

Hugh Segal

# **Bootstraps NEED Boots**

**One Tory's Lonely Fight to End Poverty in Canada**

WITH A FOREWORD BY ANDREW COYNE

 **on  
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## CHAPTER 1

# The Cheery Edge of Poverty



The capitalist version of the politics  
of inevitability – the market as a substitute for  
policy – generates economic inequality that  
undermines belief in progress.

TIMOTHY SNYDER, *THE ROAD TO UNFREEDOM*



I WAS THE LAST of three boys (we were a boys-only brood, much to my mother's disappointment) born to Sadye Dankner and Morris Jack Segal, who were married in 1937 in Montreal. Mom was the eldest sister in a family of six children. Her parents, Benjamin Dankner and Rose Kauffman, emigrated to Canada from the eastern Austro-Hungarian Empire in the late 1890s. Benjamin and Rose started Dankner's Bakery on Boulevard St. Laurent, which continued successfully for many years despite being ravaged by the Depression and some tension with the unions. My grandparents, my uncles and aunts, and my mother lived, classically, over the store, and all of them worked or helped in the bakery, which was open from Sunday mornings until Friday at noon. My grandparents were Orthodox Jews, who always closed for the Sabbath.

I did not meet my maternal grandfather, because he died in 1942 of complications from diabetes. But I heard many stories about him. The one that particularly stuck with me poignantly recounted an interesting

aspect of the seven-day period of mourning (shiva) following his death. My mother told me that every day, those who came to pay their respects to the widow and children would leave envelopes containing money (uncharacteristically, since this is not a Jewish tradition). The accompanying notes all said something to the effect of “We had no money during the Depression. Mr. Dankner said we should take what bread we needed to help feed our family, and we could settle up when things were better. We never did settle up, but we should now.” The Dankners were not poor when my grandfather died, but neither were they rich. They were always struggling business owners in the labour-intensive world of a small kosher retail bakery in the centre of Canada’s Eastern European immigrant community.

My dad was the son of Benjamin Segal and Hudja Soifer, refugees who came to Montreal after the First World War from what was then Communist Russia. My grandfather had been a tailor in a town called Mogilev Podolsk, near Minsk, where the family lived in a tiny house with a dirt floor and outdoor plumbing. He himself came to Montreal before the war ended and worked and saved to bring his family to join him.

In czarist and Communist Russia, they had been very poor. Their diet was barely subsistence, relying more on cornmeal mush (*mamiliga*), potatoes, and beets than on any regular protein. Bits of herring were a rare treat. My grandfather had supported the Menshevik side of the anti-czarist movement and had decided that the carnage of the Russo-Japanese War, the grinding poverty, and the regular pogroms under the czar were a compelling reason to leave. The near-starvation conditions and regular pogroms most weeks in his village offered absolutely no prospects for his children.

He came to Montreal by ship via Halifax, with the assistance of the Baron de Hirsch society (named for its benefactors Baron and Baroness Maurice and Clara de Hirsch) to find a place to live and a job in a tailor shop. His goal was to save enough money to bring over my grandmother and their children, of which my dad was one, along with his sisters, one older and one younger – my aunts Rose and Gertie.

On his first attempt, the money and tickets he shipped to his family were stolen in transit. He then worked through a local MP to make a second attempt via the British mission in Minsk. (Canada had no independent foreign offices outside Washington and London until after

1931 and the Statute of Westminster.) This second dispatch arrived safely, and his family set sail for Halifax in 1920.

As family legend has it, when he went to the Montreal train station to meet them – now an employed resident of a growing Canadian city, with income, an icebox filled with food, and a warm-water flat with both heat and indoor facilities – he looked so prosperous, well fed, and robust that they did not recognize him.

My grandfather worked hard to earn a living and deal with the costs of raising three children. Although he spoke only Russian and Yiddish at first, and had a wife who suffered from chronic kidney disease because of her many years of hunger in Russia, he was resolute and always cheery. Unlike my maternal grandparents, my grandfather Ben was not terribly religious. His disposition was to appreciate and adapt to his surroundings. He identified with the plight of working men and women who, like himself, had only piecework, unpredictable wages, and no benefits of any kind with which to negotiate the larger world.

