

A travel book that guides readers around the world to places where rock stars, famous composers, renowned authors, Nobel Prize winners and other acclaimed individuals lived, died, interred or just were inspired by the surroundings.

**HOBNOBBING WITH GHOSTS II:
A LYRIC AND LITERATURE JUNKIE TRAVELS THE WORLD**
By Steve Bergsman

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HOBNOBBING WITH GHOSTS II

A Lyric and Literature Junkie Travels the World



Steve Bergsman

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MY FATHER & DASHIELL HAMMETT

DUTCH HARBOR, ALEUTIAN ISLANDS

When I walked outside the front door of my hotel, I strolled just a few yards to the end of the driveway where a small stunted concrete structure sat partly obscured by Arctic wildflowers. For anyone in the military, it was obvious the concrete bulk was a pillbox, a place for defenders to fire on the enemy. Pillboxes, bunkers, and gun placements are common sights in Dutch Harbor, an Aleutian Island port built over the infrastructure of its World War II past.

If you don't remember your history, the only places in the U.S. that were actually bombed and occupied by the enemy during the last world war were a series of craggy isles in the great island chain of Alaska called the Aleutians.

On June 3 and 4, 1942, just six months after Pearl Harbor, Japanese planes swooped low over Dutch Harbor, bombing U.S. Army and Naval installations, killing and wounding over 100 civilians and servicemen. Three days later, the Japanese invaded two other Aleutian Islands, Kiska and Attu.

My father, a young soldier, was expecting to be sent to the South Pacific, but after the attack on the Aleutians, his outfit was quickly shipped to Dutch Harbor. He was a communications specialist and eventually transferred to another island, Adak, where he spent the rest of the war.

He never spoke about the war years, so I never learned if he knew the famed mystery writer Dashiell Hammett, who was also posted to Adak. My father was a sergeant and Hammett was either a corporal or

a sergeant. The island was not very big that they would not have met and it seemed like that their posting was over the same period of time.

Hammett is well known for his detective novels *The Maltese Falcon* and *Thin Man*, but also composed a booklet called *The Battle of the Aleutians*. He wrote:

And then trouble came, a williwaw, the sudden wild wind of the Aleutians. Nobody knows how hard the wind can blow along these islands where the Bering meets the Pacific . . . The first morning, the wind stopped landing operations, with only a portion of our force ashore and by noon had piled many of the landing boats on the beach.

Hammett died in 1961 at the age of 67. My father was a much younger man at the time and died much later in January 2005 at the age of 86, having never returned to the Aleutians. The closest he ever came was a cruise through the Inner Passage to Anchorage.

Six months after his death, I decided to journey to the Aleutians as a long-deserved salute to my father's war years.

Dutch Harbor is a thriving seaport of 4,500 people, but when the winter fishing season arrives, the population doubles as it is a large seafood processing venue. Although even maps list the port as Dutch Harbor, the city is officially Unalaska, and it was built happenstance across the small island of Amaknak and the larger island, also called Unalaska.

The islands are volcanic in origin but were reshaped by glacial activity, so the topography hunches and then drops into steep mountains and deep inlets. The Dutch Harbor bays are all deep-water, which is why the location was occupied by U.S. military as the country geared up for war. After the aerial bombing of the city and Aleutian invasions, the military buildup was enormous, with thousands of soldiers and sailors moving in, first to prepare for the recapture of Attu and Kiska (1943), and then for protective measures.

While the military is gone from Dutch Harbor, much of the infrastructure remains. The cement buildings still stand, redeveloped for other uses. The wooden structures are in varying degrees of dilapidation, some upright but many simply piles of weathered timber.

Think of Dutch Harbor as living battlefield museum.

I'd like to say I have a reference point as to what Dutch Harbor looked like during the war years, but my father never spoke of his time in the service and what I learned was picked up from bits and pieces of conversation. I can't even check whether my memory of my father's military recollections are correct since he passed away.

Bobbie Lekanoff, my guide to Dutch Harbor military sites, drives a big van. I would say it's an older model, but that wouldn't mean much in a community where the vehicles are all old—or look it. Aleutian weather varies slightly from stormy to overcast, and only the main thoroughfares of Dutch Harbor are paved. But what the heck! All roads end a mile beyond city limits anyway.

Bobbie tells me that many soldiers return to visit Dutch Harbor, and just before my journey, she guided a veteran of the Aleutian campaign around town. Many of the fortifications, bunkers, and buildings remain, and the old soldier immediately recognized his military life, down to the actual pillbox where he pulled guard duty.

