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G. A. Cohen

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G. A. Cohen

Liberty, Justice and Equality

Christine Sypnowich

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For David

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Preface

I first met Jerry Cohen in Hilary term in the winter of 1985, when he arrived in Oxford to take up the Chichele Chair in Social and Political Theory at All Souls College. I was already embarked on my doctoral dissertation, which sought to use the resources of liberal legal and political philosophy to make a case for a theory of socialist law. It was a topic proximate to Cohen's interests and I was excited by the prospect of him being in Oxford. My prior academic background was in the domain of critical theory and, with the exception of my acquaintance with C.B. Macpherson's incisive work on the theory of 'possessive individualism', I was quite unschooled in analytical philosophy. I was therefore bowled over by Cohen's combination of sharp-eyed precision and ardent radical commitment. It is perhaps unsurprising then, that as a huge admirer of his work and in awe of his compelling lectures, I feared looking a fool in a personal encounter. Meeting him both confirmed and dispelled my worries – he was as tough-minded an interlocutor as I anticipated, but also a delightful person, kind and tremendous fun.

Cohen's tragic death in 2009 occasioned an outpouring of esteem and affection. This is due in part to Cohen's unusual background that, as he frequently noted, shaped his scholarly pursuits. It was also due to the exceptional humanity he displayed in his dealings with others; he was not just 'widely admired but loved'.[1] I believe Jerry Cohen therefore makes for a specially interesting and compelling subject in the 'Key Contemporary Thinkers' series. Who could not be intrigued by the story of the young Jerry growing up in a Jewish

Communist community in working-class Montreal, then finding dazzling success on the British philosophical scene, and ultimately holding a prestigious chair in Oxford? The life-long socialist whose philosophy was the fruits of 'explicit political engagement' and conviction? The 'amazingly gifted political philosopher' with an 'inimitable voice' who, though fiercely austere in his philosophical standards, could make 'instant friendships with strangers', who had a 'contagious tenderness' and could make people laugh 'to the point of tears'?[2]

With such a rich background to draw upon, I chose to include much more of Cohen's personal narrative than is customary in books of this kind. Cohen himself made so many references to his family background and politics that incorporating this material seemed the obvious thing to do. I hope readers will agree that the result exemplifies the way the 'personal is political' and makes for an illuminating read.

I found writing this book a daunting task. 'What would Jerry think?' I often pondered as I tried to articulate a complicated thought, wondered whether to include an anecdote, or made philosophical judgements about his work. I feel so fortunate to have known Jerry and enjoyed his friendship. I wanted to do justice to his place in the canon of political philosophy, but also to him, the person. Moreover, I've been acutely conscious of the scrutiny this book will receive, not just from philosophers, but also from Jerry's family, colleagues and the many, many friends he made around the world and throughout his life.

Though daunting, working on this book has been an enormous pleasure in so many ways. Chief among them was the chance to spend time in Jerry's world, to get to know and talk with so many people who knew and loved him. I am deeply grateful to the Cohen family. Jerry's children, Gideon, Miriam and Sarah were wonderful in sharing their memories. I am very thankful to Miriam for the warm welcome to her family home so that I could pore over her father's papers and engage her in discussion. His rusty filing cabinet was a treasure trove of materials that greatly enhanced the narrative I tell here. Jerry's brother Michael kindly spent a day with me, gave me a vivid personal picture of his brother, and showed me around the 'Jerry landmarks' in Montreal. Maggie Cohen was good enough to speak with me at length about her marriage to Jerry and their life together raising a young family in London. I've been lucky enough to know Michèle Cohen for many years, and I am grateful to her for sharing memories of her beloved husband. Arnold Zuboff

was enormously generous and enthusiastic in talking to me about his dear friend. I am also grateful to those Analytical Marxists, good friends of Jerry, who shared their memories and ideas: John Roemer, Hillel Steiner and Philippe Van Parijs. I thank Jo Wolff who met with me at a busy time for a very valuable conversation.

I started work on this book as a Visiting Fellow in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the Australian National University in spring 2018. I am grateful to the ANU faculty and graduate students for their interest in my research, and particularly Keith Dowding, my generous and supportive host.

I am indebted to the Warden and Fellows of All Souls, whose gracious and warm welcome enhanced the unique privilege of my Visiting Fellowship in Trinity term in 2022. Postponed for two years due to the Covid pandemic, my sojourn at All Souls was magical. The chance to spend time in Jerry's cherished community, among his colleagues and friends, in such superb accommodations, was such a gift. I am truly grateful. I also thank the College staff – domestic, library, administrative, IT – who were all enormously helpful.