I knew Benjamin Segal as a doting and engaged grandfather. Visits from Zaida or, later, to his apartment in the Côte-des-Neiges district of Montreal, were a regular part of life, always enjoyable and always a chance to learn a little from a person of long years and varied experience. Sadly, I never knew Hudja, his first wife and my paternal grandmother, though family lore made it clear that I owed my very inception to her kindly suggestion to my parents that two children were simply not enough. As my mom had always wanted a girl, this idea did not meet stiff resistance.

My two older brothers were born five years apart: Seymour in 1939 and Brian in 1944. *Faute de mieux*, I arrived in October 1950, a strapping five-pound, seven-ounce little boy. Hudja had died earlier that year of kidney failure, the kind that poverty and malnourishment can produce. I was named after her, as is the tradition in some faiths and cultures.

By the time I was born into a very low-end, working-class family in what is now called Le Plateau, my maternal grandfather had died. My maternal grandmother would die fifteen years later, in 1956. They were only in their sixties, both ravaged by diseases for which we now have life-extending therapies.

At the time of my birth, Benjamin Segal was helping to set up the revived International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) local

through a strike of the Cloakmakers' local, in whose ranks he had risen to shop steward. Surnames such as Shane, Dubinsky, Kirzner, and Jodoin, senior organizers from Quebec, Montreal, and New York, were often mentioned around the family table. In the days before the ILGWU, cutters, tailors, sewers, and cloakmakers were paid by the garment, with no guaranteed weekly salary and zero benefits. The first strike my grandfather led was the result of an owner announcing on a Tuesday that if output did not double by quitting time on Friday, all the workers would be fired. As meeting the deadline was both impossible and unreasonable, my grandfather led his co-workers into the street. "We walk out like human beings today or we crawl out like mice on Friday night," he said to them. His union loyalty was not about class warfare or a dictatorship of the proletariat. His experience with Russian communism had cured him of any interest in those excesses. His involvement was simply about dignity and self-respect for the men and women who, despite working hard every day, could not make ends meet or build better lives for their families.

This was the sort of stuff on which I was raised. Combine it with stories about my maternal grandfather helping the less fortunate customers of Dankner's Bakery during the tough Depression years, and you get the general drift.

There was also a mild but pronounced class distinction between my maternal and paternal families. The Dankner-Kauffman crowd came from a slightly better-off area in Eastern Europe. They owned a business and were of Orthodox stock. In addition, they had arrived earlier than the Segals. Late arrivals were viewed as "green" or "greener" in the Yiddish dialect. As well, those who were modestly merchant or middle class, however they might be struggling, had great disdain for those who were even more modest and working class in status. My father often joked that he had had to play pinochle with Rose Dankner for what seemed like years before he was permitted to date her daughter.

That class distinction held for generations. My mother's brothers and sisters either became entrepreneurs themselves or married Americans and worked with them in small businesses that were quite successful. My maternal uncles had finished high school, had start-up jobs at the family bakery, and moved in relatively successful economic circles. Through hard work, they started businesses in the ladies' lingerie manufacturing field (Montreal) and retail baking and furniture – the latter two in Rochester,

New York: Quality Kosher Bakery and Fitch Furniture, both on Joseph Avenue. During the Rochester race riots of late July 1964, when many stores were looted and destroyed, both the bakery and the furniture store were left untouched. My uncles had black employees and worked hard to ensure that all customers were treated with equal respect, including the extension of credit as required.

My mom's youngest brother, Max, lied about his age to join the Canadian army in 1939 and became a member of the Princess Louise Dragoon Guards. He landed on the coast of Sicily and fought up the spine of Italy with the Canadian Forces in 1943–44. Despite serious wounds in the Italian campaign, he recuperated sufficiently to be part of the liberation of Holland with his Canadian comrades. When he returned to Montreal, he applied for work with the Quebec Provincial Police, now the Sûreté du Québec. He had handled guns and been a motorcycle dispatch rider in Holland. But because he had fought in "la guerre des Anglais" and was Jewish, the recruiting officer, though not unpleasant, found his pursuit of a police job quite idiotic. Max went on to become a successful sales and manufacturing player in the women's millinery business in Montreal, which suited his personality and demonstrated his gumption.

