



Tara Goldstein

LÉA ROBACK

Quebec Social Justice Activist

Activism and Social
Movement Studies

Collection Editor
R. ANNA HAYWARD

LIVED PLACES
PUBLISHING



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To the next generation of activists and educators working
towards human rights and social justice.

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Abstract

Léa Roback (1903–2000), who was my great-aunt, was well known for her seven decades of activist work in Quebec, especially her union and women's rights activism. This biography provides readers with an opportunity to read about Roback's activist life and work from the perspective of one of her great-nieces, who is an activist herself. At a time when the geopolitical moment has produced polarized views and a lack of dialogue, Roback's ability to cross linguistic, religious, cultural, and class borders – in order to work towards social justice needs to be documented and shared. The biography will be of interest to educators and social justice activists around the world.

Key words

Access to abortion – Quebec, Canada; Activism – Quebec, Canada; Anti-apartheid – South Africa; Communist Party – Canada; Jewish history – Canada; Peace activism – Quebec, Canada; Quebec history – Canada; Union labour history – Quebec, Canada; Women's history – Quebec, Canada; Women's right to vote – Quebec, Canada

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The archival research staff at the Jewish Public Library in Montreal – Eddie Paul, Maya Pasternak, and Sam Pappas – provided me with expert guidance on how to navigate the wide variety of material about Auntie Léa's life and activism housed there. After collecting and scanning the material I wanted to use in the biography, my research team – Noah Lee, Jesse Scott, Mia Jakobsen, and Anya Shen – supported the organization, translation and transcription of some of the material.

I also want to acknowledge and thank publisher David Parker and series editor Anna Hayward at Lived Places Publishing for their support in completing the final draft of the biography. As the book went into production, the Lived Places Publishing team worked with me to ensure that the book was polished and error-free.

Finally, of course, I want to acknowledge and thank my great-aunt Léa for spending her entire life fighting for workers' and women's rights and leaving behind a better world for us to inherit. It's our turn now to continue the fight and leave behind a better world for the generations to come.

Warning

This biography contains explicit references to, and descriptions of, situations which may cause distress. This includes references to and descriptions of:

- Genocide
- Sexual assault
- Ableism, discrimination, and microaggressions

Learning objectives

1. To read about the life and activist work of Léa Roback (1903–2000), who was involved in some of the most important social issues of the twentieth century, and to understand history from the storytelling of an elder from Quebec.
2. To recognize and discuss how Léa Roback's life experiences as a child, adolescent, and young adult influenced her life work as an activist.
3. To describe and discuss how Léa Roback's ability to cross borders facilitated her advocacy and activism against anti-semitism, classism, sexism, racism, and heterosexism and made it forceful.
4. To name the ways Léa Roback's advocacy was characterized by activist community care.
5. To discuss what educators and activists today can learn from Léa Roback's advocacy and activism, and how they can integrate Roback's approaches and strategies in their social justice work.

1

Léa Roback

Her life and times (1903–2000)

“Knitting isn’t my passion – social causes are.”

– Léa Roback¹

My great-aunt Léa Roback was a force. She was brave, bold, fiercely intelligent, well-read, politically astute, and funny. Like her sister, my grandmother Rose, and the other Roback siblings, Auntie Léa was a compelling storyteller, and much of what I knew about the injustices in the world in my childhood and adolescence came from listening to my family, and Auntie Léa herself, tell stories about her activist work. Social causes were Auntie Léa’s passion.²

My cousin Melanie Leavitt, a public historian who leads walking tours in Montreal about the Jewish left movement in the 1930s and 1940s describes Auntie Léa as a trailblazing feminist, labour organizer, communist, and peace activist whose activism spanned seven decades. In the 2024 podcast *recollections* produced by the Jewish Public Library about the history of the Jewish Left in Montreal, Leavitt says Auntie Léa pretty much saw every important moment in the Left throughout the twentieth

century. She was a fixture in marches and at protests well into the 1980s and 1990s and she never retired from her commitment to social justice work.

It was a lifelong commitment and it's interesting because Léa was somebody who was never one who would rest on her laurels of past accomplishments. She was always adapting and evolving with changing times and with changing concerns and always very open to looking at who are the present-day people who are being marginalized? "Where is my attention and my activism most needed now?" (Jewish Public Library, 2024c, *recollections*, Episode 3).