The deep connections Jerry forged with the fellows of All Souls meant many were forthcoming with stories and anecdotes. I thank John Vickers, Lucia Zedner, Avner Offer, David Gellner, David Addison, Santanu Das, Peregrine Hordin, Ian Rumfitt, Dame Marina Warner, Margaret Bent, Robin Briggs, Edward Hussey, Ian Maclean, David Parkin, Dan Segal, Sir Keith Thomas, Sarah Bufkin and Paul Seabright. A special thank you to Cécile Fabre who guided me during my time at All Souls, generously spoke to me at length about her former supervisor, and who became a good friend.

I am immensely grateful to Paula Casal, who organized a workshop at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona to discuss a draft of the book. Paula was a great advocate for the project, put together a wonderful programme of speakers, offered excellent advice, and was a superb host. Many thanks also to Nicholas Vrousalis, Mike Otsuka, Anca Gheaus and Zosia Stemplowska for their exceptionally acute and constructive commentaries and to Tom Parr, Serena Olsaretti, Andrew Williams and other participants at the Barcelona workshop for their tremendously valuable insights. I am also very grateful for the exceedingly helpful feedback from the anonymous reviewers of the proposal and manuscript, whose identities were later kindly disclosed to me: Mike Otsuka, Tom Parr, Matthew Clayton, Nicholas Vrousalis and Colin Macleod. I'm grateful to George Owers, the Polity editor who

commissioned the book, and his unfailingly patient and sympathetic successor, Ian Malcolm, who was such an excellent source of support, guidance and enthusiasm. Thanks also to associate editor Ellen MacDonald-Kramer for all her assistance and Ian Tuttle for his helpful copyediting.

Many of the ideas in this book were shared at seminars and workshops. I thank the hosts and audiences at the Warwick Philosophy Department; the All Souls Visiting Fellows Colloquium; the University College Dublin Equality Studies Programme; the Political Philosophy Reading Group, and the Saturday Club speaker series, both at Queen's University, Kingston; the Ralph Miliband Lecture Series at the London School of Economics; the University of Arizona Centre for Philosophy of Freedom; the Halbert Centre for Canadian Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem; the Social Justice Centre at Concordia University; the Oxford-Queen's Politics/Philosophy/Law Workshop at St. John's College, Oxford; the Department of Philosophy at Havana University; the Prague Spring Interdisciplinary Workshop in Prague; the National Trust National Conference in Fredericton, New Brunswick; the University of Melbourne Legal Theory Workshop; the Moral, Social and Political Theory Seminar at the Australian National University in Canberra; the Montréal meetings of the European Consortium of Political Research; the Philosophy Seminar at the Institute of Education, University College London; the Nuffield Political Theory Workshop in Oxford; and the annual conference of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain at New College, Oxford.

Many conversations contributed to my understanding of Jerry, his life and work, and how best to approach this project. I am grateful to Will Kymlicka, Adam Swift, David Miller, Margaret Moore, Andrew Lister, Jeff Collins, Colin Farrelly, Alistair Macleod, Elliot Paul, Shlomi Segall, Keith Dowding, Henry Laycock, Rahul Kumar, Sue Donaldson, Kerah Gordon-Solmon, Ben Ewing, Robin Archer, Wendy Webster, Cheryl Misak, David Dyzenhaus, Pablo Gilabert, Igor Schoikhedbrod, Glen Coulthard, Lois McNay, Sudhir Hazareesingh, Patrick Tomlin, Alice Crary, Michael Kremer, David Brink, Daniel Weinstock, Jeroen Knijff and Lois McNay.

I must also mention the political philosophy graduate students at Queen's, several of whom attended the Political Philosophy Reading Group or were members of my 'Justice League' research group, for their invaluable insights. Among them are Owen Clifton, Michael Luoma, Arthur Hill, Yuanjin Xia, Aidan Testa, Josh Mosely, Jessica McMullin, Jordan Desmond, Kyle Johannsen, Jeremy Butler,

Ryan McSheffrey, Omar Bachour, Brennen Harwood, Eden Elliot, Xiaojing Sun, Katie Jourdeil and Xinyuan Liang.

The challenges of writing this book were compounded by my being Head of Department, at a particularly challenging time for universities. I thank our wonderful office staff – Marilyn Lavoie, Susanne Cliff-Jüngling, Jen McLaren and Sheena Wilkinson – who provided invaluable administrative support.