My dad had no such luck. When he arrived in Canada, he spoke neither English nor French. He was put into Grade 1 at Edward VII Public School at the age of ten. Embarrassed because his classmates were so much younger, he was desperate to leave school and get a job. There was always some grinding need at home. He left school in Grade 6, found work sweeping up in a garment-manufacturing company, and progressed to shipping and other menial, go-nowhere positions. When my oldest brother was born, my father received a two-dollar-a-week raise.

Long periods of unemployment, a personal bankruptcy, and a failed effort on my father's part to be a travelling men's shirt salesman conspired to make our financial position quite precarious and sometimes desperate. There was no unemployment insurance or medicare in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

I was barely ten years old and did not fully understand the dynamics of our financial instability. Our home was always warm, and we seemed to have all the food we needed – and then some. But certain intrusions heralding a financial collapse were hard to ignore. We lived in a second-floor walk-up in lower Outremont, part of a classic Montreal working-class

triplex with outside stairs, and were always behind on our rent. One day, a bailiff arrived and repossessed our car. On a second visit, our furniture was seized, both of which had an impact. Mom had stayed home to raise her three children, but when Dad became unemployed, she took a job at an all-night drugstore.

While my brothers were in high school, they worked as cashiers at Steinberg's, the supermarket on Côte-des-Neiges and Queen Mary. This did not seem unusual for working-class folks. That all of their earnings went to pay family expenses, with none set aside for university, did strike me as unfair. Many working-class families experienced similar or worse financial and part-time work pressures.

One event that made a lasting impression on me was a visit to Belmont Amusement Park in Montreal's northwest Cartierville suburb, two streetcar rides away. My brother Seymour decided to treat me, using his cashier's earnings to pay for our excursion. We spent a perfect day, enjoying rides and cotton candy. I was exhausted and delighted at this very infrequent luxury for an edge-of-poverty working-class kid. But my brother caught pure hell from my parents when we came home that afternoon because his earnings had not gone to the household coffers. This was not easy for me to understand, at least not at nine years of age, and it was something I would never forget.

In areas of east-end Montreal or at Point St. Charles, there were many working-class families that were far poorer than the Segals, and we would talk about them around the supper table. I attended a private, fee-based religious school that taught the curriculum of the Protestant School Board of Greater Montreal for half a day and classic Hebrew language, Bible study, theology, history, and literature for the other half. I could afford to attend only because my great-uncle on my mother's side of the family, Ben Beutel, was a well-off manufacturer of men's suits (Premier Brand Suits), a noted philanthropist, and the pro-bono chair of my school. He paid my fees. My hand-me-down clothes were not all that bad, despite the fact that I was chubbier than either of my brothers at the same age. But extra funds for school trips, gym clothes, and the rest were always a struggle and produced great machinations at home.

As I rounded the corner into adolescence, some impressions had begun to set in. I realized that poor people had far fewer choices than everyone else. That money pressures took their toll: on relationships, on



outlook, on day-to-day life, on parental harmony, and on future prospects. That how well off or connected your parents or grandparents were made a huge difference. That working hard mattered, but it was not always enough. That disadvantage was a scale reflected in your relationships with the people you knew, related or otherwise, who were doing either better or worse. That sometimes even people of modest means had to help those who were worse off – and there were always folks who were worse off. That fairness did not come naturally in a society where everyone was trying to get ahead. Sometimes those at the bottom of the ladder had to make noise so that more people could step on and hope to step up.

None of this seemed even remotely political. I understood things very much at the family level. Cousins my age lived in detached homes in lovely districts and had two cars and wondrous toys (my Rochester cousin Neal possessed a Ride-em red tractor, rarely shared). When I asked for a small plastic rubber-tire Imperial Oil truck hanging on the toy rack at the local drugstore, I was scolded. This was not about genuine deprivation. It was about learning, from a very young age, that “we can’t afford it” was the usual answer to questions about getting or doing something that others next door or in our family always had or did.