For Leavitt, Auntie Léa's openness to new ideas was one of her great strengths as an activist. It prevented her activism from becoming fossilized. Another great strength was Auntie Léa's ability to build bridges between communities. She spoke Yiddish, French, and English fluently, which enabled her to connect with multiple communities – Anglophone, Francophone, Jewish, Catholic, Protestant, middle-class, and working-class – first in the labour and suffrage movements of the 1930s and 1940s and then in the anti-war and women's movements between the 1960s and 1990s.

Born to a Jewish immigrant family on 3 November 1903, in Montreal, Auntie Léa grew up in the rural French-speaking community of Beauport, just outside Quebec City, where her parents ran a small general store. Like other Jewish families from Eastern Europe living in French-speaking communities, Auntie Léa learned to speak Yiddish at home, French to the neighbours, and English at school. She remained fluent in all three languages all her life and was able to easily switch back and forth among them.

Coming from a Jewish family, Auntie Léa and her eight brothers and sisters were not permitted to attend the local French Catholic elementary school in Beauport because they were not Catholic. In the early 1900s, the school system in Quebec was separated by religion. Children being raised in Catholic families went to Catholic elementary and secondary schools. Children raised in Protestant families went to Protestant schools.

At the time, Jews living in Quebec didn't have the same constitutional rights to education as Protestants and Catholics did. However, in 1903, the Quebec provincial government created a stipulation in the Education Act which designated Jews living in Quebec as "honorary Protestants" for educational purposes so that Protestant School Boards in the province could receive funding for Jewish students. This was because by 1901 the Jewish population in Montreal had reached 7,000 people, and there were more and more Jewish children going to Protestant schools. A decade later, the Montreal Jewish community quadrupled to 28,000 people and represented five percent of the city's population. While most Jewish immigrants in Quebec settled in Montreal, some families made homes in other cities and rural communities – Quebec City, Trois-Rivières, Sherbrooke, Joliette. Like the Roback family, most of these families made a living by running small retail businesses (Anctil and Woodsworth, 2021, pp. 62, 69).

Every day from Monday to Friday, Auntie Léa and her siblings took a train from their French-speaking Catholic community in Beauport to go to an English Protestant school in Quebec City. They started the school day by singing the British national anthem, "God Save the King," reciting the Protestant Lord's Prayer,

and singing one or two Christian hymns. At the end of the school day, they took a train back home to Beauport. Travelling between a Yiddish-speaking Jewish home, a French-speaking Catholic community, and an English-speaking Protestant school as a child gave Auntie Léa linguistic and cultural skills that became foundational to her future activist work in Quebec.

Beauport was a town that was Catholic as well as French-speaking, and when they arrived, the Roback family were the first and only Jewish family in the village. As Melanie Leavitt explains, growing up Jewish in Beauport assisted Auntie Léa later on in life to build bridges between communities.

She ends up spending her formative years from the age of around two years old until she's 15, living in this, immersed in this traditional French-Canadian rural setting. And because of that experience, she is exposed to [its] culture. She's exposed not only to the language, but also to understanding the cultural background of traditional early 20th century Quebec society. Something that very few other Jewish members of the Jewish community would be exposed to (Jewish Public Library, 2024c, *recollections*, Episode 3).

Auntie Léa's memories of growing up in Beauport, and her reflections on how her early family and community life influenced her later activism, are shared in Chapter 2.

In 1919, the Roback family moved from Beauport back to Montreal. Auntie Léa was 15, and she went to work for British American Dyeworks, a cleaning and dyeing company, as a front desk receptionist. The Robacks were a working-class family and

needed Auntie Léa's income to pay the bills. At British American Dyeworks, Auntie Léa learned about the social stratification between the English Protestant elite and the French Catholic working class in Montreal. Every day she witnessed the inequalities that existed between the elite English customers who had their maids and drivers bring in their clothes for cleaning and the poorly paid French workers who did the cleaning. As Melanie Leavitt explains:

Here you have these workers coming in [to British American Dyeworks]. It's oftentimes what would be referred to as 'la bonne', you know, the maid, the housekeeper, or the drivers coming in, and they're bringing in dresses that belong to the upper class, the elite, the bourgeoisie of Montreal society. And she's ... looking at these dresses that most likely cost what these working, like what the working class would make in a year ... [it's an] example that highlights ... not only class divisions, but how [class divisions] also fall along language lines and along religious lines as well (Jewish Public Library, 2024c, *recollections*, Episode 3).

