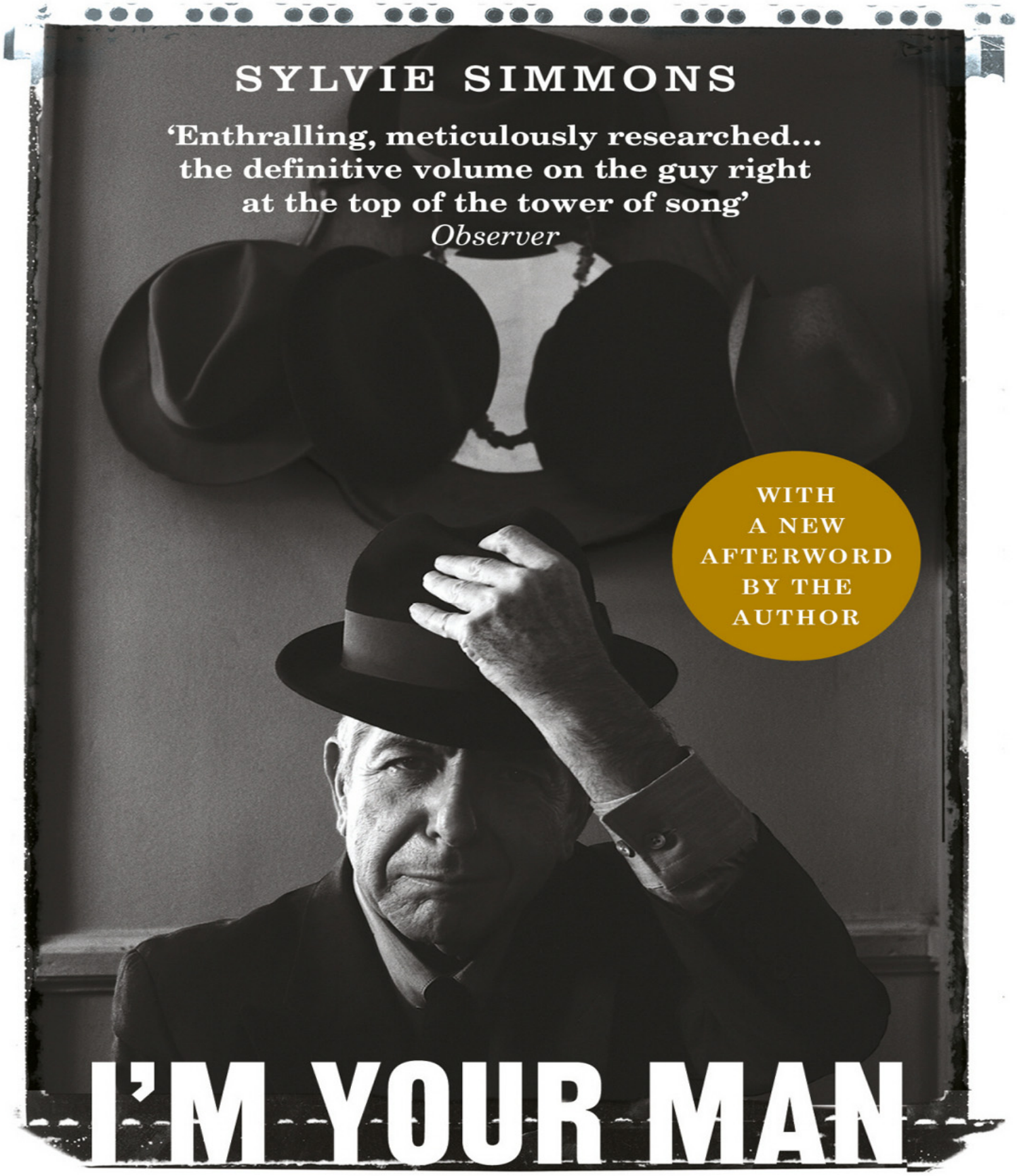

SYLVIE SIMMONS

'Enthralling, meticulously researched... the definitive volume on the guy right at the top of the tower of song'
Observer

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD BY THE AUTHOR

I'M YOUR MAN

THE LIFE OF LEONARD COHEN

VINTAGE

VINTAGE

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The genius behind such classic songs as *Suzanne, Bird on the Wire* and *Hallelujah,* Leonard Cohen has been one of the most important and influential songwriters of our time, a man of spirituality, emotion, and intelligence whose work has explored the definitive issues of human life – sex, religion, power, meaning and love.