The first bombing of Dutch Harbor took 20 minutes as a Japanese force of about 35 planes encountered heavier ground fire than expected. One soldier recounted, "The first plane peeled off toward Fort Mears and opened fire, bugles sounded up and down Unalaska Valle, and men scurried into trenches and foxholes." Some of the trenches can still be seen, a jagged scar on the hillsides, and at least one bomb crater remains within the city limits.

The best place to get a sense of the military buildup of Dutch Harbor is the site of Fort Schwatka, now a National Historic Area. The fort is located on a high mountain ridge that oversaw the entrance to the busy Iliuliuk Bay. To get there, Bobbie slowly prompted her van up a steep set of switchbacks to a highland area that once housed 350

troops in Quonset huts, barracks, and cabanas. Along the coast are gun mounts, bunkers, battery command stations, and tunnels. These were all built of concrete, and some were underground. Most of this infrastructure is still in good shape. Of the barracks and cabanas (slang for housing units), only one structure still stands, the rest eventually succumbing to the elements. Nothing remains but collapsed wood piles and jutting pieces of metal. The mess hall can easily be discerned because the metal stoves sit rusting in the open.

The best place to learn what happened in the war years is the town's excellent military museum located in the Navy's old Aerology Building. The city's Museum of the Aleutians rose from the original foundation of a World War II warehouse.

Dutch Harbor today is a thriving city and a major seafood-processing center. For a brief understanding of the sea's wealth around the Aleutians, I recommend that visitors should "go fish!" I hooked up with Tammie Peterson, who captains her own charter fishing boat. Not only was the whale watching spectacular, but when it came to the business of day, we couldn't pull in the halibut, cod, and flounder fast enough. My wife alone caught about a dozen fish, while one young woman pulled in a 60-pound halibut. By the way, the halibut sport-fishing record—caught in Aleutian waters—notched 459 pounds. You can see the behemoth stuffed and hung in all its massive glory on the wall at City Hall.

While in the Aleutians, Hammett wrote letters to playwright Lillian Hellman. My father wrote letters to my mother, who was working at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Hammett and my father served until the end of the war in 1945, with Hammett being sent to Fort Richardson on mainland Alaska while my father was sent to Fort Bliss in Texas. Ironically, they both were specialists in communications, Hammett with the written word and my father with the existing technology of the time.

HONORING LEONARD COHEN MONTREAL, QUEBEC

When the *Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal* approached native son Leonard Cohen about a collaborative exhibit, the famed singer, songwriter, and poet took two days to decide. He finally told the museum, sure, but he wouldn't be attending. It was his most salient prediction. He died on November 7, 2016.

I flew to Montreal to attend the city's celebration of Leonard Cohen and the opening of the contemporary art museum's homage, which happened on the anniversary of his death. I arrived too late for the tribute concert—with such luminaries as Sting, Elvis Costello, k.d. lang, Feist, Philip Glass, and many more celebrating his music—but it was quite easy to see the affection the city had for Cohen as there were two immense portraits of the singer looming over the commercial area and his old neighborhood. The portraits were painted on the outside walls of multi-story buildings. One in the shopping area was at least 10 stories high.

The contemporary art museum's celebration of Cohen was brilliant and comprehensive as it joined many disciplines, including sound, video, and modern dance. The exhibit called *Leonard Cohen: A Crack in Everything* was an absolute maze. Every stop, including a sensory-deprivation room with animation from Israeli director Ari Folman, who made the award-winning animated feature *Waltz with Bashir*, was designed to make one both observe and listen. I caught up with Folman, who told me he loved Montreal as “it's so calm, peaceful, and cultural.” He was surprised when the museum contacted him about contributing, but glad they did so, as he said, “I just adore

the guy. The way Leonard Cohen had invented himself so many times from the beginning was incredible.”

Probably the most unusual exhibit was a dance by maverick choreographer Clara Furey, who performed *When Even The*, a tribute to Leonard Cohen’s poems that began with this line: “Your breasts are like.” Furey performed in blue jeans and nothing more. I think Leonard Cohen would have appreciated the dance.

To fully appreciate Leonard Cohen, I took a walking tour of his neighborhoods and haunts. To do that I had to find an appropriate cicerone who turned out to be licensed guide Darren Shore.