In her book *Remembrances of Grandeur*, Margaret Westley describes the families who made up the Anglo-Protestant elite of Montreal at this time (Westley, 1991). The group was small and included people such as Sir Hugh Allan, Peter McGill, the Molsons, George Stephens, and Richard Angus, all of whom lived in mansions built on the slopes of Mount Royal, "the Mountain." Sir Hugh Allan was a shipping and railway magnate. Peter McGill founded the first railway company in Canada. The Molsons founded Canada's oldest and largest brewery. George Stephens was the

President of Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR). Richard Angus was one of the founding directors of CPR. Westley estimates that in the 1890s, between 50 and 150 Montrealers owned almost two-thirds of the wealth of the entire country.

After leaving British American Dyeworks, Auntie Léa became a cashier at His Majesty's Theatre, where she was introduced to the contemporary repertoire of English and French theatre. Already a devotee of Yiddish theatre and literature, Auntie Léa began to develop a lifelong passion for English and French theatre and literature as well. Five years later, at the age of 27, Auntie Léa left Montreal to study French literature at the Université de Grenoble in France, where she worked as an English tutor to pay for her classes. It was extremely unusual for a young woman in her twenties to sail from Montreal to Europe alone at the time, and a good story about Auntie Léa's boat trip appears in Chapter 3. Growing up listening to stories about Auntie Léa's adventures in Europe gave me a different vision of how a woman's life might be led. A young woman could get on a boat and travel to Europe to study and see the world. She didn't have to get married in her twenties, have children, and raise a family. In fact, Auntie Léa never married. She never wanted to.

I went out. I had boyfriends. I always said, "I'm damned if I'm going to get up to make breakfast for a guy. He can make breakfast for himself – *qu'il s'arrange*. I'll take all the loving I can get, and the attention, but the housecleaning and meals – that's not in my dictionary. I liked to be friendly with the guys and if they were nice, we made love – *après tout, c'est la vie* – and life was very exciting and interesting" (Schwartz and Roback, 1996/1997, p. 6).

Although Auntie Léa started a Bachelor of Arts degree in Grenoble, she didn't finish the program. It was an excellent experience, says Melanie Leavitt, but it didn't quite live up to what she had hoped it would be. By 1929, she had moved to Berlin.

And that's the next, I'd say, pivotal moment in her life as a left-wing activist. She joins her brother, her older brother Harry, who was studying medicine in Berlin. And once she's in Berlin, that's her exposure to ... the economic Great Depression, [and] also the rise of fascism (Jewish Public Library, 2024c, *recollections*, Episode 3).³

In Berlin, Auntie Léa enrolled in university again, learned German, explored the city and joined the Communist Party because it was the only political party that was taking concrete action against massive unemployment, the economic crisis, and fascism. The Socialists, for example, would hold meetings and talk about what might be done but didn't act. Auntie Léa always said she hated meetings. She wanted to act, to do something. Leavitt tells us:

... the only really legitimate response that she's seeing to this rise of fascism is from the Communist Party. And so that's where she first develops her interest in the kind of actions that they're taking on the streets. She participates in the May Day demonstrations and witnesses police brutality against the Left, but this sort of solidifies her political convictions.

She said it was a baptism by fire when she decides to join the Communist Party. She ends up officially joining the Communist Party in Berlin in 1931. And so, she's immersed in the ideology [the ideas and beliefs of Communism]. There's a lot of education about the issues

[of the day] (Jewish Public Library, 2024c, *recollections*, Episode 3).

Auntie Léa gained a political education when she joined the Communist Party in Berlin. As someone who was not afraid to step out of line, break the rules, and speak out against injustices, the Party provided her with a space and structure to act and push for change. After returning to Montreal from Berlin, Auntie Léa joined the Communist Party of Canada, but being a “free spirit” as documentary filmmaker Sophie Bissonnette described her to me, she also felt profoundly accountable to and in tune with the rank and file she worked with. Auntie Léa would become critical of the Party and eventually leave when she felt it no longer served the needs of the people whose causes she embraced.

When Hitler came into power in 1933, the political climate in Berlin became increasingly hostile to Jews living in Germany. Auntie Léa was a Jewish woman, a member of the Communist Party, and a foreigner. Her friends and comrades in the Communist movement advised her to leave Germany and return to Canada.

“She’s very resistant at first,” says Melanie Leavitt. “She’s somebody who is very tenacious. She is fearless. She always wants to be on the front lines and fighting against injustice. But she quickly realizes that she has to return to Canada” (Jewish Public Library, 2024c, *recollections*, Episode 3).

