

The GLQ Archive

A HARD LEFT FIST

Esther Newton

I always thought I'd begin to tell my story with my mother, the Eldorado of my desire, but while I've been struggling to begin, the fathers and their masculine principle have pushed their way forward. Is it because my masculinity defines me more than my desire does? Or because masculinity is more associated with the disciplines of history and anthropology that have shaped my outlook?

I had three fathers. The first was my mother's first husband, a Hungarian Jewish refugee photographer named Laszlo Gluck, much older than she, who had died of a heart attack. On my original birth certificate he was named as my father, and I had his last name until I was eight years old. Recently, when I asked my mother why I had been named Esther-Mary, she said that these had been names of Gluck's relatives; she had wanted to think of me as his child. My second father was Saul Newton, a Communist Party organizer, also Jewish, who had married my mother after World War II and then adopted me. These were the two fathers I was told about, growing up. At nineteen I learned that there had been a third man, whose affair with my mother had caused my birth. My biological "father"—would this person now be called a "sperm provider"?—was also Jewish and left-wing, the only kind of man who turned my WASP mother on.

I have become some version of those men, the ones who turned my mother on, even though, because of my chromosomes—XX as far as I know—and a reproductive biology, which is, or rather was, capable of giving birth, my sex is female. During my lonely childhood I was stuck in the girl gender, which is linked, worldwide, to hard work, low pay, and disrespect, though this is not the only reason why, for me, neither being female nor being a woman has ever been easy or unequivocal. Later, when I found gay life, I was given a second gender: butch. This masculine gay gender makes my body recognizable, and it alone makes sexual love possible. Butch is my handle and my collective name—a tribe, the late

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lamented writer Paul Monette called us gay people. My life's work has been inspired by and primarily written for this tribe, these gay communities, entities that are no less powerful for being symbolic. But being butch has been problematic, too. How could it not be?

Certainly, we butches have been the target of medical interventions to correct our grievous mistakes, our unshakable belief in how we should look and move. My body commits every one of these movement mistakes—for example, hands on hips, *fingers forward*—which are used to diagnose gender identity disorder, a category of mental illness listed in the DSM-IV, the current diagnostic handbook of the shrinks. Luckily, when the friction of my teenage misery burst into flames, I escaped the Thorazine or shock treatments others endured through the middle-class option of therapy meant to cure what still proved to be an intractable “case” of gender dysphoria and homosexual desire.

Once when I am in my late thirties, and confident that I have finally escaped from his crushing dominance, my father Saul and I meet for dinner near where he lives on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Later, as we stand on the corner of Broadway and Ninety-first Street, waiting for the light to change, I realize with a creepy shock that we are dressed nearly the same—running shoes, jeans, and plaid shirts—and are both standing with hands on our hips, fingers forward, a couple of tough Jewish guys.

I'm sitting on a bus going east on Seventy-second Street in Manhattan, on my way to one of those doctor's appointments that become increasingly frequent in middle age if one is lucky enough to have health insurance, wondering why I've always come back to New York. My mother didn't like New York; for her, it was just a devastating interlude. But I was drawn to the milieu of those Jewish guys, fire-eating dragons who joined the Communist Party and exhaled smoke into the New York City atmosphere that I breathed growing up, so that I was never comfortable in my mother's chosen state, California, with its big blondes and bland Republican attitudes.

I consider myself the quintessential American, or at least the quintessential American born in the mid-twentieth century, the offspring of a *Mayflower* WASP mother and three Jewish immigrant men, and therefore I am the biological and cultural proof, the all-too-human amalgam, of the clash and attraction between the old European American stock and the immigrants who came at the turn of the last century. Or at least I am the quintessential white American, what white became after the Irish and Jews and Italians and Poles elbowed and charmed and fucked their way in.

