at the PX.

There were a lot of different brands on the market. The most popular were Camels, Chesterfields, Lucky Strike, Philip Morris, Old Gold, Kools, Winstons, and Salems. I could not understand the British influence on some others. In addition to Pall Malls, there were Parliaments, Benson and Hedges, Dunhills, Viceroy's, and Tarrytons. Then came the Marlboro Man. All of them, we eventually learned, could kill you.

I smoked at my desk at every job I had, until 1971. In the '60s, the word was out that nicotine is addictive, and that cigarettes cause cancer, but few of us believed it would happen to us. Maybe to someone else. I was smoking a pack a day. I didn't start to smoke until I got to the office, and was happy when there were still cigarettes left in the pack. By the late '60s, my kids were pestering me to stop smoking. I said I could stop whenever I wanted, but I didn't want to, just yet. Information about the dangers of smoking increased. You had to be stupid to ignore it. I stopped for a while, but then resumed. I think it was Mark Twain who said, "quitting smoking is the easiest thing to do. I did it hundreds of times." In December 1970, I discovered a two week class to help people quit smoking, run by the Seventh Day Adventists. It was convenient—in the neighborhood. My kids were delighted. I received a certificate proclaiming that I had taken the course, and was no longer a smoker.

I had a rough couple of weeks in January 1971. Instead of cigarettes, I had gum and hard candy on my desk. I was not very productive. My colleagues were very understanding. I had to admit that I had been addicted to nicotine, and it was not easy to withdraw. From time to time, over the next year, when a friend was smoking, I would take a drag from his cigarette, and found that it tasted awful. I was cured.

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