So, at the end of 1932, Auntie Léa escaped Germany “by the skin of [her] teeth” (Weisbord, 2022, p.46) and returned to Montreal, which had become a very different city from the one she’d left in the 1920s. The Jewish community she returned to was also different from the one she left. Melanie Leavitt explains:

She's arriving back at a time when there is rampant poverty and unemployment and major suffering. But also at the same time, because of the dire circumstances, there's also a groundswell of support for various different left-wing movements ... she's able to return to a Montreal and a Jewish left-wing Montreal that's already actively engaged.

And that's when she joins into the activities and the organizing that's taking place here by the Communist Party here in Montreal and in Quebec. And immediately, you know, she meets somebody like Fred Rose, who at the time was the leader of the Quebec Division of the Communist Party. And so, it's right away back into the heart of the action (Jewish Public Library, 2024c, *recollections*, Episode 3).

In Chapter 3, I share what Auntie Léa learned during her years in Berlin. I also share her stories about returning to Montreal and her work for the Communist Party.

As a member of the Communist Party in Montreal, Auntie Léa opened a leftist bookstore. Her work for the Party led to an invitation to become the Educational Director of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). In this position, Auntie Léa recruited thousands of women members for the ILGWU. Then in 1937, she co-led 5,000 garment workers – most of them women – on a three-week strike for better pay and working conditions. After the strike was over, Auntie Léa worked for the ILGWU as a Grievance Officer. When she left the ILGWU in 1939, Auntie Léa went to work at the RCA factory in St. Henri and organized the workers there. These accomplishments are

discussed in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, I discuss Auntie Léa's activist work in the Quebec suffrage movement, peace movement, anti-apartheid movement, anti-pornography movement, and access to abortion movement.

Auntie Léa remained an activist well into her 80s and 90s. In the last chapter, I talk about the ways Auntie Léa lived out the last years of her life and discuss the many tributes and honours she has received for her work. I also discuss the way Auntie Léa's activism continues to live on in the generations of educators and activists who have followed her.

Perspectives in the biography

Intersectionality

As an activist who was always adapting and evolving with changing times, Auntie Léa was never a single-issue activist. She understood the importance of what today is known as "intersectionality." The idea of intersectionality emerged in the early 1980s and is often credited to Audre Lorde who was a Black feminist lesbian scholar and poet from the United States. Lorde challenged her readers to think about the ways identity, politics and activism around different social identities and issues were connected and related to each other. In her essay, "There is No Hierarchy of Oppressions" (1983) for example, Lorde argued it was not possible to gain a meaningful picture or understanding of a person's experience by only examining a single dimension of their identity, for example, their racial or sexual identity. It was also not possible to gain a meaningful understanding of the discrimination or oppression a person was facing without considering multiple dimensions of their identity. Lorde famously wrote:

Any attack against Black people is a lesbian and gay issue, because I and thousands of other Black women are part of the lesbian community. Any attack against lesbians and gays is a Black issue, because thousands of lesbians and gay men are Black. There is no hierarchy of oppression (Lorde, 1983, pp. 306–307).

Like Audre Lorde, Auntie Léa believed there was no hierarchy of oppression, worked on a number of social issues at once and addressed the different layers of oppression in each struggle. For example, one of the first issues Auntie Léa confronted as a union activist in the 1930s was sexual harassment – decades before the MeToo movement against sexual violence began in the mid-2000s.⁴ In 1937, she brought up the issue of sexual harassment as a key grievance of the women workers during the labour strike of the garment workers. After the strike, as a Grievance Officer for the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union, she confronted the racism of the garment industry owners. In Chapters 4 and 5, I share stories about Auntie Léa's intersectional activism around workers' rights, sexism, and racism in the 1930s and 1940s.

In researching and writing this biography of Auntie Léa's life and intersectional activism, I have focused on moments that illustrate her ability to cross borders and build bridges between Montreal's Yiddish, French, and English-speaking communities. I have also focused on moments that show how Auntie Léa's social justice work was characterized by activist community care. My interest in writing about inter-community connection and activist care is grounded in my desire to share how crossing borders and practices of care are a continuing important force in social justice advocacy.

Border crossing

The practice of border crossing is often traced to the writing of Gloria Anzaldúa (1942–2004), who was a scholar of (American) Chicana cultural theory, feminist theory, and queer theory. Self-described as a “queer Chicana Tejana feminist patlache poet, fictionist, and cultural theorist” (Trujillo, 1997), Anzaldúa was interested in analysing the everyday experiences of people who, like herself, straddled and crossed borders of race, ethnicity, language, gender, sexuality, and geography (Anzaldúa, 2018).