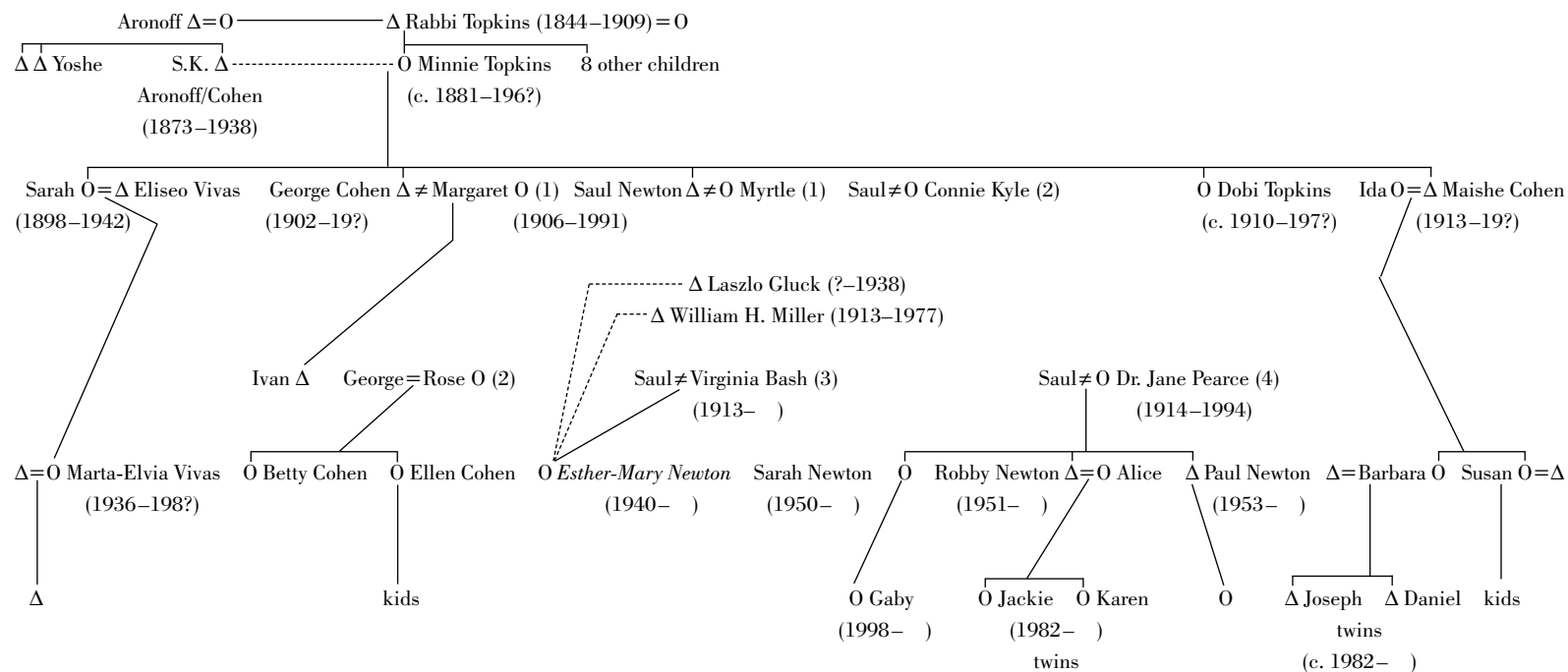
As a good American, then, and therefore a “unique individual,” why

shouldn't I begin my story at my birth? Or even when I first had sex with a woman—my rebirth in the heaven of erotic love and the hell of pariahdom? Or other turning points, times when I reinvented myself, by moving to Paris, for instance? The story starts before me, because I was born into a situation nested inside the situations of my parents and even their parents; without this context my narrative makes no sense to me. In this as in other ways my historical mind-set rubs against the grain of popular thinking. The “primitive” peoples I studied in graduate school were right, it seems, in their ancestor worship, if by *worship* we mean giving full due to the ways ancestors set the parameters of our lives.

So I'll start with my fathers. Which one of the three was “really” my father, though? This was a question I faced after Saul Newton's death—since I did not have his “blood,” was he my father? Since my mother and I had lived with him as a nuclear family for only a couple of years, was he my father? How authentic was my mourning? How appropriate? Saul had claimed me as his daughter, given me his legal recognition, his name, and his money, which my biological “father” had withheld. Perhaps only now, writing this, have I fully accepted that although Saul could never be my only father, he was the only man who inhabited, who lived, the role of father. (Maybe fathers are always unsatisfactory.) The other two were the shadow fathers, the ones my mother wouldn't talk about, figures who were absences, mysteries.

So let's say that my American history through my father Saul Newton starts on Ellis Island back in the nineteenth century, when an immigration officer changed Saul's father's name from Aronoff to Cohen. I don't say that this Aronoff was my grandfather. This is not just because I am not Aronoff's “blood” descendant, since the two men whose genes are one-half of my physical endowment don't feel any more like “grandfathers” to me than Aronoff does. My never having known these “grandfathers,” any of them, is symptomatic of my disentangled paternal line, which is too late-twentieth-century to support any role so unambiguous as that of grandfather without the quotes. In this too I am so American. Back in 1830 Alexis de Tocqueville commented on the decline of the paternal principle in American life. Although both Aronoff/Cohen and my mother's father, General Bash, were dominating, patriarchal figures, their links to me, their cultural and/or biological progeny, were compromised. In fact, I could hardly say I have a “family”; rather, I have relatives, a postmodern kindred perhaps, people who are my “half-brother,” “half-sister but I've never met her,” “cousins—well, my adoptive father's nieces and nephews,” or “people I've only heard of,” and in that way my disordered childhood, so deviant in the post-World War II period, has become the way most Americans live now.

Esther Newton's Kinship Chart (Paternal)



Saul also married Joan Harvey (5) (two daughters: Wendy and Amanda) and Helen Moses (6) (four children).

O equals female; Δ equals male; = equals marriage; ≠ equals divorce; solid lines equal descent and siblings.