Millions of children have experienced worse. After all, we lived in Montreal, then Canada’s premier city. Streets were safe. School was safe. We could worship freely in our own faith. On Saturday nights, we could watch les Canadiens play hockey, sitting in front of our own twelve-inch Philco television (the set came to us because our uncle Hy Fitelson, married to my mother’s sister Ceal, was the proprietor of Fitch Furniture in Rochester). My childhood was not about despair. It was about getting a strong sense of where you stood and about what you did or did not have the right to hope for.

Being on the cheery edge of poverty is not, as some bootstraps proponents assert, about building character and ambition. It is about understanding that the financial insecurity at the centre of your existence, once installed in your memory bank, never leaves. And since you don’t live in abject poverty, it’s also about realizing how much worse the feelings of instability and insecurity must be for those who do.

## CHAPTER 2

# The Missing Toy Box



We are not rich by what we possess,  
but by what we can do without.

EMMANUEL KANT



**AT THE AGE OF NINE**, you don't have many possessions that are deeply important. My little bedroom, off the kitchen and beside the furnace room, was fine. It had a single bed, a bright, if threadbare, rug, and a small closet. It was not far from our second-floor balcony, which overlooked the back laneway that we shared with other triplexes and four-plexes in the neighbourhood. We lived in lower Outremont, on Avenue de l'Épée, near Lajoie. In the back alley, we played street hockey and wall tennis, bouncing the ball off the stucco walls. Trucks sometimes drove up the lane, delivering coal (later, oil) to our basements. We enjoyed playing "cowboys and Indians" or hide and seek in the lanes that connected de l'Épée to Bloomfield and the cross-street at Lajoie. It was a happy place, where kids could play outside all afternoon until called to dinner.

The central "altar" of my bedroom was a mahogany toy box about five feet tall. Its large lidded compartment served as a seat. It held many toys, from stuffed teddy bears, small trucks, and cap guns to a constructed Davy Crockett hat. We couldn't afford a real Davy Crockett hat with the faux-raccoon tail, so mine had a cloth tail in a greyish tone. There were soldiers made of pipe cleaners, Dinky Toy cars, several Slinkies, and some

colouring books and pencil crayons. There was a whistle on a cord for hockey games, a small bat and a baseball, a bolo bat, and a Tonka tractor that I especially loved. The box also contained a series of cereal box submarines that were magically powered by baking powder (the original non-polluting fuel?). I had a small three-car pull train made of wood (alas, more than fifty years of asking for an electric train has been futile), along with a skipping rope or two, and some street chalk. Not, perhaps, wealth in objective terms, but it was my little treasure trove. The back of the box was carved in the shape of a beaver, and it had brass pegs from which to hang coats, bathrobes, peaked hockey hats (vaunting the Canadiens, of course), and scarves.

I don't remember where it came from – a hand-me-down from a wealthier relative? Something given to me from my grandparents' house? I'm not sure. But it was my home base. For me, it was like today's desktop or laptop computer or CPU. I could leave schoolbooks on the seat or hide stuff in the secret compartment. The toy box was at least as important as my bed, though not as important as the fridge just around the corner in our large eat-in kitchen, replete with its chrome-legged arborite-topped table and soft plastic-upholstered chrome-framed chairs.

So my shock could not have been greater when I entered my room late one afternoon in the dead of winter to find all my stuff piled neatly against the wall and the toy box gone.

My dad was not at home, so I went to my brother Brian, who was fifteen and a student at Outremont High.

"Where is my toy box?" I asked accusingly.

"Dad had to use it for something," Brian said in an uncomfortable voice.

"When will I get it back?"

"Better ask Dad."

I was troubled, and at a loss. What could my unemployed father, out looking for work, want with my toy box? It made no sense.

Dad came home around 6:30 p.m., having stopped at the Steinberg's up the street for some groceries. I heard him come into the kitchen and start making supper. I put down my pipe cleaner men and wandered into the kitchen. My father expected the usual hug.

"Hi Touie," he said. "How was school?" (As a child, I could not pronounce the "H" in Hugh or Hughie, so my nickname became Touie.)