In this biography Sylvie Simmons draws on Cohen's private archives and a wealth of interviews with many of his closest associates, colleagues, and other artists to share stories and details never before revealed. The result is a deeply insightful, well-rounded portrait of an artist, poet and writer whose reach, vision, and incredible talent has had a profound impact on multiple generations and who continues to create magic today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sylvie Simmons is a renowned music journalist and award-winning writer. A Londoner, she moved to LA in the late seventies where she began writing about rock music for *Sounds*, *Creem* and *Kerrang!*, then *Rolling Stone*, the *Guardian* and *MOJO*. She is the author of fiction and non-fiction books, including the acclaimed *Serge Gainsbourg: A Fistful of Gitanes*, *Neil Young: Reflections in Broken Glass* and the short story collection *Too Weird for Ziggy*. She currently lives in San Francisco, where she plays ukulele and still writes for *MOJO*.

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To N. A., in loving memory

SYLVIE SIMMONS

I’m Your Man

The Life of Leonard Cohen

VINTAGE

‘The way you do anything is the way you do everything.’

Tom Waits

PROLOGUE

He is a courtly man, elegant, with old-world manners. He bows when he meets you, stands when you leave, makes sure that you're comfortable and makes no mention of the fact he's not; the discreet stroking of the Greek worry beads he carries in his pocket gives the game away. By inclination he is a private man, rather shy, but if probing is required he'll put his feet in the stirrups with dignity and humour. He chooses his words carefully, like a poet, or a politician, with a habit of precision, an ear for their sound, and a talent and a taste for deflection and mystery. He has always liked smoke and mirrors. And yet there is something conspiratorial in the way he talks, as there is when he sings, as if he were imparting an intimate secret.

He is a trim man – there's no excess to him at all – and smaller than you might think. Shipshape. You imagine that he wouldn't find it hard to wear a uniform. Right now he is wearing a suit. It is dark, pinstriped, double-breasted, and if it's off the peg it doesn't look it.

'Darling,' says Leonard, 'I was born in a suit.'[1]

Chapter One

BORN IN A SUIT

When I’m with you
I want to be the kind of hero I wanted to be
when I was seven years old
a perfect man
who kills

‘The Reason I Write’, *Selected Poems 1956–1968*

The chauffeur turned off the main road by the synagogue which took up most of the block, and headed past St Matthias’ Church on the opposite corner, and up the hill. In the back of the car was a woman – twenty-seven years old, attractive, strong-featured, stylishly dressed – and her newborn baby son. The streets they passed were handsome and well appointed, the trees arranged just so. Big houses of brick and stone you might have thought would collapse under the sheer weight of their self-importance appeared to float effortlessly up the slopes. Around halfway up, the driver took a side road and stopped outside a house at the end of the street. 599 Belmont Avenue was large, solid and formal-looking, English in style, its dark brick softened by a white-framed veranda at the front, and at the back by Murray Park, fourteen acres of lawns, trees and flowerbeds, with a sweeping view of the St Lawrence River to one side and, on the other, downtown Montreal. The chauffeur stepped out of the car and opened the rear door, and Leonard was carried up the white front steps and into his family home.

Leonard Norman Cohen was born on 21 September 1934 in the Royal Victoria Hospital, a grey stone pile in Westmount, an affluent neighbourhood of Montreal, Canada. According to the records, it was at 6.45 on a Friday morning. According to history, it was halfway between the Great Depression and World War II. Counting backwards, Leonard was conceived between the end of Hanukkah and Christmas Day during one of the subarctic winters his home town managed to deliver with both consistency and brio. He was raised in a house of suits.

Nathan Cohen, Leonard's father, was a prosperous Canadian Jew with a high-end clothing business. The Freedman Company was known for its formal wear, and Nathan liked to dress formally, even on informal occasions. In suits, as in houses, he favoured the formal English style, which he wore with spats, and tempered with a boutonnière and, when his bad health made it necessary, a silver cane. Masha Cohen, Leonard's mother, was sixteen years younger than her husband, a Russian Jew, a rabbi's daughter, and a recent immigrant to Canada. She and Nathan had married not long after her arrival in Montreal in 1927. Two years later she gave birth to the first of their two children, Leonard's sister, Esther.