Family was for me, as it was for Jerry, the precondition of my labours. My work, often done very early in the morning before others have stirred, was made more enjoyable by the company of my Siamese companions, Luna and Felix. More important, I owe a special thanks to my husband, David Bakhurst, to whom this book is dedicated. David generously read parts of the manuscript, unstintingly gave comments and advice, and kept up my spirits when they risked being low. Jerry was fond of David, an expert on Soviet Marxism, and he often addressed the two of us as 'Baknowich' or 'Sypnohurst', in a nod to 'unity in diversity' as Hegelian Marxists would say. My beloved children, Rosemary and Hugh, and now Rosemary's husband, James, helped remind me that the personal isn't just political. I am so fortunate to have all these dear Bakhursts in my life. My siblings and their partners, Paula and Martin, Catherine Mary and Claudio, John and Laure, were a great source of kind support. I have been fortunate to have wonderful parents, Marcia and Peter, who took an interest in this project. My mother was instantly charmed by Jerry's wit and hospitality at a dinner at All Souls many years ago. My father, who sadly passed away when I was in the final stages of preparing this manuscript, was an intellectual force, and his inculcation of socialist ideals in me as a young child have always stayed with me (though not with him – he became quite conservative in his old age, and not just in Jerry's sense of valuing existing things!).

Finally, I must thank Jerry Cohen himself. I know my approach to philosophy is no match for his in analytical acuity, but his standard inspires. And certainly, Jerry's socialist convictions, the belief in equality, to be argued for as honestly and forcefully as one can, is an ideal that I strive to realize. The last time I saw Jerry was in the spring of 2009, just a few months before he suddenly died. He had spent a few days in Kingston giving talks at Queen's. The trip had been an immense success. I was dropping him off at the station and felt overcome with sentiment about saying goodbye. He laughed at me and said, 'I love you too'. How Jerry. I hope this book is worthy.

1

The Political is Personal: G. A. Cohen's Philosophical Journey

It 'was like a lollipop', Jerry Cohen said of his first acquaintance with the word 'philosophy' when, as a young boy, he tried to pronounce the 'tongue-loving word' on the cover of his babysitter's textbook.[1] Though that first sense that philosophy was both mysterious and delectable inspired the young Jerry, it would be some time before philosophy took a hold on his ambitions and pursuits. His earliest influence, rather, was a strong set of political convictions. How his politics generated a philosophy guided by a 'clear, distinctive and demanding ideal of equality' is key to the compelling story of his life and work.[2]

Gerald Allan Cohen (1941–2009) was a philosopher who produced writings of depth and insight on the most fundamental ideas of political theory: liberty, justice and equality. Moreover, his intellectual career was unusually wide-ranging, exploring Marxist, liberal and even conservative traditions of political thought. An outstanding scholar and an exemplary teacher, Cohen enjoyed an exceptional international reputation for his rigorous socialist political philosophy. His book, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, inaugurated the school of 'Analytical Marxism' and irrevocably changed the character of left-wing political thought.

Cohen's distinctive political philosophy grew out of his fascinating personal history that, as he often remarked, so shaped his philosophical career. This lends his thought a specially compelling character. As was remarked in the Preface, Cohen's story is especially compelling, from his childhood in a Jewish communist community in working-class Montreal, to making his mark on the

British philosophical scene, to his appointment to a prestigious chair in Oxford. But understanding Cohen's unique contribution is not just a matter of tracing the story of his political convictions and how they shaped his stirring political philosophy. The high regard for Cohen was also due to his personality, his sense of humour, and his rare ability to connect with people, all of which shines through in his writings. Cohen's impact must therefore be understood in light of Cohen the person: charismatic, witty, humane, loveable and loved.

Montreal Origins: Communist Community, Repression and Disappointment

Cohen's communist community

Gerald Allan was born in 1941 in Montreal, Canada, to Bella (née Lipkin) and Morris (Morrie) Cohen. He spent the first eight years of his life in a small apartment on Montreal's Park Avenue above Shiveck's jewellery store. His parents had met in Montreal as workers in the garment trade. Bella's life was characterized by downward mobility. Born in Kharkov (Kharkiv), Ukraine, in 1912, she grew up in a well-off, secular Jewish family. Her father was a timber merchant who, after the Russian Revolution of 1917, continued to prosper under the New Economic Policy. However, by 1930 Soviet politics had become hostile to the business class and Bella's parents, along with Bella and her sister, emigrated to Canada, thereby experiencing an inevitable decline in economic and social position. Yet for the young Bella – a committed Bolshevik since her youth – entry into the proletariat was not unwelcome. It was as a sewing machine operator that she met her future husband, a dress cutter with 'an impeccably proletarian pedigree' as the son of a poor tailor from Lithuania. Bella and Morrie's courtship took place amidst long days in the factory and trade union struggles, punctuated by respite at the summer camp outside of town established by and for radical Jewish workers.[3] Cohen's younger brother Michael recounts a vivid memory of Bella in a corner of the living room operating her electric sewing machine. The sewing machine was on the same circuit as the television and running it caused frequent interruptions to the Ed Sullivan Show or the hockey game, much to the protestations of her menfolk.[4]

