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Straight Razors: Old is New Again

by Stephen Garger

My father emigrated from Hungary in his early teens with little formal education, a huge capacity for hard work, and a real "knack" for the application of common sense. I remember how delighted he was when stainless double-edged blades replaced the blue-blades, something he shared while I was watching him shave back in the 1950s. "These stainless blades last long, but they tell you to replace them every week so they can make money," he said while laughing. "You should be smart enough to know when to replace razor blades without being told."

My common sense gene kicked in one morning while shaving. I'd been doing a slow burn since the new millennium about spending three to four bucks a pop for multi-bladed razor cartridges. When it finally penetrated my skull that the company was putting a little color strip on those cartridges to alert the user when it's "time to replace" them, I thought of my dad's words and just started laughing. I also determined to find an alternative.

A little research and I came up with a fine, \$30 stainless Merkur brand double-edged safety razor

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Three handcrafted straight razors by Max Sprecher of Las Vegas. At top, 15/16" wide "Spanish Point," quarter hollow ground, with extra long tail and scales of blue paua shell laminate. Middle razor is a wedge ground 13/16" "Humpback" handled in faux ivory G10 fiberglass. At bottom is another "Humpback" in a 7/8" width, quarter hollow ground, with carbon fiber scales.

With the resurgence of the double-edge, interest in the straight razor has also grown. "I think people want to make a difference - making a little effort to 'go green' is one aspect of the interest," Sprecher theorized. "Using shaving soap instead of the canned goop, and going back to the old school of straight razor shaving is a way to do that." While Sprecher sees a growing market for straight razors, he noted that "they will never take over and push Gillette from the throne."

I mentioned that several knifemakers are also producing an occasional straight razor. "A few knifemakers do it since the basis

is pretty much the same in terms of grinding, but I see too much of a knife in the razor," said Sprecher. "When you want to make something, use it - and many knifemakers have no idea what it is to shave with a straight razor, so they make one without understanding the balance and feel." I opined that the custom straight razors by knifemakers I'd seen looked good and Sprecher agreed: "There are not any flaws in the finished product, but the whole razor has something that is off - weight, balance, length of tang, edge, proportions - it just feels awkward in the hand."

Sprecher admits to knowing very little about making knives. "I'm a razorsmith and you'll never hear me talk about knives," he says. "It's not about knife makers as competition - the more the merrier - but you have to be honest with your customers in that something may appear nice, but the question remains 'Is it functional?'" I asked Sprecher to name some of the razorsmiths he knows of. "Alex Jacques and myself; Robert Williams, Joe Chandler (who was a knife maker with a good reputation for his straight razors before the whole hype began), Charlie Lewis, and Mastro Livi (an Italian) are known for the straight razors," he responded immediately. "You have to pay your dues and build a name for yourself in the straight razor circle since a name in the knife industry is completely different from being known in the straight razor industry." Sprecher works out of Las Vegas, Nevada and his customs begin around \$500. Note that just as with custom knives, prices for custom razors are determined by features like scale material and file work for example, and can go into the \$1000+ range for a damascus blade with ivory scales.

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made in Germany. For another twenty bucks I picked up a variety pack of one hundred (!) blades, enough for about five years given my beard. A boar bristle brush, shaving soap with a mug, and I was set. After a week of practice (with a nick here-and-there) re-learning how to let the weight of the shaver do most of the work, I was getting a better shave than with the new plastic gizmos and their pricey blade contraptions.

With my new interest in shaving, it was only a matter of time until, as a knife fan with a serious thing for blades; I would begin to wonder about straight razors. I'd always been aware of them and know there are collectors that focus on the vintage editions. However, except for the barber using a straight razor to clean up the back of the neck, I had no experience with them, and decided some investigation was in order.

Around the turn of the 20th Century, an American businessman named King

Camp Gillette invented a safe razor with a cheap and disposable blade. Long history made short, the Gillette Safety Razor Company was born and production begun in Boston during 1903. "Straight razors were used primarily up until World War I; when the soldiers were issued Gillette Safety Razors, and then there came to be less and less work for the barbers and Gillette took over." I was talking with Max Sprecher, a straight razor maker, restorer, collector and purveyor. "Few companies produced them [straight razors] through the 1970s and 1980s, but now you have nostalgia," said Sprecher. "I think the major point for people currently going back to the double edge is those disposables have become so expensive, students can't afford them, and you get a better shave with a double edge."

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