“Okay. Mr. Michaeli was sick, so we had a substitute teacher.”

“Any good?” he asked.

“Her Hebrew had a different accent. Some said maybe Moroccan.”

Dad was making patties, mixing ground beef with egg yolks, bread crumbs, and some mustard. Fried in a pan with onions, accompanied by mashed potatoes and green peas from a can, those patties were one of my favourite meals. My father was making dinner because my mom had already gone off to her nightshift job as a cashier at the Medical Arts Pharmacy at Guy and Sherbrooke, about a forty-five-minute bus ride away.

“Dad?” I started. “Could you –?”

He stopped me cold. “Touie, I gave your toy box away to the people upstairs on the third floor.”

“The Lacroix family?” I asked, puzzled.

“They needed it for heat in the furnace.”

“My toy box?” I began to cry.

“They had no money for the coal man. It’s very cold outside – and their welfare cheque isn’t due till the end of the month.”

“So you gave them my toy box!”

“Had no choice, Touie. They asked for money. I had none to lend, so I figured they could burn the wood until they got some coal. The mahogany will burn slowly, the wood is really thick – it will help.”

“Dad, that was my toy box!”

“We’ll get you another one someday.”

“When? Besides, it won’t be the same.”

I stomped off to my room and slammed the door. Anger, desolation, and despair (but mostly anger) flowed through my veins.

About twenty minutes later, Dad hollered, “Brian, Touie, supper!”

I stayed where I was. A few minutes later, Brian knocked on my door. “It’s going to get cold.”

“Not coming,” I said with some flourish.

“Touie, it’s your favourite! Schnitzel!” (For reasons that were never clear to me, my mother called this hamburger dish “schnitzel,” but breaded second-cut veal was called “veal chops” – go figure.)

“Don’t care, not coming!”

After he and Brian had finished eating, my dad brought a plate of food to my room, along with a glass of Eskimo Nectar (its actual brand name) ginger ale.

"Touie, here's some supper," he offered, knocking on my door.

I didn't answer.

He poked his head in. "Touie, have some supper. I promise to get you a toy box as soon as I find a job."

"It won't be the same, and I'm not hungry." The first part of this statement was an assertion, the second a lie. But I was determined to be angry and tough.

I fell asleep in my clothes and woke up at about 11:00 p.m. The hall was dark. Both my brothers were out, and I could hear my dad snoring. My parents' bedroom was past the bathroom and down the hall, near the dining room. It was far away, but his snoring had serious tonal depth and volume. I changed into my pyjamas and went back to bed, listening to the wind rattle the loose windowpane just a few inches from where my toy box used to be. I cried myself to sleep.

The next morning, as usual, Mom woke me up.

"Good morning, Touie. You have to catch the bus in an hour and fifteen."

I took a shower, brushed my teeth, combed my hair, and put on my thick wide-wale corduroy pants, a hand-me-down flannel shirt in shades of green, a red sleeveless sweater, and my Savage shoes. My breakfast routine involved cereal, frozen concentrated orange juice, a banana, and a huge tablespoon of the most foul-tasting cod liver oil in the world. I often tried to pour it into my orange juice to dilute the taste, but Mom would not allow it.

"Dilute the oil and it won't heal!" she would intone.

Brian and I sat quietly, listening to CJAD's Morning Show with Bill Roberts. Mom seemed preoccupied, and Dad had gone downtown already to talk to someone in a clothing factory about a job. After breakfast, I went to the furnace shed to put on my heavy flannel leggings, my duffle coat, and my brown vulcanized rubber buckle boots.

"Touie, I made you lunch," my mom called. "The cold schnitzel from last night will make great sandwiches. Don't forget to eat the celery, and don't eat the Dare cookies first."

I said nothing.

Mom joined me in the furnace shed. "I guess you skipped supper last night. Daddy told me."

"I wasn't hungry."

“Touie, you’re always hungry! Why did you skip supper?”

No answer.

“Daddy said you were angry.”

No answer.

“About your toy box.”

Brian was putting on his boots to walk to Outremont High. He didn’t have to wear leggings or take a bus to school. He left before my conversation with Mom continued.

Finally, I said, “He gave it away without my permission.”