In the summer of 1999 I put my mother in a nursing home. Inside her address book I am astonished to find a romantic snapshot of my father in his army uniform. When I ask my mother about it, she looks up from her wheelchair with a naughty smile. "He was the love of my life, you know." They were divorced back in 1950, and this is forty-nine years later. "Oh Mom," I blurt out, "he was a terrible man." Underneath the photo of Saul the soldier is one of Saul the father, kvelling, glowing with pride as I show off the cast I got breaking my wrist on the jungle gym, and underneath that there are three pictures of me, ages maybe five to eight, all in boys' bathing trunks at a public playground. Presumably my mother ranked these photos in order of their importance to her.

My first memory of Saul is in that U.S. Army uniform. Suddenly, the war was over, and he came into my life—about 1945—with a captured German revolver and a battered helmet, telling scary war stories; almost to the day of his death he was a compelling storyteller. He had a dark, sexy energy that had bowled my Gentile mother over back in 1933 in Chicago, when they were part of a network of young left-wing radicals centered around the university.

Throughout his life Saul mostly preferred the company of women, and many, many of them reciprocated. Even during his final illness he was just as glad to see the friends who accompanied me on visits—and whom he had never met before—as he was to see me. Simply because they were pretty, personable, and female, my friends brought him pleasure and made him forget for a few minutes that he was tied down to a wheelchair and was constantly anxious because, although he could not remember any of our names or where he was, he knew he no longer had a home.

When my stepmother, Dr. Jane Pearce, was succumbing to cancer back in the summer of 1994, two years after Saul's death, she let me know that for her, too, years after their divorce, Saul was still magical, perhaps an evil warlock whose spell she could not break. She had dreamed, she told me, that she was floating down the river Hades in a boat that went aground. When she climbed onto the bank, she made her way toward an old barn that had been converted into a theater. Inside, Saul was bossing everyone about, directing a large cast rehearsing a musical comedy. She said to herself, "If Saul is still in charge, even here in hell, I don't want to die yet." Then she pressed upon me a sheaf of badly written, abstractly tortured poems of hers from when she and Saul were falling in love, back when he was still married to wife number three, my mother, and was cheating on her, just as he would cheat on women all his life. He didn't call it cheating, though; he called it unconventionality, and the older he got, the more he rationalized it with his Marxist-therapeutic theories.



Cohen family in the Catskills, with doomed "Jewish dogs," 1923.
 Front: George and S. K.; middle: Minnie and Sarah, the oldest child;
 back (l-r): Maishe, Dobie, Saul (sitting against post), an unidentified relative

Along with his terrible temper and disregard for others' feelings, Saul also had irresistible charm and, improbably, a quality of sly sweetness that would appear suddenly, at the most unexpected moments. During his final illness many of the hospital workers remarked on the vitality and appeal of his personality, even as they complained about his violent outbursts, when he would throw things at another patient or curse out a doctor. One nurse's aide was amused rather than outraged when, after he had leaned out of his wheelchair to pat her behind and she

had objected, he said sheepishly, “I just couldn’t resist.” She cut short my apology on his behalf, saying, “I wish I had known *him* in his prime.”

One of the ways that Saul perpetuated the myth that he had invented himself was that he rarely talked to me about his past, and in the years after their divorce my mother was so embittered that she didn’t talk about him at all if she could help it. So when my oldest half-brother Robby, who is Saul’s son with Jane Pearce, mentioned that in his suburban garage he had over three hundred pages of interview material with Saul—“yours if you want them”—I thought of how Robby had offered me Saul’s ashes, “yours if you want them,” and I had refused, not knowing what I’d do with them. The only memorial was organized by my cousins, the daughters of those brothers Saul had picked fights with and kicked out of his life years before.

Before the dementia took him, though, nobody ever could or did ignore Saul. He had six wives and sex with hundreds of other women, probably; he had ten children, of whom I am the oldest; he kicked butt in the Spanish Civil War and World War II; he wrote a psychology book that became gospel and verse for hundreds of people in a cultlike community that, as one friend quipped, “combined the worst aspects of therapy, Marxism, and musical theater.”

Saul’s life before he came into mine was almost as mysterious to me, until Robby gave me his memoir, as if he and all his siblings had emerged from some misty Paleolithic. I learned that he was born on 22 June 1906 in Saint John, New Brunswick. “It was sort of an inbred family. . . . My mother and father were first cousins,” as were quite a few other married partners in the extended family. His mother’s father, named Topkins (b. 1844), had been a Hasidic rabbi in Russia before emigrating to Canada with his large family about 1898. Although Topkins originally settled in Saint John, he later moved to Brooklyn and was a rabbi and kosher butcher there until he died in 1909. Saul’s mother, Minnie Topkins, had been born about 1881 in Russia.

In Saul’s immigrant family, a college education was the object of obsessive, almost erotic desire, as alluring as the Mona Lisa’s smile and worth more than any material possession. Rabbi Topkins had pulled Minnie out of school when she was eleven and apprenticed her as a seamstress. She always boasted about how she had worked and slaved to put her brothers through medical school, but Saul said that “she hated [her father] all her life for this evil deed.” Nevertheless, she visited the same fate on her children, in Saul’s view because of her bitterness about her own lack of education. George, Saul’s older brother, was forced out of school at the end of the eighth grade and made to go to work, even though the family was prosperous by then.

