

Chapter 11. Trip to Mexico

I

After Dina died, Malvina again attempted to locate her brother Stashek in Mexico. Stashek had rarely answered her previous letters, and Dina had often groaned despairingly, “*De indianer ot em geharget!*” (The Indians must have killed him.)

This time, however, Malvina did get a reply. Stashek was now living in Mexico City. He ran a thriving business selling electrical equipment and radio parts in the center of town. He and his wife Gucia (whom he had married back in Poland before coming to Mexico) had a son Alejandro, now seven years old. They lived directly across the street from Chapultepec, in a very large apartment overlooking the famous park.

In his letter he begged Malvina’s forgiveness for the many years of silence and neglect, and asked her to come visit. Malvina and Jacques decided that it would be good for

her to get away, especially after the ordeal of Dina's death. This was the last summer that Josy could travel for half-fare, since she was now eleven years old. Jacques had only two weeks of vacation a year and was unable to join them, but they decided that Malvina and Josy should go in June and spend the entire summer vacation in Mexico.

Malvina started preparing early in March. She wrote Stashek about her plans and received a warm letter of welcome in return. He asked if she could buy and bring silk blouses for his wife. Silk was quite expensive in Mexico, he told her. Malvina bought several yards of silk and went to her dressmaker, Mrs. Wyman. She asked for ten silk blouses to be made for Gucia, as well as several travel outfits for Josy and herself.

"Mrs. Wyman is a wonderful dressmaker," Malvina explained to Josy. "Her lines, the way she sews, are so artistic. Yes, she happens to be very slow and not too reliable, but it's worth the wait when you try on the finished garment!"

Josy had already been taken to Mrs. Wyman to have dresses made. She detested the experience. The dressmaker would talk for hours at a time, while the stitching lay idly in her lap. Then would come weeks of telephone calls on the part of Malvina, pleading, scolding, insisting, cajoling, all to no avail. Garments were usually completed nearly a year later, and always with trouble and at the last minute before a deadline.

"The trouble is," Josy replied to Malvina, "that you hardly ever see anything finished. It can take Mrs. Wyman years, and by then, the dress doesn't feel new anymore, and it's no fun to wear it!"

"Never mind," Malvina responded. "You must learn to be more patient. And besides, this time she has a deadline. She knows we're leaving for Mexico in June, so she *has* to be ready."

Famous last words, Josy thought. Mrs. Wyman, true to her usual style, kept procrastinating. Week after week, the sewing remained untouched. No work was ever performed between their visits. Each Saturday they sat in her upstairs sewing room, which was always cluttered with enormous bolts of cloth, and where one could never be sure if a pin or needle might be sticking out from a seat. Mrs. Wyman would baste a few stitches and then launch into a lengthy narrative. This was always about herself, her poverty, and the distresses that she and her family had to endure. Josy, sitting idly by while the two women gossiped, fidgeted until she could stand it no longer. One time, she blurted out, "Maybe you could sew while you're talking?"

Mrs. Wyman glared at Josy, her eyes steely pinpoints behind her glasses, and snapped, "Right now we're telling stories! Don't interrupt!"

Those Saturdays spent in Mrs. Wyman's upstairs bedroom, crammed amid the sewing machine, countless bales of fabric, and numerous unfinished garments of many sizes and colors, were pure torture for Josy.

When June arrived, nothing had been completed. On the last Saturday morning before their departure, Malvina visited Mrs. Wyman without Josy. Later she recounted how more than a dozen garments had lain strewn about the bedroom, each in a varied state of completion. With Malvina nagging at her, Mrs. Wyman worked feverishly on one article of clothing after another. By suppertime, with Malvina sitting close by to make sure that the dressmaker kept to her task, she had completed only a few of the planned garments. However, the fabrics for Gucia's blouses remained unopened in their original packing.

"Never mind!" Malvina sighed. "I'll take those with me the way they are!"

"But you can't" pleaded Mrs. Wyman. "They're not done! Give me just one more week! No, another two days. I swear. I promise on the heads of my children that they'll be done!"

With no time remaining for another visit, Malvina paid for the work that had been completed and left carrying the ten unopened bolts of silk in a huge shopping bag.

II

In early June, Malvina and Josy set out for their trip. The Sokoloffs drove them to New York. Jacques went along, although he remained behind once the boat left. They drove directly to the wharf, where the steamship *SS Siboney* lay at anchor, preparing for departure. A six-hour stop at Havana, Cuba, was on the itinerary, with the final destination being Vera Cruz, Mexico. This was the same steamship line that had owned the *Morrow Castle*, another liner that had sunk off the coast of New Jersey just the year before.

Malvina's cousin Helen Margolius from Paterson, New Jersey came to the pier to wish them good-bye. Yetta Davidson (Malvina's friend from Chicago who was now living in New York City) also met them there to wish them a good trip. Yetta had her ten-year-old son Uryon with her. Uryon, whom Josy disliked intensely because he had often punched her and fought with her when they were younger, managed to remain well behaved this time. At his mother's prodding, he grudgingly gave Josy a small anthology of poems. Everybody toured the ship, took pictures, and inspected the cabin that Josy and



Helen Margolius, Josy, Jacques, and Emma Sokoloff.

her mother were to share. Finally, a loud booming noise from the foghorn announced that it was time for all visitors to leave the ship. They said their farewells. The guests got off, remaining on the pier to wave good-bye, and afterward the ship set sail. It steamed out of New York Harbor, gliding past the Statue of Liberty, which Josy had never seen before. It was a glorious sight.