Like Anzaldúa, psychologist Maria Root is interested in the ways people living in multilingual, multicultural, and multiracial families and communities cross borders. Root’s (1996) research provides examples of the different ways people choose to border cross. Some people “bridge” linguistic, cultural, racial, and national borders by creating meaningful connections in two or more communities and by moving back and forth between them. Others camp out or put down roots in one community for extended periods of time and make their way into other camps from time to time. Alternatively, some people sit on the border between communities and use their experiences on that border as a central reference point for living their lives. Others foreground particular identities and background others in different situations or contexts. Some people choose to make use of more than one of these border crossing practices.

Auntie Léa never chose to put down roots in just one community. Instead, she made use of the three other practices Root describes to create inter-community connection, solidarity and care. I discuss Auntie Léa’s practices of border crossing

throughout the biography and describe the ways they allowed her to build bridges between diverse communities.

Activist community care

While Auntie Léa's activism took place in the streets and union halls, my own activist work has taken place in classrooms and the theatre. My teaching and research work as a professor at the University of Toronto, and my playwriting and theatre work as the Founder and Artistic Director of Gailey Road Productions, have focused on equity and justice in education, particularly around contemporary queer and trans activism in schools. Recently I have also engaged in archival research around queer and trans academic and community activism between the late 1940s and 1980s.⁵ Many of the activist conversations I have participated in about queer and trans activism have made use of the concept of activist community care.

Activist community care practices are different from traditional individual practices of care work often carried out by women. Built on the ideas put forward by queer women of colour in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., hooks, 2000; Lorde, 1983/2021; Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1981/2015), activist community care practices operate in the absence of institutional support – for example, the absence of healthcare support (Fink, 2021; Owis, 2024; Piepzn-Samarasinha, 2018). Working within networks found within their own communities, activists find ways of providing people with the resources they need without casting judgement or causing shame (Malatino, 2020).

Auntie Léa's social justice work included practices of activist community care. For example, in the 1930s and 1940s, she provided

young women workers dealing with unwanted pregnancies with referrals to doctors for safer abortions. She also supported young women who chose to pursue their pregnancies in challenging circumstances. This care work was not part of her mandate as a union grievance officer. Auntie Léa chose to care for the women who came to her for help as part of her activist work.

Sources used in writing the biography

Archival research

My research for this biography began in January 2024 when I read through a great deal of the archival materials in Auntie Léa's dossier at the Jewish Public Library in Montreal. While I grew up in Montreal, I currently live in Toronto. During my visit to the library, I worked with community archivist Sam Pappas and collected both French and English interviews with Auntie Léa. Some of the interviews were audio-recorded; others were published in newspaper and magazine articles. Most of the interviews were undertaken in French and needed to be translated into English. I used the artificial intelligence program ChatGPT 4.0 to translate the French interview excerpts I've shared in this biography.

This is the first biography of Auntie Léa that has been written and published in English. There are, however, two superb biographical projects that have been undertaken in French. The first is a set of interviews undertaken in the 1980s by Quebec sociologist and activist Nicole Lacelle. They have been published alongside another set of interviews with union organizer Madeleine Parent, a friend and colleague of Auntie Léa's, in Lacelle's book *Entretiens*

avec Madeleine Parent et Léa Roback. Entretiens was first published in 1988 and then reprinted in a second edition in 2005. My citations come from the second edition.

The second French biography project is a documentary film by Quebec filmmaker and activist Sophie Bissonnette, which was filmed in the late 1980s. *Des lumières dans la grande noirceur/ A vision in the darkness* premiered in 1991 and won the 1992 Cinema Award from the Office of Social Communications, the 1992 Sequences Award, and an honorary mention at the 1992 Golden Gate Awards in San Francisco.

The French title of Bissonnette's film *Des lumières dans la grande noirceur* can be literally translated into English as "The Lights in the Great Darkness." In Quebec, the period known as *la Grande Noirceur*/the Great Darkness refers to the 19 years Maurice Duplessis was premier of the province of Quebec (1936–1939, 1944–1959). The name captures the many oppressive laws and policies Duplessis put into place during his time as premier. It also captures the ways many of the people in Quebec struggled during the years he was in power. The "lights" in the Great Darkness were activists like my Auntie Léa who protested and fought against many of the oppressive laws and policies that characterized the Duplessis government.