Since Leonard Cohen was Jewish and grew up in Montreal at a time when the Jewish community was extremely vibrant with budding entrepreneurs (the Bronfman family of Seagram’s liquors), writers (Mordecai Richler), actors (William Shatner), and songwriters like Cohen, I began my quest by having lunch at Schwartz’s Deli on St. Laurent Boulevard, which has been around since 1928 and is now 50% owned by singer Celine Dion, also from Quebec. When Darren showed up, he guided me across the street to the Main and said this was Leonard’s preferred deli, where he enjoyed the smoked meats (pastrami) and baby-back ribs. If you’re nice, the waitress will show you Cohen’s favorite booth.

Cohen’s house was a very plebian abode in a Portuguese community at 28 Rue Vallières across a narrow road from Portuguese Park, a neighborhood enclave. In an old Leonard Cohen documentary, you can see him hanging out in the park. Cohen’s son still lives in the home, and on the anniversary of Leonard’s death, candles and flowers are laid on his doorstep.

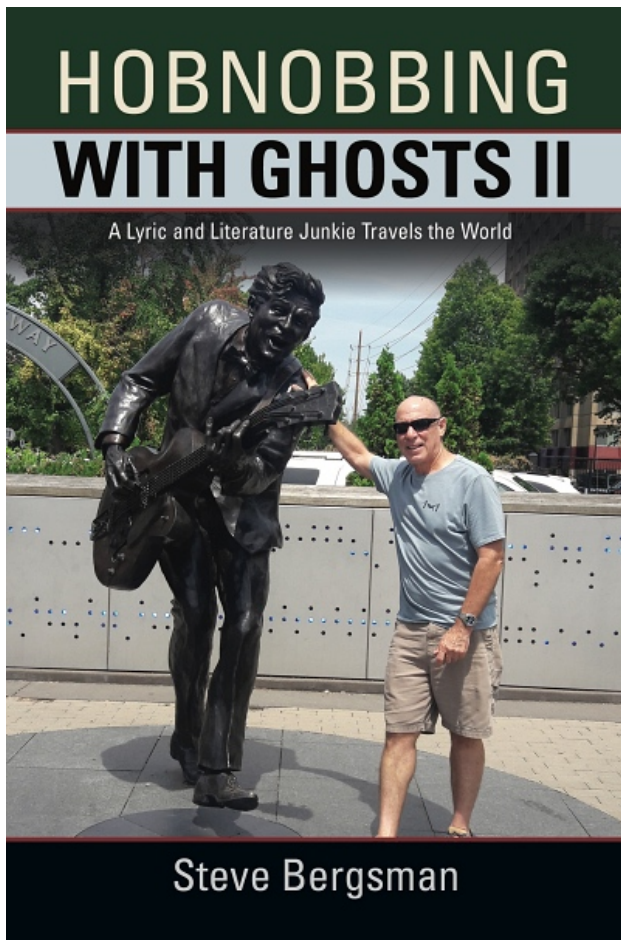
Cohen’s life in his native city was tied up in Montreal’s Jewish neighborhood, now the multi-cultural Mile End. Darren pointed out numerous points of interest including the Shubert Baths built in 1929, when the surrounding apartments were all cold-water flats and erotic stores that were once Yiddish theatres. Two of the more interesting stops are the Baron Bing High School, where Mordecai Richler and William Shatner attended and is now a community center, and

Wilensky's, a sandwich shop that first opened in 1932 that not only was a Cohen hangout, but immortalized by Mordecai Richler in his book *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*. A scene in the movie was shot there as well.

At this point on the Leonard Cohen quest, the locations are all east of Mount Royale Park. Hop in a cab and head toward the park. On the mountain park's border, in Outremont, where wealthy French-speaking citizens lived, head to the Mount Royale Jewish Cemetery and not far inside the gates, you'll see a tombstone busy with flowers, books, and all sorts of dedications. This is the gravesite of Leonard Cohen, buried at his bequest next to the resting places of his parents and grandparents.

Hop back in the cab and travel over the top of the park to Westmount, where wealthy English-speaking Montreal inhabitants once lived. Cohen grew up in Westmount. His family moved to a basic bourgeois house at 599 Belmont Street. Depending on how in-depth you want your tour, you can also visit the Congregation Shaar Hashomayim synagogue, which the Cohen family attended, and Westmount High School, from which he graduated.

For years at a time, Cohen lived elsewhere, but always returned to his hometown. He once said he was suspicious of anyone who didn't like Montreal. My sentiments exactly!



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