Minnie bought books in lots at auctions “to put them on a bookshelf so that people would assume that she was educated and cultured,” but she did it also to hear them. Since she never learned to read or write English, she would badger her children to read to her, and in this way Saul came to know the novels of Dickens, Turgenev, Maupassant, Jane Austen, and Emily Brontë: “My mother was a particular kind of culture vulture who . . . refused to learn to read and write English and had learned to speak a rough-and-ready English which was spotted by big words that she didn’t quite understand and therefore misused. . . . A frequent phrase out of her mouth during my growing up was ‘If I only knew how to read and write English, what I couldn’t do!’”

Despite her handicaps as a woman and an immigrant, Minnie was a leader in the Jewish community of about a thousand souls in Saint John. She was an officer of the Ladies Aid Society. Saul heard her interrupt a boring rabbi at the synagogue to give a rousing speech regarding a Polish pogrom that would have “normally” (if a man gave it?) gotten a standing ovation. By anyone’s reckoning, this Minnie, whom I remember as a tiny bent woman with a strong Yiddish accent, had been a powerful figure. My cousins Betty and Barbara, the daughters of my father’s brothers, George and Maishe, remember her as “intrusive”; for example, when Saul’s youngest sister, Dobi, had boyfriends over to the house, Minnie would sit down between them. But both cousins have a far less harsh view of Minnie than Saul had. They say that she had had a tough life and had done her best, but Saul, by the end of his life, when he dictated his memoir, was convinced that his mother had harbored a vicious enmity for all her five children, especially him, her favorite. “What kept me alive,” he said, was that “I began studying the art of problem solving very young. . . . She [his mother] was good training for surviving two wars.”

He recounts how she tried to give him blood poisoning by plunging his cut finger into a bowl of flour to stop the bleeding, how she tried to destroy the pleasure of candy by telling him that an older sibling had died from eating candy. When as a small child he sneaks away from the house and hops on a raft and almost drowns, he blames his mother, sure that she wants him dead. What an ego-tist he was! His mother was always, he imagined, thinking about him.

At every turn he believes that she is out to undermine his manhood. He recalls that as a teenager he hated her for remarking to a woman friend that, unlike some, he was a good boy and would not take advantage of girls. Years later, having moved to New York with his second wife, he has a panic attack while looking at a two-bedroom apartment, thinking that his mother will demand to move into the second bedroom, and “what could I say?” Later still, the three brothers, George, Saul, and Maishe, have put Minnie in a nursing home. Saul hears from



Saul, 1945

the doctors that Minnie is dying and is calling for him, her favorite son. This seems to provoke another panic, because he has to think about it overnight. By the morning he has concluded that it is a scheme—Minnie is trying to lure him to the home so she can die in his arms. If he refuses to go to her and her plot is foiled, he reasons, she'll recover, and she does! Then, after she finally has died, he boasts (at



Saul and I, about 1947

least, in light of his theories about the evils of motherhood, I presume that it is boasting) that he didn't even go to her funeral, something that cousin Betty refutes. One way or the other, Saul got his comeuppance: he never even *had* a funeral. Perhaps his most lasting memorial, aside from his ten children, was the obituary I helped arrange in the *New York Times*. Until I decided to write this memoir, that is. Isn't it strange that I, the adopted child, have become his scribe, his historian?

My mother and father and I spend part of the second summer after they are married, 1947, in northern Maine, close to Saint John. A steep, winding, bumpy dirt road leads up to our rented cabin. My father and I go into town in the brand-new Dodge sedan to buy groceries or get ice cream cones. This new car is wonderful, loud, powerful, and roomy. After the penury that my mother and I suffered during the war, suddenly its end brings Saul into our lives and we can get butter, coffee, a telephone, a bigger apartment, and this car. Saul always drives, and we are often scared by his daredevil, aggressive driving. Once he is so angry when another car cuts him off on the open highway that he overtakes the other guy and cuts him off by hooking our rear bumper—they were separate from the car body then—under the other car's front fender and ripping it off—what skill!

My father and I are close and complicit on these rides back from town, and sometimes he lets me do something I know he wouldn't if my mother were there. He lets me sit on his lap and steer the Dodge up the hill while he works the pedals and gearshift. I remember the struggle, the ache in my arms from wrestling with that behemoth of a car—no power steering—and the thrill of the jolts and swerves, the road before me, the mastery, the danger, our shared adventure, and his confidence in me.

My father never mentions his father's first or last name in his memoir, referring to him only as "my father" or "my old man," and now nobody in the family even remembers his first name. (Isn't it true that in Judaism the name of G—d must never be spoken or written?) My cousins recently told me that Saul's father was known in the family as S. K. He was born about 1873 in a village in white Russia, now Ukraine. Orphaned in childhood, he had three older siblings, whom he hated for cheating him out of his inheritance from a brewery. Two of S. K.'s siblings came to America; the other stayed in Russia and had a son, who fought in the Red Army. Saul saw a photo of the son once and was astonished because at first he thought it was himself, the family was so inbred.