Early photographs of Nathan and Masha show him to be a square-faced, square-shouldered, stocky man. Masha, slimmer and a head taller, is in contrast all circles and slopes. The expression on Masha's face is both girlish and regal, while Nathan's is rigid and taciturn. Even were this not the required camera pose for the head of a household at that time, Nathan was certainly more reserved, and more anglicised, than his warm, emotional, Russian wife. As a baby, Leonard, plump, compact and also square-faced, was the image of his father, but as he grew he took on his mother Masha's heart-shaped face, thick wavy hair, and deep, dark, sloping eyes. From his father he acquired his height, his tidiness, his decency and his love of suits. From

his mother he inherited his charisma, his melancholy and his music. Masha always sang as she went about the house, in Russian and Yiddish more than in English, the sentimental old folk songs she had learned as a child. In a good contralto voice, to imaginary violins, Masha would sing herself from joy to melancholy and back again. ‘Chekhovian’ is how Leonard described his mother.[1] ‘She laughed and wept deeply,’ said Leonard, one emotion following the other in quick succession.[2] Masha Cohen was not a nostalgic woman, she did not talk much about the country she had left. But she carried her past in songs.

The residents of Westmount were well-to-do, upper-middle-class Protestant English Canadians and second- or third-generation Canadian Jews. In a city that was all about division and separation, the Jews and Protestants had been filed together on the simple grounds of being neither French nor Catholic. Before the ‘Quiet Revolution’ in Quebec in the 60s, and before French became the sole official language of the province, the only French in Westmount were the domestic help. The Cohens had a maid, Mary, although she was Irish Catholic. They also had a nanny, whom Leonard and his sister called ‘Nursie’, and a gardener named Kerry, a black man, who doubled as the family chauffeur. (Kerry’s brother held the same job with Nathan’s younger brother Horace.) It is no secret that Leonard’s background was privileged. Leonard has never denied being born on the right side of the tracks, has never renounced his upbringing, rejected his family, changed his name or pretended to be anything other than who he was. His family was well off, although there were certainly wealthier families in Westmount. Unlike the mansions of Upper Belmont, the Cohens’ house, though big, was semi-detached, and their car, though chauffeur-driven, was a Pontiac, not a Cadillac.

Leonard at four months

But what the Cohens had which very few others came close to matching was status. The family Leonard was born into was distinguished and important – one of the most prominent Jewish families in Montreal. Leonard's ancestors had built synagogues and founded newspapers in Canada. They had funded and presided over a lengthy list of Jewish philanthropic societies and associations. Leonard's great-grandfather, Lazarus Cohen, had been the first of the family to come to Canada. In Lithuania, which was part of Russia in the 1840s, when Lazarus was born, Lazarus had been a teacher in a rabbinical school in Wylkowyski, one of the most rigorous *yeshivas* in the country. In his twenties, he left his wife and their baby son behind to try for his fortune. After a brief stay in Scotland, he took a ship to Canada,

stopping in Ontario in a small town called Maberly, where he worked his way up from lumber storeman to the owner of a coal company, L. Cohen and Son. The son was Lyon, Nathan's father, whom Lazarus sent for, along with his mother, two years later. The family eventually made their way to Montreal, where Lazarus became president of a brass foundry and started a successful dredging company.

When Lazarus Cohen first arrived in Canada in 1860, the country's Jewish population was tiny. In the middle of the nineteenth century there had been fewer than 500 Jews in Montreal. By the mid-1880s, when Lazarus assumed the presidency of the synagogue Congregation Shaar Hashomayim, there were more than 5,000. The Russian pogroms had led to a wave of immigration, and by the end of the century the number had doubled. Montreal had become the seat of Canadian Jewry, and Lazarus, with his long, white, biblical beard and uncovered head, was a familiar figure among its community. Along with building a synagogue, Lazarus established and headed a number of organisations to aid Jewish settlers and would-be immigrants, even travelling on behalf of the Jewish Colonisation Association of Montreal to Palestine (where Lazarus bought land as early as 1884). Lazarus' younger brother Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Cohen, who joined him in Canada soon after, would become chief rabbi of Montreal.

In 1914, when Lyon Cohen took over the presidency of Shaar Hashomayim from his father, the synagogue could claim the largest congregation in a city whose Jewish population now numbered around 40,000. In 1922, having grown too big for its old premises, the synagogue relocated to a new building in Westmount, almost a block in length, just minutes down the hill from the house on Belmont Avenue. Twelve years later Nathan and Masha added their only son to the synagogue's 'Register of Births of the Corporation of English, German and Polish Jews of Montreal',

giving Leonard his Jewish name Eliezer, meaning ‘God is help’.

