

MY LIFE IN FURNITURE

Along with everyone else, I grew up in a home filled with furniture. I never gave it much thought. Not as a small child, nor even as a teen-ager. I had no sense of quality: expensive, cheap, what was or was not in good taste. I felt comfortable with the furniture around me, the furniture that my parents bought when they married. There was only one change that was made that affected me, growing up: My day bed was replaced by a sleep sofa.

My mother and I lived in a two-room apartment, which we moved into when I was five. I was oblivious to the downsizing required as a result of the move from a four-room apartment. My mother must have sold the excess furniture. In the combination living room, dining room, kitchen (and my bed room), we had a table, chairs, a large mahogany china closet, a day bed (later a sleep sofa), a chest of drawers, a small round table with a cut glass lamp, a marble bust, a bookcase, and various pictures. In my mother's bedroom, there was a large mahogany double bed, a large matching dresser with a mirror, a desk and a chair. In the hallway between the two rooms were a Victrola, and an umbrella stand.

I eventually became aware that our furniture was a little different. My mother pointed out to me that the chest of drawers, the small round table with the marble top, and the desk, were made of a special kind of wood, and that the designs were inlaid. Most important, they had been made by my uncle in Paris who was a cabinet maker. My mother had the pieces shipped here after she visited her sister and her family in 1926.

The mahogany pieces--the china closet and the bedroom set--must have been top of the line. These were my surroundings as I grew up. We may have been poor, but we had a lot of rich furniture. Inside the china closet was my mother's collection of cut glass--lots of bowls, pitchers, and vases--as well as painted plates, Limoges china, and 1847 Rogers Brothers silver.

When I was 23, working in Cleveland, my mother died. I returned to our home, but made no changes in the furnishings. When I was 24, Sylvia and I married. We started our married life in the same apartment with the same furniture. Sylvia wanted her own home with her own furniture, so we began getting rid of my mother's furniture. We found a second hand dealer who was happy to take most of the old furniture off our hands. He took the fancy chest of drawers and the little round table that my uncle made, the marble bust, and when we found a replacement, he took the bed and dresser and china closet. I removed three of the glass shelves from the china closet and used them for book shelves.

My mother's books and bookcase presented a problem. What do we do with all her Yiddish books? It was 1952 and there was no National Yiddish Book Center. I gave most of them to our neighborhood library which had a Yiddish section, and kept the rest: a 12 volume set of "Veltgeshikhte," a Yiddish encyclopedia, bound in blue leather, a four volume set of the writing of Leonid Andreyev, translated from Russian, and various

books by Sholem Aleichem. Then we sold the bookcase. We replaced it with “brick and board” which was the way all young marrieds at the time displayed their books.

We got rid of the windup phonograph, but kept some of the 78 rpm records. One of our first purchases was a hi-fi set: record player, speakers, tuner, amplifier. We were now ready to furnish our home with furniture that reflected “our” taste. This required many visits to the chic furniture stores in Greenwich Village. The name that sticks in my mind is Maurice Villency. We also discovered Herman Miller. Our apartment took on a very different appearance. Eames chairs, Herman Miller cabinets, lots of teak instead of mahogany, a new mattress and box spring. And in place of the big mirror over the dresser, I constructed hanging book shelves, with the three glass shelves removed from the china closet. We packed away the Limoges china and replaced them with Russell Wright, and the 1847 Rogers silver was replaced with Danish modern stainless steel.

The next 20 years whizzed by, furniture-wise. In 1957, we moved from two rooms on Fox Street in the Bronx to four rooms on Sterling Place in Brooklyn, and then to Washington DC. In 1967, we bought a house on 14th Street NW, acquiring and getting rid of furniture along the way. Rather than seeing it thrown out, I took home two library-quality oak book shelves, when I worked for AFSCME in 1965. Sylvia developed an interest in antiques. We bought furnishings for the children’s rooms, the dining room and the living room.

When we separated in 1972, I only needed enough furniture for a one bedroom apartment. I took a few pieces, whatever was left of my mother’s possessions, and added some necessities, chairs and a table, a bed, a chest of drawers, a couch, and I was fine.

The one thing I wanted was a leather Ekornes “stressless” chair and ottoman. Some are into lounge chairs, arm chairs, easy chairs, recliners. I wanted a stressless. I saw it in a Scandinavian furniture store in Georgetown, but it was too much money. I kept waiting for it to go on sale. Instead, each year the price increased. When I moved to Boston, I discovered another Scandinavian furniture store. I was delighted to see that they had my chair in stock, except it was even more expensive. I mentioned the chair to Fran, before we married. “Buy it!” she told me. So I bought it. And it made me very happy. Twenty four years later, when we moved from Greenough Street to the Brook House, it was beginning to look old, but I couldn’t get rid of it. It came with us.

In 1979, I moved with my furniture to an apartment in Boston. In 1981, Fran and I married. Fran had a beautifully furnished one bedroom apartment just a few blocks away on Beacon Street. I had bought a two bedroom condo in Brookline and we found ourselves making decisions regarding what to keep and what to part with. As I remember, it went quite smoothly. I don’t think we had to part with much. Fortunately, we bought a four bedroom house within a year, and found ourselves in the position of having to acquire more furniture.

Before David was born, I bought a bentwood rocking chair at Jordan's. Fran sat and rocked in it as she nursed David. It was eventually moved from our bedroom to our living room. We finally gave it to Carol..

We discovered a custom furniture store that made a wonderful cabinet with lots of drawers and shelves which was perfect for our bedroom. We also found a second hand furniture store in our neighborhood that had what looked like antique quality pieces. We bought several items, including a lovely table and chairs, perfect for the dining room, which had wall paper that Fran described as something out of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In time we moved from the four bedroom house on Evans Road to a three bedroom house on Greenough Street. That too, went fairly smoothly.

Fran had her own office, and furnished it with a couch and a couple of very comfortable chairs. Her desk was a glass top on two black metal saw horses. We use it now as our dining room table. Serving perfectly as dining room chairs are six black metal office chairs bought from an office furniture supply house.

I still had, and treasured, my uncle's desk. Looking at a few of the pieces we bought from the second hand store, and the desk, I decided to take a course in furniture refinishing. It was a lot of fun, and it made the pieces look a lot better. (I was going to say "like new" but that would not be appropriate for antiques.)

Over the years, Fran and I bought and discarded a lot of stuff. David grew, and outgrew a lot of furniture. As a teenager, he gave up his bed for a futon, and when we acquired a sleep sofa, we parted with his futon. His room is now Fran's office. Not surprisingly, one of the most important pieces of furniture are the bookcases. I guess it is because we have a lot of books. We have bookcases in the bedroom, in the hall, in fact in every room of the house except the bathroom.

The Big Move came, as I mentioned, when we moved from our house on Greenough Street to a condo at the Brook House. That required downsizing with a vengeance. We sold and gave away tables, chairs, chests, bookcases etc. When we moved into our new apartment, the previous owner sold us an impressive, three piece glass display cabinet which must have been custom made for the living room. What really sold me on the place were the built-in desk, shelves and bookcases (more bookcases) in the room that became my study. The L-shaped desk was designed to accommodate a computer. Fran added a coffee table and a couch for the living room, and our home was complete.

The story is not quite over. When Fran's cousin Libby died, there were some of her furnishings which we could not part with. Libby had a bookcase with glass doors, a lovely small table that she had never used, a sleep sofa that had never been opened, and a wooden arm chair from Edward Little High School, where she had taught for many years. They are now part of our home.