S. K.'s eldest sibling was a peddler named Yoshe, who lived in Saint John when Saul was growing up. "He would go from house to house buying junk and then selling it to the junk wholesaler." Despite S. K.'s bitterness toward his siblings, he had done better in the New World than some of them. The story around

Saint John's Jewish community was that Yoshe was so cheap he would try to train his horse not to eat, but just as he claimed to be succeeding, the horse would die and he would have to get another. "This was the point at which he would come to my house, this uncle of mine," my father recalled. "It would be after dinner. My father would be sitting in the living room reading the Yiddish paper, *The Forward*, which was published in New York City. Yoshe would, with a sort of hat-in-hand air, come into the room in which my father was reading and sit down in a chair a respectful distance away from his well-heeled younger brother, who would not in any way acknowledge Yoshe's presence. After an hour of the silent treatment, my father would say, without looking up, 'How much is it this time?'

"Yoshe would respond, 'My horse died. I need to buy a new one. It will cost . . .' and he would name the amount. My father would dig out the cash, hand it to him without a word, and go back to his newspaper."

I couldn't believe this story, or that I had a relative named Yoshe, even one as distant as the uncle of my adopted father, who peddled junk from a horse; maybe what I really couldn't believe was the way my father used English as he recalled his boyhood in Saint John—"this uncle of mine"—telling stories that were right out of the shtetls I had read about with detached interest in anthropology books. My father had seemed to "stop being Jewish," as my brother Robby put it, when he changed his name from Cohen to Newton, sometime in the 1930s.¹

Cousin Betty told me how Saul almost wrecked her wedding by fighting with another guest. This man had become very interested in Judaism and asked Saul if he hadn't joined the Abraham Lincoln Brigade because he was a Jew. Saul belligerently said no, he went strictly as a Communist; being Jewish had nothing to do with it. They started yelling at each other, "Jew!" "Communist!" and they almost came to blows and had to be separated. Betty commented that the other guy could have wasted Saul, who was an old man by then. But Saul's nickname as a child had been "Jack Johnson," after the great fighter, because "I never backed away from a belligerent situation."

Although my father never observed any aspect of the Jewish religion, he never denied that he was Jewish, either, and his looks—he was also known in his family as "the black one"—would scarcely have permitted him to pass for Gentile even had he wanted to. Probably being Jewish was such a given for him that he felt no need to state it. I recall only one time when he affirmed (and then only by implication) that he *was* Jewish—"Never forget that you are one of the chosen people," he suddenly said to me—although I don't recall what provoked this completely atypical admonition.

Yet these stories of my father's, and the Yiddish way he told them, were

genuine; it seems they were a part of him, a part he rarely shared with me. His sperm may not have made me, but his imagination and memories did—even though I didn't know them in detail. Reading his memoir in my late middle age, eight years after Saul's death, I feel like a blind person suddenly seeing a face previously known through touch alone, and feel how much of a Jew I partly am.

I tell my ex-lover Jane, the one who taught me to light a yartzeit candle for my father, how I didn't feel like eating the pork chops someone had cooked, adding ironically, "I'm Jewish, you know." Jane laughs. "If you were really Jewish, you would have wanted the pork chops."

Reading my father's memoir is like staring into a plastic tray filled with chemicals as a blank sheet of paper develops in the darkroom into a clear print, a photograph that was always there. What confused me was the blank paper, my father's silence, his posture of adamant refusal. Now I understand why his sinewy body was so tense—he was always in combat with his domineering, intrusive mother and his father the wrathful and disappointing Jewish god.

S. K. had gone to New York first, probably in his late teens, around 1890, where the family name was changed from Aronoff to Cohen by the indifferent immigration officer. He learned the skill of cutting clothing in the women's garment business and then gradually saved up to get his factory in Saint John. The relatives didn't help him at all, he claimed. By his mid-twenties he had a thriving clothing factory, selling his wares to modest department stores in the Maritime Provinces. He was able to build a large house for his family; it even had a second floor that he rented out. Summers Minnie and the kids went upriver or to the seashore, where S. K. came to visit weekends.

Saul describes his father as having had "a sort of paranoid turn of mind and a belligerent character. . . . [He] was taciturn, reasonably generous. . . . He was a rather good-looking man, with a face that was characteristically withdrawn and distant. But when he smiled, there was a kind of charm that would melt ice." Apparently he didn't smile often. Saul recounts how his father picked up a disgruntled customer and bodily threw him out into the street, so, Saul concludes, "if I wished to be like my father, I had to be slender and powerful; I couldn't afford to panic with such a father." Saul's younger brother, Maishe, was more critical. In a brief autobiography he wrote as a college freshman, Maishe recalled that "Father's deep-seated irrationality slowly became a tangible horror in my mind. He would have violent fits of temper, blustering and shouting like a wild man for such things as the tendency to oversleep of my oldest brother George." One story captures for me the almost biblical bitterness of my father's childhood milieu. Both parents, but especially S. K., were abusive toward George, who was constantly called stu-

pid and punished for “things he had and hadn’t done.” George was so angry about his father’s abuse that he once shat into S. K.’s boot, knowing his father would step in it the next morning.