Lyon Cohen, like his father, had been a very successful businessman – clothing and insurance. He also followed Lazarus into community service, being appointed secretary of the Anglo-Jewish Association while still in his teens. He would go on to establish a Jewish community centre and a sanatorium, and preside over relief efforts for victims of the pogroms. Lyon held top positions in the Baron de Hirsch Institute, the Jewish Colonisation Association and Canada’s first Zionist organisation. He went to the Vatican on behalf of his community to talk to the Pope. He co-founded the first Anglo-Jewish newspaper in Canada, the *Jewish Times*, to which he contributed the occasional article. Lyon had written a play when he was sixteen years old titled *Esther*, which he produced and in which he acted. Leonard never knew his grandfather – he was two years old when Lyon died – but there was a strong connection, which intensified as Leonard grew older. Lyon’s principles, his work ethic and his belief in ‘the aristocracy of the intellect’, as Lyon always referred to it, all sat well with Leonard’s own persuasion.[3]

Lyon was also a staunch Canadian patriot, and when World War I broke out he launched a recruitment drive to encourage Montreal’s Jews to enlist in the Canadian Army. The first to sign up were his sons Nathan and Horace (the third son, Lawrence, was too young). Lieutenant Nathan Cohen, number 3080887, became one of the first Jewish commissioned officers in the Canadian Army. Leonard loved the photographs of his father in uniform. But, after his return from the war, Nathan suffered recurring periods of ill health, which had left him increasingly invalid. This might be why Nathan, although the oldest son of the oldest son, did not continue the family tradition of holding the presidency of the synagogue, nor of much else. Although on paper he was president of the Freedman Company, the business was

largely run by his brother Horace. Neither was Nathan an intellectual or a religious scholar like his forebears. The dark wooden bookshelves in the house on Belmont Avenue held an impressive leather-bound set of the Great Poets – Chaucer, Wordsworth, Byron; Nathan's bar mitzvah gift – but their spines remained uncracked until Leonard took them down to read. Nathan, Leonard said, preferred the *Reader's Digest*. But 'his heart was cultured; he was a gentleman'.[4] As to religion, Nathan was 'a Conservative Jew, not fanatical, without ideology and dogma, whose life was purely made up of domestic habit and affiliations with the community'. Religion was not something that was discussed in Nathan's house, or even thought about. 'It was mentioned no more than a fish mentions the presence of water.'[5] It was simply there, his tradition, his people.

Leonard's father, Nathan Cohen (top left), and his uncle, Horace Cohen (seated, centre)

Masha's father Rabbi Solomon Klonitzki-Kline was a noted religious scholar. He had been the principal of a school for Talmudic study in Kovno in Lithuania, some fifty miles from the town where Lazarus had been born (although by the time of Rabbi Kline's birth, Lithuania had been annexed to Russia). He was also an author, whose two books, *Lexicon of Hebrew Homonyms* and *Thesaurus of Talmudic Interpretations*, would earn him the sobriquet 'Sar HaDikdook', the Prince of Grammarians. When the persecution of Jews made life in Lithuania untenable, he moved to the US, where one of his daughters lived and had married an American. Masha had gone to Canada, where she took a job as a nurse. When Masha's work permit expired, he turned to his American son-in-law for help, which led to his introduction to Lyon Cohen's resettlement committee. It was through the subsequent friendship of the rabbi and Lyon that Masha and Nathan met and married.

Leonard, as a young boy, heard about Grandfather Kline more than he saw him, since the rabbi spent much of his time in the US. Masha would tell Leonard stories, about how people came hundreds of miles to hear his grandfather speak. He also had a reputation as a great horseman, she told him, and Leonard was particularly pleased with this information. He liked it that his was a family of important people, but he was a young boy and physical prowess trumped intellect. Leonard was planning to attend military academy once he was old enough. Nathan told him he could. Leonard wanted to fight wars and win medals – like his father had done, before he became this invalid who sometimes found it hard even to walk up stairs, who would stay home from work, nursed by Leonard's mother. Through Leonard's early childhood, Nathan had often been ill. But the boy had proof that his father had been a warrior once. Nathan still had his gun from World War I, which he kept in his bedside cabinet. One day, when no one was around, Leonard slipped into his parents' bedroom. He opened the

cabinet and took out the gun. It was a big gun, a .38, its barrel engraved with his father's name, rank and regiment. Cradling it in his small hand, Leonard shivered, awed by its heft and the feel of its cold metal on his skin.

599 Belmont Avenue was a busy house, a house of routine, well ordered, and the centre of the young Leonard's universe. Anything the boy might need or want to do orbited closely around it. His uncles and cousins lived nearby. The synagogue, where Leonard went with the family on Saturday morning, and on Sunday for Sunday school, and to Hebrew school two afternoons a week, was a short walk down the hill. So were his regular schools, Roslyn Elementary School and, later, Westmount High. Murray Hill Park, where Leonard played in the summer and made snow angels in the winter, was immediately below his bedroom window.