I saw Sophie Bissonnette's film *Des lumières dans la grande noirceur/A vision in the darkness* at two film festivals in 1991: one in Toronto and one in Quebec City. For the Quebec City screening, I travelled with my Auntie Léa and Sophie Bissonnette from Montreal to Quebec City. We took the bus. Before the screening, we were invited to lunch by my great-aunt Annie Pedvis

who lived in Quebec City. Auntie Annie wanted to celebrate Bissonnette and Auntie Léa's achievement. "We're proud of you," Auntie Annie told Auntie Léa.

Des lumières dans la grande noirceur has been made available with English subtitles for free by La Cinémathèque Québécoise.⁶ Auntie Léa's stories about her life of activism are as compelling today as they were 35 years ago. I have included excerpts from Bissonnette's documentary film in this biography, using the English subtitles. In 2023, Sophie Bissonnette worked with historian Denyse Baillargeon to create a dossier of additional interview material that was not included in the film. The dossier is available in both French and English on a website created by La Cinémathèque Québécoise. English transcripts of the interviews, created by a professional translator, are available on the English website. I have used these translations when quoting from the additional interview material in the dossier.

During my first archival visit to the Jewish Public Library archives in January 2024, I had the opportunity to have dinner with Sophie Bissonnette and talk to her about this biography project. We discussed the way Sophie used the stories Auntie Léa shared with her to discuss the history of the activism of working-class urban women in Montreal. This was the perspective she took when she interviewed Auntie Léa and edited the interviews into a compelling documentary. Bissonnette encouraged me to find and articulate my own reasons for wanting to share stories about Auntie Léa's activist life and work. I have three.

The first, mentioned earlier, has to do with my desire to discuss the importance of building bridges and crossing borders in

activism work. Today, we live in a political moment that has produced polarized views around human rights issues and a lack of dialogue. Auntie Léa's ability to cross linguistic, religious, cultural and class borders to advocate for workers' and women's rights makes a significant contribution to current conversations around human rights, equity, activism and education. Auntie Léa's particular gifts for border crossing and providing activist community care thread themselves through each of the chapters of the book. They provide me with a perspective for sharing stories of Auntie Léa's life and activism.

My second reason for writing this biography has to do with wanting to share the stories of Auntie Léa's life and work with English-speaking audiences. Because most of the interviews and biography projects that feature Auntie Léa's work are in French, many activists, university students, and educators in English-speaking Canada (and elsewhere) have never heard Auntie Léa talk about how she and others fought for workers' rights and for women's rights for seven decades in the twentieth century. I hope this biography will provide an opportunity for them to do so. I also hope it provides them with a preliminary understanding of Quebec and Canada's complex political and gender history in the twentieth century.

Finally, I decided to write this biography to honour Auntie Léa's desire to share stories of her activism with future generations of activists and educators. At the Quebec City premiere of *Des lumières dans la grande noirceur/A vision in the darkness* I remember someone in the audience asking Auntie Léa why she had agreed to participate in Bissonnette's documentary film. Auntie

Léa said she wanted young people to know about the activist achievements that took place even in the most repressive of political times. If stories about Auntie Léa's lifelong activism could help the next generation learn about these achievements, she wanted to support Bissonnette's project. Twenty-five years after Bissonnette's film first came out, I believe stories about Auntie Léa's life and activism have the power to both educate and inspire readers in English Canada.

Auntie Léa loved reading and had a strong belief in the importance of education. This is something we share. I have worked as a professor at the University of Toronto for over 30 years conducting research and educating university students, mostly new teachers, about pursuing equity in schools. I'm excited about sharing stories about Auntie Léa's activist life and work with other educators, students, and community activists.

During my first archival research visit to Montreal, I also spent time with Melanie Leavitt, who took me on a private walking tour about the Jewish left movement, focusing on the work Auntie Léa accomplished in the 1930s and 1940s. Sam Pappas, the community archivist at the Jewish Public Library, joined us. After the tour, we went for coffee, and Melanie told us the story of how she first met Auntie Léa. Melanie was introduced to her cousin Léa at a family bar mitzvah when she was 7 years old.⁷ She had heard about Auntie Léa's activism from her mother Barbara Leavitt, and when she was introduced to Léa, Melanie told her that she wanted to become an activist as well.

"Mais, c'est formidable!" said Auntie Léa. "Well, that's fantastic!"