The decisive event in Saul’s young life was his father’s struggle with his synagogue. There were two synagogues in town, an upper-class one, to which the Cohen family belonged, and a lower-class one, which they shunned. When Saul was about five, his father accused the officers of their synagogue of misappropriating funds. When they responded by appointing S. K. to a high position in the synagogue, he took it as a sign that they wanted to buy him off and accused them even more loudly of being corrupt. In retaliation, the entire family was expelled from the synagogue.

I suppose having been a homosexual before Stonewall helps me appreciate what kind of disaster this ostracism must have been for an immigrant Jewish family in a provincial Canadian town. Saul recalled that his father “wast[ed] his best energies on an utterly stupid six-year lawsuit to force his reinstatement in the synagogue.” After his family’s ejection from the sacrum and social center of the Jewish community, Saul became an atheist, furious at God and at adults in general, believing them to be liars and hypocrites. From then on he refused to say the Lord’s Prayer at school. (The teachers never challenged him, and afterward he thought it was because he was Jewish.) He felt he was consistent in his atheism, because he could never recall having dared God to strike him dead if he was wrong. “At five,” Saul asserts, with typical hubris, “I disproved the existence of God.” Unlike me, his daughter, brought up in no strong religious tradition, here was a man for whom God really mattered. Even in his eighties, when death was closer to him than it had been since his soldiering days, my father rejected religion resolutely and totally. “When it comes right down to it, there’s no place to take one’s beef about the inevitability of death, and about the obscenity of death,” he says. “It is the ultimate unbudgeable imperfection in nature. To talk about the consolations of religion is to deeply insult the dignity of man.”

Having created a vacuum by rejecting the religion of his fathers, little Saul filled the space himself. At age six, when he announced that he wasn’t afraid of the dark, his friends dared him to prove it, so he went alone to a graveyard and said out loud, “Well, if there are any ghosts down there, why don’t you c’mon up? I’m waiting for you.” He decided to run everywhere instead of walking and once collided with a vicious pit bull when neither of them would give ground on a path. He claimed to have taught himself to swim after the incident in which he had almost drowned, and when his father refused to buy him a bike, he swiped his father’s and learned to ride on his own.

My father takes me to Central Park with my new balloon-tire bicycle, the exact one I had begged him for and he had given with evident paternal pride. My feet barely reach the pedals. I'm about seven; there are no training wheels in those days. I am giddy with delight, excitement, and fear. He runs along with me a couple of times, holding me steady by the back of my seat. "Don't let go, Daddy, don't let go!" "I won't," he says, but the next time, after running behind a few steps, he gives me a shove and lets me go; I take off but soon wobble and crash. "Get up," he barks. "You can do it." He ignores my whimpers and skinned knee. "Get up," he orders. "Get back on, now." I do, and soon I'm riding all over Central Park and loving it. It is worth having been afraid, and even learning I can't trust him, to win his approval.

Saul was a leader in the gang of little boys that formed in his neighborhood, and although he describes the local gangs as mild compared to the ones he later heard about on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, he learned to fight from his older brother, George, who became a noted amateur boxer in Quebec and used Saul for a sparring partner. "In various contexts," Saul remembers, "being a Jew was enough reason for a fight. And in others, not being a Roman Catholic was enough reason for a fight."

Saul teaches me to box. He crouches down to my seven-year-old level and shows me how to hold my hands up, to jab with my left and follow through with my right. If I let down my guard, he slaps me—not hard—with his open hand. "Don't telegraph your punches," he advises. "Don't let 'em know what you're going to throw."

We play a game called "henchmen." "I've got two henchmen," he sings out, and I answer, "I've got three henchmen." "Daddy's got four henchmen," he says. "How many do you have?" "I've got five henchmen," I say, jumping up and down with excitement. We are both laughing, but no matter how many henchmen I have, he always has more, and sometimes the game ends with me in tears. Fifty years later my mother tells me, "I thought Saul should have let you win sometimes." I was thrilled that he let me have any henchmen.

Saul loved the Boy Scouts and was picked for the honor guard when the founder, General Baden-Powell, began his North American tour at Saint John. He was also at the head of his class in school. He hated the Jewish holidays, when he had to stay home, but he frequently had problems with the authorities. Saul did not dare involve his parents in his problems at school, because his father would have "picked up [a teacher who had beaten Saul up for not squealing on a classmate] and thrown him out the window." I always assumed, knowing how physically tough he was, that Saul had been rebelling against the image of Jewish scholarly

manhood, all white soft flesh, but Saul describes his father and even his mother as violent and combative. Once when she thought that a teacher was picking on him, his mother, Minnie, came to school and beat the teacher with her umbrella.

"My life took root in a family closely held together by a fanatical clannish loyalty," wrote Maishe in his college autobiography. "Love binds me to my brothers and sisters so that each has cut a deep groove in my consciousness. Mother's, however, cuts deeper than the rest. I am so completely a part of my family that the head-strong enthusiasm, the lack of shrewd foresight, and the utter disregard for the untoward fact, all idiosyncrasies of our clan, are welled up within me, having seeped into my flesh. My life, purely the product of my background, cannot have a sense of unity unless it is to be derived from my family's chronicle."