The Westmount Jewish community was a close-knit one. It was also a minority community in an English Protestant neighbourhood. Which was itself a minority, if a powerful one, in a city and a province largely populated by the Catholic French. Who were themselves a minority in Canada. Everybody felt like some kind of outsider; everyone felt like they belonged to something important. It was 'a romantic, conspiratorial mental environment', said Leonard, a place of 'blood and soil and destiny. That is the landscape I grew up in, and it's very natural to me.'[6]

599 Belmont Avenue

Leonard’s community, half a city away from the working-class immigrant Jewish neighbourhood around St Urbain (which formed the backdrop to Mordecai Richler’s novels), might have appeared to be hermetically sealed, but of course it wasn’t. The cross on the top of Mount Royal, Mary, the family maid, always crossing herself, the Easter and Christmas celebrations at school were part of the young Leonard’s landscape just as the Sabbath candles his mother lit on Friday evenings were, and the imposing synagogue down the hill, from whose walls Leonard’s great-grandfather and grandfather stared down at him from large, framed portraits, reminding him of the distinction of his blood.

Leonard and his grandmother

As Leonard recalled it, it was ‘an intense family life’.[7] The Cohens would get together regularly – at the synagogue, in the workplace, and also once a week at Leonard’s paternal grandmother’s home. ‘Every Saturday afternoon, at around four o’clock, Martha, her devoted maid, would wheel in a tea trolley with tea and little sandwiches and cakes and biscuits,’ says David Cohen, two years older than Leonard and a cousin with whom Leonard was particularly close. ‘You were never invited, and you never asked if you could go, but you knew that she was “receiving”. It sounds very archaic, but it was quite something.’ Leonard’s grandmother had a flat in one of the grand houses on Sherbrooke Street at Attwater, which was where all the parades that were held in

Montreal would end up. ‘St Jean-Baptiste, that was a big one, before it became a very tough political situation in Montreal, and we’d watch from inside from the big, beautiful window in her living room.’ Their grandmother was very much a Victorian lady, ‘but, though it sounds archaic and old-fashioned, she was a pretty hip lady too’. She made quite an impression on Leonard, who would later describe her tea parties in his first novel, *The Favourite Game*.

In that same book, Leonard described the older men in his family as serious and formal, but not all of them were. Among the more colourful members of the family was Cousin Lazzy, David’s older brother Lazarus. Leonard thought of Lazzy as ‘a man about town, familiar with the chorus girls and the nightclubs and the entertainers’.[8] There was also a cousin of an older generation, Edgar, Nathan’s cousin, a businessman with a literary bent. Many years later Edgar H. Cohen would go on to write *Mademoiselle Libertine: A Portrait of Ninon de Lanclos*, a biography published in 1970 of a seventeenth-century courtesan, writer and muse whose lovers included Voltaire and Molière, and who, after a period in a convent, emerged to establish a school where young French noblemen could learn erotic technique. Leonard and Edgar, says David Cohen, were ‘very close’.

Leonard’s was a comfortable, secure life during an uncomfortable, insecure time. Days before Leonard’s fifth birthday, Germany invaded Poland and World War II began. Closer to home, in 1942 there was an anti-Semitic rally on St Lawrence Boulevard – The Main, as locals called it – which was the traditional dividing line between English and French Montreal. It was led by Montreal’s French Nationalist movement, which included supporters of the Vichy regime in France. One particularly risible claim of the organisation was that the Jews had taken over the clothing business in order to force modest young French Canadian girls to wear

‘improper gowns in New York styles’.[9] During the rally, windows of several Jewish-owned shops and delis on The Main were broken and racist slurs painted on walls. But for a seven-year-old living in Westmount, sitting in his room reading his *Superman* comics, it was another world. ‘Europe, the war, the social war,’ Leonard said, ‘none of it seemed to touch us.’[10]

He breezed through the early years of childhood, doing all that was required – clean hands, good manners, getting dressed for dinner, good school reports, making the hockey team, keeping his shoes polished and lined up tidily under his bed at night – without showing any worrying signs of sainthood or genius. Nor of melancholy. The home movies shot by Nathan, a keen amateur cameraman, show a happy little boy, beaming as he pedals his tricycle along the street, or walks hand in hand with his sister, or plays with his dog, a black Scottish terrier named Tinkie. His mother had originally given it the more dignified name of Tovarich, the Russian word for ‘ally’, but it was vetoed by his father. Nathan was already aware that in this small, anglicised, Canadian Jewish community, Masha’s Russianness, her accent, her imperfect English and big personality made her stand out. ‘It wasn’t thought to be a good idea to be passionate about anything,’ said Leonard, or to draw attention. ‘We were taught’, says cousin David, ‘to mind our ps and qs.’

Nathan Cohen confronts a bull

Masha and Leonard