

From the start Lenny loved music. But his father insisted that music was no career, and he wanted Lenny to follow him into business. Beginning with Leonard Bernstein's childhood and ending with his triumphant conducting debut when he was just twenty-five, *Music Was IT* shows how the famed composer of *West Side Story* and conductor of the New York Philharmonic always knew his life would be about music.

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★ "Highly readable and inspiring."

—*Booklist*, starred review

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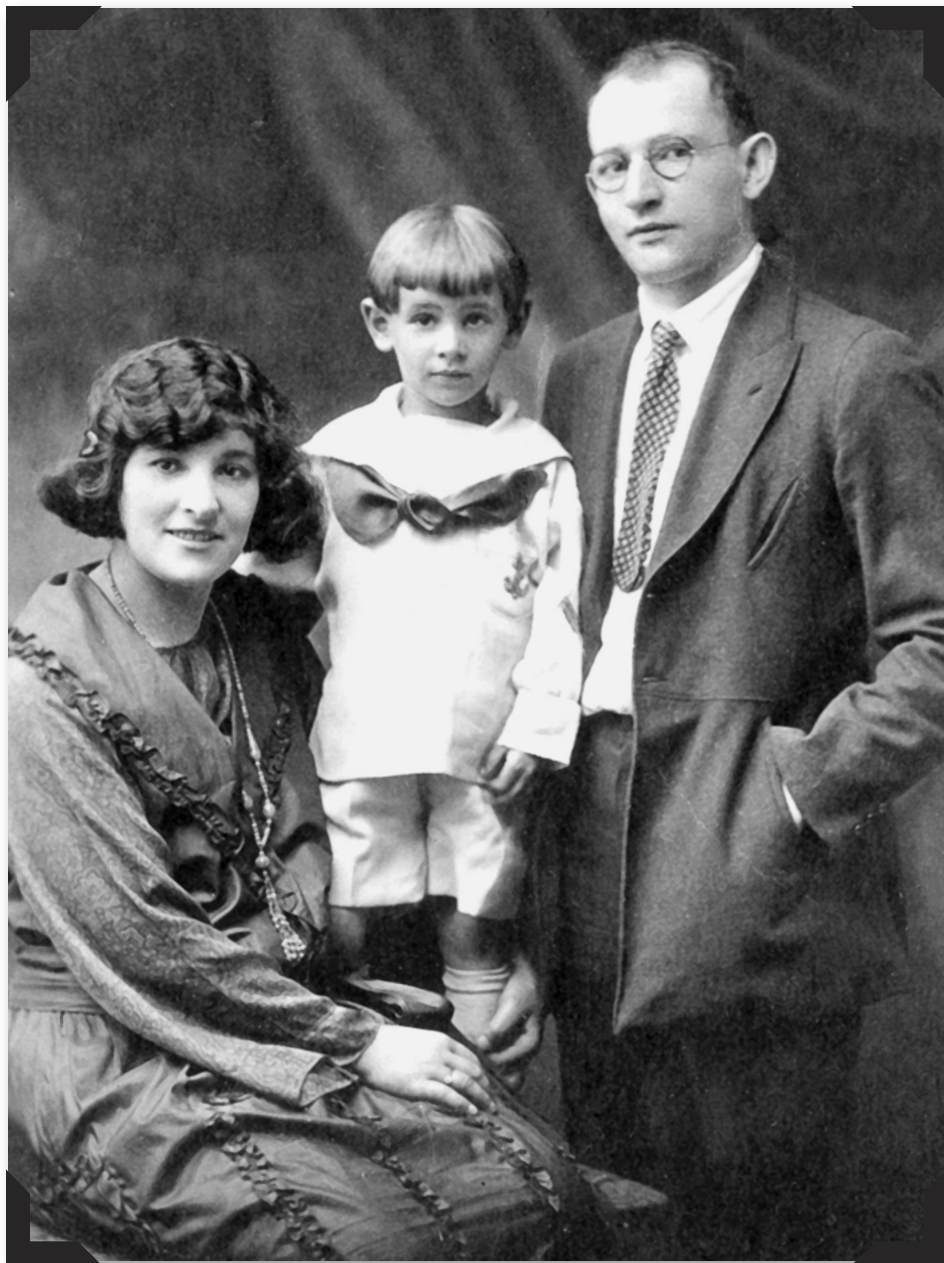
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From the start Leonard loved music. When he was about two years old, his parents, Sam and Jennie, stayed with friends who had a summer house at Revere Beach near Boston. The friends had a piano in the living room, and whenever Leonard heard someone playing, he pressed his ear to the closed door. “Moynik!” he shouted, his own word for music.