His violent temper was my father's worst trait, and what is more, at the end of his life, looking back, he justified this failing instead of regretting it. How could this man have set himself up as a psychologist, a healer? Anyone who ever knew him had most likely been victimized by these grotesque paranoid outbursts. His wrath was potential in every situation, but I never learned the cues—what was going to set him off? That made his temper much scarier, of course. It's not like there were clearly defined rules whose transgression would bring retribution. In lots of ways he was a permissive parent, or even neglectful. He never tried to police our sex lives, for example, and he never met me at the airport, even when I was only twelve years old.

Saul's violence colors my earliest memories of him. One of my jobs is to change the cat's box, which in these days before kitty litter is made up of torn strips of newspaper. I can never figure out if the paper should be torn vertically or horizontally and always wind up with uneven fistfuls of paper instead of the long neat strips my mother keeps demonstrating. One day I am whiny and frustrated with this task when my father comes home, and I tell him petulantly that I can't do it. He erupts, screaming at me and finally kicking me as I cower on the floor, with my mother crying out, "Don't hurt her, don't hurt her!" My father won't tolerate incompetence and weakness, and my mother is ineffective—I don't want to stand in the corner with my hands fluttering and scream, like her; I want to be like him: dominant and scary.

During Saul's adolescence the fighting between Minnie and S. K. intensified, and he concluded that his father always lost *because* of losing his temper, when Minnie's "quiet, even, rational style" reduced him to impotently calling her bad Yiddish names. So Saul decided never to lose his temper, and according to him he never did until he reached his forties, but he admits, "I think I have somewhat made up for it in the subsequent thirty-five years. And if someone now says

to me, ‘Did you have to lose your temper?’ I have a simple answer, which is, ‘Yes, for my health.’” He thought the fighting with his mother drove his father insane and ultimately killed him. My cousins told me that S. K. was actually committed to Rockland State mental hospital, where he died; they thought he had bipolar disorder, what used to be called manic depression. Saul, the psychologist, claims that he never knew and never asked how S. K. died.

Just because the family had been kicked out of the synagogue didn’t mean that Saul would be excused from becoming a man by having a bar mitzvah. But because the family eschewed the lower-class synagogue, Saul never went to Hebrew school. At thirteen, after some weeks of memorizing the Hebrew, having no idea what it meant, he had his bar mitzvah at the despised lower-class synagogue. After the ceremony Saul “was in the most violent rage that I can ever remember experiencing. I cannot remember enough of what was in my head at the time to know whether the focus of the rage was my own submissiveness or my parents’ hypocrisy, but I made myself a vow that I would never ever again walk through the door of a House of God.” He was to break this vow twice, once to visit a beautiful cathedral in northern Italy and another time to go into the disused synagogue in Toledo, in Spain. “I could think of it as sufficiently fumigated” after it had stood empty for a couple of hundred years, he wrote.

Once he spoke to me scornfully about what he saw as the pettiness and hypocritical lewdness of the synagogue members he had known in Saint John. “They would study, study,” he said, mimicking how they would *daven* or pray by rocking back and forth. “And the kind of question they would debate . . . see a guy is up fixing the roof, and he falls. There’s a woman passing below in the street, and when this guy falls his penis goes into her. Is it rape?”

In the summer of 1919, just after the ill-fated bar mitzvah, as Saul was finishing the eighth grade, his father finally won the lawsuit against the synagogue, but having proved his point, S. K. sold the factory and moved the whole family to Montreal, where he went into a spats manufacturing venture with a cousin from Halifax. Uncle Maishe saw this as the beginning of the family’s decline. “There was always some new scintillating get-rich-quick scheme to make him [S. K.] completely neglect his already well-established business.” In Montreal Saul and his siblings were introduced to a wider world. The Jewish kids were treated as Gentiles and sent to the English-speaking schools, where Saul was popular because he was a good basketball player and again at the head of his class.

But just as Saul was finishing high school in May 1922, fully expecting to go to college—he wanted to concentrate in theoretical physics, and how much better it would have been for him and for many others if he had done so—his mer-

curial father suddenly sold out the spats business to another cousin and bought a dairy farm in the Catskill Mountains near the small town of Wurtsboro, in Sullivan County, New York. The farm was seventy acres of arable land and a hundred acres of woodland and had two dozen milk cows. Saul and George were peremptorily summoned by S. K. to drop everything and move the whole family—by this time there were the three brothers and two sisters—down to the farm.

Although he recalls loving the “look of the land, and the far perspective down the valley, and the changing of the seasons,” the Wurtsboro farm was a disaster. There was no heat in any of the bedrooms, and all the older children had to work seven days a week while S. K., who had the mistaken belief that he knew about farming from having grown up around peasants in Russia, still viewed himself more as a “manager,” the way he had been at the factory. While Saul milked cows and tried to get balky bulls to mate, he brooded about his lost college opportunity and fumed under his father’s authority. He says he never dared to ask his parents why he couldn’t go to college. Yet on another day he tells the interviewer, “I think that’s what I never forgave him: telling me, ‘I didn’t go to school; you can’t go to college, and you’ll work eighty hours a week for me for no pay.’”