Bella, a charismatic, articulate and passionate woman, was an active member of the Canadian Communist Party, whilst her husband, a quiet, diffident and shy man, pursued his left-wing political convictions in the more low-key United Jewish People's Order (UJPO). The family was resolutely working class, socialist, anti-religious and politically engaged. In the Cohen family, ideas mattered and were to be discussed any time and any place. Jewish holidays were celebrated in terms of the general theme of resistance to oppression. Thus Jerry and Michael, nine years Jerry's junior, grew up in this politically charged atmosphere and it permanently shaped their outlook, ideals and careers. Looking back on his childhood, Cohen likened the beliefs he grew up with to those of a religious creed. Though he held them firmly, on well-reasoned grounds, he also was convinced that it was 'an accident of birth and upbringing' that he had them.[5]

Jerry's schooling

The young Jerry went to a school run by the UJPO: the Morris Winchevsky School, named after a Jewish proletarian poet. Mornings were devoted to standard curriculum, taught by non-communist gentile women teachers (antisemitic discrimination in the teaching profession meant there were no Jewish candidates for such positions). Afternoon lessons, in Yiddish, were devoted to Jewish history and Yiddish language and literature, all with a decidedly Marxist inflection. Jerry recalled with pride that he got a straight A in 'History of Class Struggle' in 1949.[6]

As Cohen reminds us, the 1940s were characterized by harmonious relations between the western capitalist countries and the USSR, a consequence of their alliance in the Second World War. This was evidenced, he notes, by a special issue of *Life* magazine in 1943 which celebrated Soviet achievements, with vivid photos and testimonials. For Jerry and his classmates, communism and democracy were inextricably intertwined – people's control of their destinies required both. And for the young Cohen, to be Jewish was to be communist. The belief that 'all people are equal, all people are capable of good, there is tremendous potential in the human spirit' pervaded their lives.[7] Thus, the election of a Montreal Jew from the Communist Party to the Canadian Parliament in 1943 seemed part of the natural order of things.

Anti-communism and Khrushchev's speech

That order ended abruptly in 1952 when, under the aegis of the anti-communist Padlock Law and on the orders of conservative Quebec premier Maurice Duplessis, the Anti-Subversive (Red) Squad stormed the Morris Winchevsky School along with the offices of the UJPO. Although the school was allowed to remain open, enough fearful parents withdrew their children to make its continued existence untenable, and so the students were forced to venture into the non-communist world for the rest of their schooling. Jerry, now age 11, went to Alfred Joyce School. There his education was entirely in the hands of anglophone protestants, and though the students were almost all Jewish, Christmas carols and daily incantations of the Lord's Prayer were de rigueur. To this there was not 'even a mild squeak of protest', perhaps in part, Cohen mused, because of the assumption that a more explicitly antisemitic Catholic school would have been worse.

The young Jerry continued to be active in communist organizations, delivering pamphlets and making speeches at youth groups. He was widely recognized as an intellectual leader by his comrades.[8] However, he kept these activities secret at school, not just to avoid detection by the police, but to ward off the disapprobation of his classmates who, though they were almost all Jewish, were certainly not all, or even mostly, communist. The young Jerry thus lived in 'two Jewish worlds', one anti-Zionist and communist, the other Zionist and anti-communist. But left-wing society could still be found at the Jewish summer camp, and of course in the Cohen home.[9]

This was profoundly shaken, however, in 1956, with the release of Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev's 'secret speech', discrediting Stalin and indicating the extent of the horrors of his authoritarian regime. Canadian communists were devastated. After the difficult years of postwar anti-communism, where they were sustained by camaraderie and 'a sense of oneness', to suddenly discover that everything said by your enemies – and some friends – was true, hit like a thunderbolt.[10] In Montreal the sense of betrayal was compounded by the realization that the news had been concealed by the national delegates from Toronto. The Communist Party split into hardliners and revisionists, with Bella as one of the leaders of the latter. Some months later, a vote regarding the Canadian Party's leadership was contrived to ensure the hardliners retained power, and Jerry's mother, along with other revisionists, feeling disenfranchised, fell away from the party.[11]

