

SHOE REPAIR

Whenever I go to my local shoemaker, I always feel good. That's because everything there is repairable. Shoes, regardless whose feet they shod, are given concrete and honorable solutions. Considering the state of our present world, I go there a lot these days.

Koskina's is owned by an immigrant from Greece who bought the shop 32 years ago—which brings up another point: the matter of immigration. It's a good thing, immigration, I say. Don't put up a fence. I'm an immigrant too.

Koskina's is also a family business and the father/son choreography goes something like this: Mr. K's American-born son, Stefan, to whom English is not a second language, always stands behind the counter facing the customers walking through the door. He lets them speak first and then assesses the work to be done. His father, who speaks English poorly, operates the cast register and is called on only for a second opinion. "Second opinion jobs" always entail surgery, i.e., the insertion of a zipper on a boot for a customer whose calves are too wide, or the question of how much a high heel can be shortened for a lady who wobbles. But also, I have observed that Stefan calls on his father's "second opinion" because he wants the customer to know that the repair suggested will cost more but is the best solution. As in football, Stefan huddles with his father in Greek and then comes up to face the customer with the price (and the score) in English.

Ordinary jobs such as heels and soles are delegated to the back where hired hands, also immigrants, know what to do. But, all "second opinion" jobs are tackled by Mr. K., Sr., the *eminence grise* of his shop—and these always involve surgical intervention on the shoe for the comfort of the foot.

Ah, the comfort of the foot! Need I mention that Koskina's is located in Manhattan, where walking is the preferred mode of locomotion and where the relationship between feet and shoes is a serious matter. According to my estimate, about one customer a minute walks into Koskina's, and when there is a lull for a few minutes, you can be sure that in a blink, two customers will squeeze through the door together. Location, location, location.

"These shoes are killing me," was the opening line of a young woman the other day who took off her pumps and massaged her aching toes while standing barefoot in front of the counter. "Especially the right one," she informed. "Is there anything you can do?" "I will stretch it and it will make a difference," Stefan assured. "How long will this take?" she wanted to know. "Overnight is a pretty good measure for a stretch," was his reply.

(In my opinion, stretching is never a real solution, though it may be the only solution when a shoe has been bought for fashion and not for fit. But who am I? I'm just someone sitting on one of the three chairs against the wall which Pavlova's makes available for customers who are waiting for repairs.)

From this vantage point, not unlike bleachers in a small stadium, I have observed that not all of Koskina's customers buy for fashion; there's a whole category of both men and women who are attached to their shoes, and also their bags, and have them restored from season to season. These persons are not the pointy fashion plates but the round-toed preservationists, and their coat of arts is the shoe tree.

The other day, with Park Avenue being just around the corner, a maid came in with four pairs of her lady's brand new pumps, each stuffed with a velvet shoe tree. Stefan seemed to know right away what she wanted: "Metal tips," he said, and then, "You can come back for them this afternoon." Later that day, a female preservationist placed an order for two suede brushes, "one for light and one for dark."

But in addition to the pointy, trendy types and the round-toed preservationists, there are also the fetishists. These are men who love their wallet and will not part with them no matter how spotted and worn. All they want is to have a go at swing up their split seams just one more time. They come in with wallets they've had since they were in the Navy or when they started their first job forty years ago. These objects have become an extension of themselves throughout their lifetimes. Usually made of pigskin, they have absorbed, through seat and grit, a man's total sense of self, invisibly imbued on darkened leather. Empty or not, that stained piece of pigskin is a man's friend for life; it is his talisman and embodies his spirit.