Yet the twisted bonds between father and son were tight. Not long after the family settled on the farm, S. K. ordered a thousand baby chicks. An epidemic of roup soon spread among them, but if the infected chicks were destroyed, the others might survive. S. K. was “too squeamish” for the job, so the task of killing them was assigned to Saul. “I sat there for a long time, picking up one after the other of the infected chicks, taking its body in my right hand” (being left-handed, he always precisely described the action of his hands) “and putting my forefinger and middle finger of the left hand onto the neck of the chick, and, with one twist, beheading it, tossing the corpse to the designated spot.” For all his belligerence, my father was no sadist. “It was not a pleasant experience, ripping off the heads of baby chicks,” he comments, but his older brother, George, had backed out, and Saul “couldn’t afford” to be squeamish. Then, cryptically acknowledging the silent compact between the fiery S. K. and his second son, and the son’s pride in carrying out this especially onerous order, Saul adds, “My father loved me very much.”

Meanwhile, in the Catskills the family was subject to more overt anti-Semitism than in Canada. Saul attributed this to southern influence. A neighbor shot one of their dogs because she was a “Jewish dog.” Saul claims that he and George took this guy out into the woods and “beat him up as viciously as one could without crippling him, and turned him loose.” In an even more traumatic incident, one that seems to have expanded my father’s resentment of patriarchal

authority into hatred of state authority, their other dog barked at a mounted state trooper, who then shot her as Saul stood helplessly by. "I never forgave the state troopers for killing my dog," he says. "Before that point, making a big issue of anti-Semitism had never been my thing. But I seem to have been utterly outraged that they didn't ever try to come directly after me, but got at us through killing my dog, who, from her birth, had been French [Canadian], not Jewish." Saul had no fear of the troopers, despite being unarmed and slightly built. "I think they were puzzled," he speculates, with eerie grandiosity, "by this kid who, without a handgun, yelling down the state trooper, might have some unknown-to-them political strength that it would not be advisable to challenge." In his crazy courage my father thought that he was imitating his own father, "who, if his cause was in his mind just, would take on anyone of any weight. I always thought he was convinced that his cause was just. He could not lose no matter what the odds were."

The troopers' anti-Semitism had one unexpected effect on my father: it made him really want to keep dogs. Perhaps his rejected Judaism resided in them, or even his family loyalty. After he was through being a soldier in Spain and France and had settled down with us on Thirty-third Street in Manhattan, we got a beagle, who died of distemper; then a Dalmatian, who was too much for me to handle and went "to a farm"; then two Shetland sheepdogs, who ultimately became the foundation of our life without Saul. As he went his separate way and established new households with new wives, he kept a succession of standard poodles: Lucy, the smartest, sweetest black poodle I ever knew; Jack and Jill; Rambi and Beau. The last time I saw him before his final illness, he had two brown miniatures. I wouldn't say these dogs were neglected, but they were untrained, and he never seemed to bond with them. They were like his ten children: greatly desired but rarely embraced.

I live now with Lucky, my fourth in a series of standard poodles, the breed that I, like Saul, prefer. Unlike his dogs, mine have been groomed, coddled, and well trained. If they have a fault in the dog show ring, it's that they "crowd" me, always wanting to press against me or nibble on my hand, not only because poodles are an affectionate breed but also because, from the first day each of them came into my life, I was always touching, hugging, and caressing them, drawing them near. This is the mutilated love, probably, that my father had for that French Canadian dog, pouring out of my hands.

Back in the Catskills, Saul's resentment of his tyrannical father had hardened into rebellion. Sick of doing unpaid labor on a failing farm in a backwater and longing to go to college, sometime in 1924 Saul plotted what he ironically describes as "the most graceful plan I could think of" to escape: "My father was

standing, musing, in the farmyard. I walked up to him. I struck a rather hard left fist smack in the middle of his chest. He was so violently—as I expected—outraged that a Jewish son could even conceive of striking his father, let alone carry it out, that he ran around looking for the largest stone he could locate that would crush my skull with one blow.”

“Borrowing” his brother George’s suit and the family car, with nothing but ten or twelve dollars he’d managed to save, seventeen-year-old Saul drove to the Wurtsboro station and boarded a train for Greenwich Village.

Notes

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1. After I had read a draft of this essay at the University of Chicago Gay and Lesbian History conference in September 2000, Liz Kennedy, a professor of women’s studies at the University of Arizona, and one other person told me that similar versions of the Yoshe story had been told in their Eastern European Jewish families, too. Evidently, this cautionary tale about miserliness was a Yiddish urban legend. Although I was somewhat shocked to find that what I had taken to be a genuine recollection was perhaps instead a tribal myth, it made Saul’s Jewishness all the more vivid.