Brothers

Bella and Morrie had personal challenges too. Bella gave birth to another boy, David, who tragically died of an asthma attack at age 3. Bella never fully recovered from the heartache, and this early loss deeply affected Jerry too.[12] However, joy followed sorrow with the arrival of Michael in 1950. Jerry was delighted to have a brother again, and the bond between the two was strong, despite the nine-year age gap. Michael remembers fondly his older brother's kindnesses. Jerry took him to the amusement park, to baseball games and, when Michael was 13 and Jerry home on holiday from Oxford, they hitchhiked together to Cornell University to visit one of Jerry's friends. When Jerry got engaged, he brought his little brother to London to meet his bride-to-be, and the two brothers went on a trip to Paris. The then 15-year-old Michael was thrilled by such filial attentions. Michael recalls that, although he was often compared to his more academically successful brother, there was 'zero sibling rivalry'.

Michael grew up in a very different time when the communist community so dear to Jerry had largely fallen apart. Moreover, Michael had his own path; he was a star athlete in high school, attended a different Montreal university, and ended up pursuing a successful career in labour law in Montreal, allying not so much with East European Jewish communists, but the French-Canadian working class.[13] Fighting for justice in the world, rather than conceptualizing it in philosophy, garnered tremendous respect from his big brother. All their lives the two men would spend time together, their last meeting a glorious autumn weekend in the Saguenay in Quebec two years before Jerry's death.[14]

Despite the Moscow revelations, Cohen family politics remained pro-Soviet and this put Jerry at odds with the now 'pale pink' summer camp where he had worked as a counsellor for many years. So, as a university student at age 19 he found himself a new summer job at Wooden Acres, a mainstream, non-communist Jewish children's camp run by B'Nai Brith, which, Cohen recalled, 'led to my closest encounter ever with the Jewish religion'. For a time at Wooden Acres Jerry participated in a Hebrew prayer group, finding himself more receptive than he expected.[15] It would not be until much later in his life, however, that Cohen would seriously reflect on spiritual matters.

Academic Success: Strathcona, Outremont High, McGill, Oxford

Jerry takes flight

The young Jerry excelled in high school, first at Strathcona Academy and then for his final year at Outremont High. He placed ninth in the entire province of Quebec, made public in the academic ranking published in the *Montreal Gazette*.[16] In 1957 Jerry began his studies at McGill, aware that the university had until recently imposed higher academic requirements for Jews as part of an antisemitic quota system. He embarked on a four-year Arts degree which involved a diversity of subjects. Though Jews were a minority, it was a sizable enough one at McGill, and it was to Jews he gravitated. The gregarious and entertaining Jerry made many friends, keeping in touch with a close circle all his life.

For his elective at McGill, under the influence of the family's economic determinist creed (or as Bella put it, 'everything is economic'), Jerry planned to study economic history. However, the fact that, as he put it, 'the bourgeois, suit-wearing Zionist boys' took economic history swayed him to study philosophy and political science instead.[17] He could always switch to economics later, and political science enabled him to retain some connection to the real world, though he wittily observed 'at least with the superstructure, since by doing philosophy I was depriving myself of the economic base'.[18]

As it happened, Cohen 'fell in love with philosophy', a discipline he took to be one of ideas and ideals, forms and beauty, a subject where, in contrast to the empirical studies of politics, 'one could fly free'.[19] At that point his philosophy education was without the rigorous methods that might have clipped his wings, though McGill's focus on great texts did not invite many flights of fancy either. But Cohen was in his element, writing papers that his professors declared were 'monumental' or 'bristled with ideas',[20] and he excelled, winning the McGill Gold Medal.

Oxford

Graduate studies beckoned, in particular, a B.Phil. at Oxford,[21] though his McGill professors warned against the 'new form of

philosophy' there, dismissing it as 'talk about talk'. In the autumn of 1961, Cohen, keen for a European adventure, but wary of Paris due to unease about his French language skills, set sail for New College, Oxford. For their part, Bella and Morrie, always tremendously proud of their son, felt their hearts would burst as Jerry set off.[22]