“Oh,” said my mom. “Your permission.”

“Yes.”

“Young man” – it was never a good sign when she said that – “I am really disappointed in you.”

“In me?”

“Yes, in you.”

I began to tear up.

“Hugh David Segal” – also not a good sign – “you know where the box went.”

“It was my toy box!”

“Touie, Mr. Lacroix had no money for heat, and Dad had no money to help. How do you think Mr. Lacroix felt, having to ask Daddy for help? How do you think Daddy felt, having nothing to give but a wooden box? And you’re angry? I’m ashamed of you! How could you be so selfish?”

I walked out the door, holding my mom’s hand, bawling my eyes out as we went up de l’Épée to Bernard. She got on the bus with me. I cried all the way down to boulevard St. Joseph and Park Avenue, where my school was located. It was the worst moment of my whole nine years.

I didn’t understand why I was in trouble, when it was my toy box that had been burned.

I hadn’t understood that there were people poorer than we in our triplex.

I didn’t understand anyone telling me that the box really didn’t matter. It mattered to me.

I did understand the guilt I felt for upsetting my mother.

Weeks passed. Whenever I was in my room, I thought about my toy box, now replaced by shopping bags full of my treasure.

About three months elapsed before I began to understand. No one could stand by, or should stand by, and see a neighbour go without something as basic as heat. I did not forgive my dad. But I began slowly to understand why what happened had happened.

This was the lesson that activated a nascent sense of conscience in me. Guilt is a powerful force.



Conscience is many things: a sense of obligation; a sense of right and wrong. For me, after the sacrifice of my beloved toy box, my anger, and feeling of violation, conscience was a compelling sense of guilt at my selfishness. I learned how painful a motivation guilt could be. More importantly, I had learned that there were people living close by who were in rougher shape than my family. What might be a small luxury for one family could well be a survival necessity for another. All of this lodged somewhere in the place between soul and mind. But I still didn't forgive my dad!

This incident occurred before the health insurance breakthroughs of Saskatchewan premier Tommy Douglas became the norm throughout Canada. In those days, many immigrant communities founded sick and death benefit societies into which low-income people paid small amounts so that there might be a burial plot when they passed or a tiny bit of financial assistance when they got ill. My dad was a member of something called the King Edward Benefit Association (KEBA), which was similar to the groups set up by the Ukrainian, Polish, Chinese, Italian, Hungarian, and Greek communities during their first-generation years in Canada.

These organizations raised funds, sponsored communal events, elected executives, and generally sought to be a community-centred force for cooperative progress. The KEBA even had a bowling league that met at Sunset Lanes on rue de la Savane on Tuesday nights. My dad belonged to that league for many years. He quit only after my mom joined and won the Rookie of the Year Award, which meant she was a better five-pin bowler than he was.

Most of that was peripheral noise to a pre-teen. But I do remember the monthly KEBA meetings at the Moose Hall on Park Avenue near Laurier. My dad attended, and as the meetings followed my swimming lessons at the nearby YMHA, he took me along. After singing “God Save the Queen,” the meeting dealt with its agenda. A dry-cleaning store owner by the name of Mr. Zangwell officiated as president, and others around the table reported in, asking questions and proposing motions. The Cemetery Committee report was always first, followed by the Bowling League Committee. Then there would be the Health and Sickness Report. Finally came the Distress Committee report.

This last report was about families or individuals who were in severe financial distress because of illness, accidents, business collapse, unemployment, and the like. Their names were never mentioned, in respect for their privacy. The KEBA meeting decided how much money to give them, either as a gift or a one-time loan, classically called a “free loan” because no interest was ever charged and because payback was on an “as and if ready and able” basis. My father always argued in favour of generosity. Later, when he worked as a cab driver and had a little extra income, he donated to that committee. I was proud of him for that.

Everyone lowered his voice during this last part of the meeting. Being poor was embarrassing for the people in need. Those who were marginally, if temporarily, better off discussed their situation discreetly, in hushed tones. Sometimes, I wondered if my family’s financial circumstances would become so dire that folks would talk about us in this way. Whenever I did, I thought about my toy box.



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