At home in Mattapan, a suburb of Boston, he would cry “Moynik!” with tears running down his face until his mother put a record on the windup Victrola. Then Lenny, as he was called, would stop crying and listen happily. The Victrola was Lenny’s faithful companion and, often, his only playmate.

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Lenny at age four with his parents, Jennie and Samuel.

Lenny was a sickly boy with asthma. “Every time he had an attack,” said his mother, “we thought he was going to die.” She stayed up all night “with steam kettles and hot towels, helping him to breathe.” If he so much as sneezed or seemed to be coming down with a cold, she kept him indoors. At ages four and five, Lenny amused himself by sitting at the window of the front room and watching people pass by as he listened to the Victrola. One of his favorite tunes was a popular song called “Oh by Jingo”: “Oh by jingo! Oh by gee!/ You’re the only girl for me.” He also enjoyed recordings of opera singers and Jewish cantors. From his perch indoors, he would tap rhythmically on the windowsill in time to the music, so his mother called him her “windowsill pianist.”

In 1923, when he was five, his sister was born. Their mother named her Shirley Anne, after Anne Shirley, the heroine of her favorite book, *Anne of Green Gables*, and the actress Anne Shirley, who later starred in the movie version. For the first few years until the family rented a larger apartment, Lenny and Shirley shared a room. She became his closest ally, and they thought of themselves as a separate family.

During Lenny’s childhood his greatest musical influence came from the synagogue. Because his father was a deeply religious man, the family joined Temple Mishkan Tefila and went to services on Friday nights, the big music night. Mishkan Tefila was a conservative congregation that allowed an organ and a mixed choir of men and women. The music moved Lenny deeply and brought tears to his eyes. The

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Young Lenny and Shirley.

cantor sang “the ancient tunes,” Lenny remembered. “Then the organ would start and then the choir would begin with its colors, and I just began to get crazed with the sound of choral music.” The organist and choirmaster was Professor Solomon Braslavsky, a musician trained in Vienna. Braslavsky was also a composer and performed many of his own compositions during services. Once he created an arrangement of the hymn “Adon Olam” (“Lord of the World”) for High Holy Days. “Arrangement is too small a word,” said Lenny. “It was a great composition. I knew every note of it because I heard it every year; it was like an opera.” Later as an adult, Lenny said that Braslavsky provided him

with “the first real music I heard.” In a letter to Braslavsky he wrote, “I never forget the tremendous influence you and your music made on me when I was a youngster.”

For a long time Lenny thought of becoming a rabbi. His ancestors on his father’s side were scholarly rabbis. Sam’s Judaism pervaded the household. Born in the town of Beresdiv in the Russian Ukraine and raised as a Hasidic Orthodox Jew, Sam had lived in a *shtetl*, a Jewish village. At age sixteen he had come to America against his parents’ wishes. Sam struggled to make a good living. First he cleaned fish in a market in New York City, then he worked at his uncle’s barbershop in



Solomon Braslavsky (with outstretched arm) with Jewish musicians in Europe.

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Connecticut. Finally he wound up selling barber and beauty supplies for a company in Boston.

In 1923 Sam opened his own business, the Samuel Bernstein Hair Company. Mostly he made and sold wigs to Orthodox Jewish women, who were traditionally required to keep their own hair covered. In 1927 his business grew when he bought a license to sell a new invention—the Frederics Permanent Wave machine for curling



Miss America receives a permanent wave with the newfangled permanent wave machine in 1926.

women's hair. His was the only company in New England that sold the machine, and beauty parlors swamped him with orders. "It was what you call the American Dream coming true," said Sam.

Lenny's mother, Jennie, was also Jewish and had emigrated from the Old Country when she was six years old. As a little girl in Russia, she liked to wander through non-Jewish parts of town, listening to strolling street musicians. Once she followed the musicians and got lost. She fell asleep in a park, and the next morning a czarist policeman dragged her home. As a teenager in America,



Lenny with his parents, Samuel and Jennie, and his sister, Shirley, around 1933.

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Jennie was forced to drop out of school and work in the Massachusetts textile mills to help support her family. Then she married and started raising her own children.

Like many other Jewish immigrant families, the Bernsteins moved frequently to bigger apartments in better areas as Sam's income increased. By the time Lenny was nine, they were living in Roxbury. On the way home from school, bigger boys chased him. Frail and skinny, Lenny didn't know how to fight back.

Then when he was ten, a miracle happened. Almost overnight his health improved, he shot up in height to be the tallest boy on the block, and he could run faster than anyone else.

All because of a piano.