It was not, however, an easy transition, if only because Cohen finally found himself in a 'non-Jewish world'.[23] Many who come to Oxford for graduate studies are beset by fears that they might not be good enough, often compounded for international students who are regarded as 'colonials' by their British peers and teachers. These feelings would have been amplified further by Cohen whose Jewishness, if not a cause of outright discrimination, would have set him further apart.[24] Yet hard though it is to believe, it was intellectual anxiety especially that afflicted the high-achieving Jerry. He recalls his worries when attending a seminar led by David Wiggins and Michael Woods: 'I was confident I could not master this difficult thing' – Oxford philosophy – in the two years available.[25] Cohen was fortunate to find a kindred spirit in Marshall Berman, another Jewish socialist from North America who found Oxford forbidding; the two young men became very close.[26]

Mentors

However, Cohen encountered Gilbert Ryle, and, under his 'benign guidance', steeped himself in the rigour and discipline of an Oxford philosophical training. Ryle, he says, was wonderful, 'in the sense to be wondered at' – eccentric and inspiring.[27] Ryle was a pioneering figure in Oxford, one of the founders of ordinary language philosophy. Committed to demystifying philosophical inquiry, Ryle was convinced that the task of the philosopher was to clarify how language sheds light on everyday experience.[28] If that meant the discipline had to be 'taken several pegs down its once exalted sense of itself', so be it.[29]

Cohen took to analytical philosophy like a duck to water, proving able at spotting foibles in arguments, breaking down weak defences and marshalling forces towards alternative, warranted conclusions.[30] As his former doctoral student Nicholas Vrousalis put it, Cohen was 'a mastermind of guerrilla warfare' in the world of philosophy.[31] Yet Cohen the argumentative tactician was also enchanted with philosophy's trove of questions and ideas. Indeed,

the notes he compiled in those years, written in messy black fountain pen in small, lined booklets, provide a window into his almost obsessional enthusiasm: for instance, he tallied a list of 183 topics, for each of which he wrote a few philosophizing paragraphs. Topics include: do men make their own history?; driving on left or right; career ambitions; intrinsic evil of lying; anti-philosophy; on historical materialism; worrying about worrying; freedom is the recognition of necessity; 'Good'.[32]

Nonetheless, for all his burgeoning talent for Oxford philosophy, Cohen decided to play it safe and got permission from Ryle to sit his examinations in subjects he had first studied at McGill, principally moral and political philosophy, and to write a thesis on Marxism. Political philosophy, let alone Marxism, was not much in favour in Oxford, and Ryle sent him elsewhere for guidance. And thus came another formative influence on his philosophical career, Isaiah Berlin, the Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory, famed for his 'bracing' lectures on Marx.[33]

Berlin became Cohen's teacher, mentor and friend. As it turned out, Cohen did not write his B.Phil. thesis on Marx after all; his analytical training ultimately won the day. But Cohen contends it was not their mutual interest in Marx, but his and Berlin's 'common Jewishness', and Berlin's erudite views on the role of Jews in western intellectual history, which really drew Cohen in. He 'basked in' being accepted by the great man, and admired, even if he did not emulate, Berlin's capacity to reveal the rich historical context of ideas. The two men thereafter kept in frequent touch, in a relationship characterized by considerable regard and affection.[34]

A surprising friendship

Cohen strongly disagreed with Berlin's negative views of Marx and Marxism and was adamant that Berlin was wrong to deny that lack of money 'carries with it lack of freedom'.[35] Moreover, Cohen was much more of an analytical philosopher than Berlin, the historian of ideas. Yet these disagreements caused no rift between the two friends. Their closeness is striking; one would expect there to be some political and personal bite to their philosophical differences. Berlin was an anti-communist Cold War figure, and the Cohen family's experience of McCarthyite repression could have set Jerry against Isaiah.[36]

True, Berlin abhorred McCarthy, but he also penned his famous 1958 essay on positive and negative liberty to defend 'capitalist civilization' in the 'open war' between 'two systems of ideas'.[37] Over time, Berlin made many revisions to that essay, and one reviewer claimed that the alterations in the 1969 version owed a lot to the fact that Marxism had become 'less intellectually disreputable' in the intervening years.[38] Unhappy with this review,[39] Berlin wrote to Cohen for support, with Cohen kindly nursing his friend's wounded ego.[40]

In retrospect, what might have divided the two men was the fact that Berlin had actively sabotaged the appointment of the Marxist Isaac Deutscher at the University of Sussex, a fact that, given Berlin's 'embarrassed coverup',[41] only came fully to light after the death of both Berlin and Cohen.[42] Ironically, Cohen's book on Marx won the Isaac Deutscher Memorial Prize, and this helped secure Cohen the Oxford chair once held by Berlin. That irony is further compounded by Cohen's lecture on the occasion of the award, in which he took a rather different view from that of his mentor, praising Deutscher for showing that 'scrupulous scholarship was compatible with political engagement'.[43]

Although the Berlin–Cohen friendship was surprising, Cohen felt nurtured and probably flattered by the eminent Berlin's attentions; in a 1979 letter Cohen refers, gratefully, to 'your strong interest in my welfare'.[44] And in 1984, after Cohen had news that he was appointed to the chair that Berlin had once held, Cohen wrote to his mentor with gratitude. Recognizing the role Berlin had played in promoting his candidacy, Cohen wittily notes on the other side of an art postcard depicting Lowry's 'Industrial Landscape', 'The productive forces and I are deeply grateful for everything you have done which contributed to our recent unexpected recognition'.[45] After Berlin's death, Cohen dedicated an essay to him, proclaiming how his love for his teacher was 'imperishably present'.[46]

London: Work, Family and Comradeship

At University College London

In 1963 Cohen took up a lectureship at University College London (UCL), where he spent over 20 happy years.[47] His head of department, Richard Wollheim, was fair and open minded, 'famously hospitable to radical and unconventional ideas',[48] unusual at a time when

British philosophy was dominated by the analytical creed. Cohen thrived under his leadership. Among Cohen's colleagues was Myles Burnyeat, who began as a graduate student when Cohen joined the department and then became his colleague; Burnyeat and Cohen were later colleagues again at All Souls. Also at UCL was fellow Canadian Ted Honderich, who lived near the Cohen family in Hampstead. Honderich's relationship with Cohen was friendly though competitive, the two often sparring on issues philosophical, political and personal.[49]

At UCL Cohen met an Englishwoman a year younger than him, Margaret (Maggie) Pearce, who was studying philosophy. The daughter of a shopkeeper from a small town, Maggie was not Jewish, nor from a progressive background, but she and Jerry shared socialist convictions and fell in love. They married in 1965 and a year later Gideon was born, to be followed by Miriam in 1970, and Sarah in 1975. Like the feminist husbands he touted as 'moral pioneers' in his later work on personal obligations and justice,[50] Cohen took on additional childcare responsibilities when Maggie embarked on postgraduate training as a psychotherapist, tackling the cooking with his limited culinary repertoire.[51]

At the same time, Cohen's work ethic at UCL was legendary, and he juggled his various duties by going into his College office on Saturdays to continue his philosophical research.[52] Maggie Cohen recollects how her husband spoke of the courage needed for academic work, to confront that blank page and get on with it. He would invoke the climb to his study on the top floor of the family home as a metaphor for the challenge of both pushing oneself to work and surmounting conceptual obstacles in the arduous task of writing philosophy.[53]

The bonds of family

Although his children recall that Cohen's work was sacred and 'uninterruptable', that applied also to family life. He was a devoted father, tremendous fun, concerned to guide and advise, but respecting his children's intellect and autonomous choices.[54] Time alone in conversation with Dad was always treasured, and Cohen made such opportunities a priority, despite the hectic pace of life in the busy Cohen family. As an adult, Sarah discussed with her father the merits of the spiritual ideal of enlightenment from Eastern religions, her father adamant that one should not aspire to love all

equally, but rather adhere to a hierarchy of love, with family at the apex. That her father wouldn't budge on the matter was touching for Sarah: 'he was so vehemently attached and also attached to being attached, to his particular family. When someone loves like that, you feel it.'[55]

The children grew up in an atmosphere set by both parents of progressive political convictions, ruthless honesty about ideas and arguments, irreverence and fun, music and singing. They were often in the company of friends and colleagues from London and around the world, for example, the communist lawyer Michael Seifert (who provided legal counsel to striking mineworkers, the African National Congress and others)[56] and the Canadian socialist philosopher John McMurtry and his family.

If possible, summers were spent back in Canada, in the Laurentian mountains, with Morrie, Bella and Michael, as well as uncles, aunts and family friends who had shared the heady times of the old days, including Sam Carr, a prominent officer of the Communist Party who had served time in prison for being a Soviet spy.[57] Bella, effervescent and full of intellectual energy, in high heels and beautiful homemade dresses, could be intimidating. Certainly, for the young English wife and mother from a quiet, conservative background, it took some adjustment. But Maggie, like her children, relished the times away from London with this fascinating extended family in the beautiful Quebec landscape.[58] To this day Maggie can sing the socialist hymns she learned at those gatherings.

Heartbreaking news from Montreal, comradeship in London

However, tragedy struck. Bella's mental health had been precarious ever since the Khrushchev revelations. She and Morrie had lost comrades who had abandoned the socialist cause for careers in business, swapping communist Russia for Zionist Israel as the object of their political loyalty. But especially hard for Bella was the loss of friends who preferred to move in more privileged social circles than the Cohens. Though she had a strong, outgoing personality, there were also bouts of significant anxiety and low moods. Her mental health declined and in June 1972, age 60, she took her own life. Jerry, always close to his mother, was heartbroken. With his father's financial help, it was resolved that the family should make annual trips back to Canada.[59]

In 1974 Arnold Zuboff, a doctoral student at Princeton University, joined the UCL department as a young lecturer and a friendship with Cohen quickly formed. Also hailing from a North American Jewish family, and a talented if diffident philosopher himself, Zuboff became Cohen's intellectual interlocutor, sounding board and unfailing admirer. The two spent hours in Cohen's study at the family's Agincourt Road house delighting in each other's company and discussing Cohen's projects, be they his philosophical arguments or his latest comedy routines. For Zuboff, that small room was a 'magical place', full of intellectual excitement; it was exhilarating to subject Cohen's work to sustained criticism and play a part in its craft, as well as to receive Cohen's phone calls the next morning reporting his progress on the problems they had discussed.[60]

As Cohen's career thrived, Zuboff took pleasure in each triumph and felt that in some small way he shared in them. He too, wanted his pal to 'knock 'em dead', whatever the occasion. Cohen repeatedly credited Zuboff in his publications, grateful that 'his fertile and razor-sharp mind' was 'always at my disposal'.[61] Unmarried and childless until later in life, Zuboff was virtually a family member, often babysitting and enjoying time with the Cohens. He was indeed, as Cohen wrote in a book dedication, 'brilliant critic, devoted friend'.[62]

Time to philosophize about Marx

Not long after arriving at UCL, Cohen decided to draw upon the tools forged in his Oxford education to mount a rigorous, sustained defence of Marx's historical materialism. Prior to that, he had contended 'with the complacent self-endorsement of youth' that, insofar as he was a Marxist, he was not a philosopher, and insofar as he was a philosopher, he was not a Marxist. This influenced his attitude to graduate studies in philosophy: 'I came to Oxford already steeped in Marxism, and so, unlike most of my politically congenial contemporaries, I did not look to university philosophy to furnish me with ideas that mattered.'[63] Cohen's political views were so deeply personal and impregnable, they needed no defence. Philosophy, on the other hand, was all about testing arguments and finding them wanting. Cohen was good at it, worked hard and enjoyed it, but until he wrote the Marx book, in the end maybe it was just a job. Or perhaps the contrast

could be put another way – politics was serious stuff; philosophy was the confection portended by that lollipop-sound all those years ago.

Cohen remained pro-Soviet, even after Khrushchev's revelations, though seeds of doubt had been sown. In 1968, however, the invasion of Czechoslovakia cemented his disillusion.[64] Cohen was highly conscious of the damage done by Soviet 'actually existing socialism' to Marxist theory. Increasingly, though, he also became preoccupied with the undisciplined way in which the Marxist doctrine had been defended. By the late 1960s Cohen became convinced that the creed with which he had grown up should be tackled with the best resources he had at his disposal, rigorous analytical philosophy, and he set out to produce a book defending Marx's historical materialism.

Cohen published two essays that presaged his opus on Marx, tackling the interface between a Marxist tenet and a philosophical concern. His very first published essay considered the impact of social roles on a person's identity. Another posed the question of whether the material causes of ideas were relevant to their truth.[65] A third essay, in 1970, defended the economic determinism of Marx directly, making the ingenious and elegant argument that would be the heart of the Marx book, that is, that the superstructural, non-material realm which emerges out of economic relations, though it owes its existence to the material realm, can yet cause changes within it.[66]

Cohen's progress on the Marx book was slow, in part because of his exacting standards, but also because this work was interrupted when, in 1975, he made a trip to Princeton. Three years earlier his friend Gerald Dworkin had drawn his attention to the work of the libertarian Robert Nozick and Cohen resolved this would be the focus of his Princeton lectures. Cohen was shaken by the commonality between Nozick's self-ownership argument about the exploitation inflicted by the state and the Marxist theory of the exploitation of workers by capital. So Cohen resolved to delay work on his book to tackle the problem of freedom and capitalism. The result was several acute critical essays on the place of liberty in libertarianism. In Princeton, Cohen also got to know the philosophers Thomas Scanlon and Thomas Nagel, who were less convinced about the threat posed by Nozick. Cohen noted the paradox that Nozick's challenge looms larger the further left one's politics.[67]