The *Siboney* was an elegant vessel. Several levels high, it sported wide decks, a card-and-game room, and several shuffleboard courts on the upper level. A majestic staircase led downstairs to the dining room, on the side of which stood a huge ballroom. Noticing Malvina and Josy inspecting the ship, one of the stewards invited them for a tour of the kitchen, where a large staff, directed by the head chef in a tall white hat, was already preparing dinner. The cleanliness and spotless organization of the operation impressed Malvina enormously. Josy's attention, on the other hand, was captured by the numerous pans of lamb chops, each sporting its own lacy white paper holder at the bone.

Their cabin itself was small. It held two wall beds, and Josy chose the one directly under the porthole. Standing on her bed she could watch the ocean outside.

She was the only child on board until they reached Havana. The crew made a big fuss over her, showering her with conversation and attention. She spent several hours sitting in a deck chair, watching the sea go by. Occasionally, she read. She had two books with her, *Gulliver's Travels* and the small anthology of poetry that Uryon had given her at the pier. Reading on deck was pleasant, the sun dancing over the waves, tipped white with foam. Josy always associated *Gulliver's Travels* with that visit to Mexico, although there were only a few sections that she found interesting. Most of the time she browsed through the poetry anthology, which contained several wonderful poems that she learned by heart.

The captain had set aside the third evening for an after-dinner party to be held in the lounge, which was decorated with crepe paper and balloons. Malvina had no intention of going to the party, but she asked the steward's permission for Josy to carry a large balloon out of the lounge after dinner. With the balloon in one hand and the other on the banister, Josy began descending the grand staircase, with Malvina right behind her. Suddenly two men, slightly intoxicated and roaring with laughter, jumped out of nowhere. One lunged

at Josy and, teetering precariously on the steps, thrust a pencil into her balloon. The balloon burst with a loud snap. Josy stood there motionless, her mouth open in shock. The men continued to sway on the landing. Then, seeing the disappointed look on her face, one turned to the other and mumbled, “That wasn’t as much fun as I thought it was going to be!” After that they both staggered off down the stairs.

On the fourth day, there was a six-hour stop in Havana, Cuba. As the boat entered tropical waters, the late-afternoon sky suddenly took on a bright pale green hue. Josy had never seen anything like this before. In wonder, she ran all over the ship, trying to find her mother so that she could point out the amazing sight to her. Malvina, meanwhile, was also wandering about the boat hunting for Josy, with the same purpose in mind. They finally stumbled upon each other on the top deck. Then they stood by the railing for over an hour, marveling at the strange, brilliantly colored sky.

When the ship pulled into Havana, passengers were allowed to get off and tour the island. The streets of the city gave Josy her first glimpse of Latin America. Row houses, each with narrow second- and third-floor balconies bordered by tapered, wrought iron railings, overlooked the narrow streets busy with traffic. Josy saw no sidewalks on many of them. In among the cars wandered an occasional goat or cow, unattended. Oblivious to the flow of transport, and completely ignoring the shrieks and whistles of the policemen guiding traffic, the animals sauntered lazily through the hubbub. This was something Josy had never seen in a downtown street before, and she stared in bewilderment and disbelief.

Two other ladies from the ship (schoolteachers on a holiday, it turned out) suggested to Malvina that they all hire a taxi together and take a tour around the city and its environs. Malvina agreed, and they soon located a cab stand where, after using broken Spanish to bargain (as they had been told to do aboard ship), they found a guide to drive them. He took them to the Capitol Building where he pointed out an enormous diamond embedded into the marble floor. This, he explained, lay in the exact geographical center of the building. It also marked the spot where the acoustics were supposed to be among the best in the world. Here, he told them, several famous people had once sung, among them the renowned tenor Enrico Caruso, as well as Eddie Cantor, the comedian and film and radio star. The diamond was enormous and clearly visible through a clear glass covering in the floor.

Later, the taxi took them out into the countryside. They passed dozens of tobacco farms, where enormous sheets of tobacco leaves hung limply on clotheslines, drying in the sun. They looked like layers of heavy dark brown laundry waving in the breeze.

They drove by the elegant country club where they walked through the gardens. In the midst of beautifully manicured lawns lay a man-made lagoon. The driver explained that this pond had been sculpted to mirror the exact shape of the island of Cuba. Visible not far off lay the sea. It was all beautiful and impressive. They drank pineapple juice squeezed in front of their eyes from the fresh fruit itself, and it tasted different from any of the canned variety Josy had ever tasted at home.

Late that afternoon the ship set sail again and on board now was a seven-year-old Mexican girl traveling with her mother from Cuba to Tampico. She and Josy soon became friends, and they had a wonderful time playing shuffleboard on deck. Using the numbers on the shuffleboard court, they taught each other to count up to twenty in their native languages. Josy felt sad when two days later, a small tugboat pulled up alongside the steamship, and the girl and her mother got off.

A few hours after that the ship arrived at Vera Cruz, its final destination. Several people came on board looking for friends and relatives. Among them, Malvina spotted a bald-headed man.

“Stashek!” she screamed.

It was her brother, whom she had not seen for twenty-five years. They grabbed each other, hugging and sobbing uncontrollably, while Josy stood by watching. After finally regaining her composure, Malvina introduced her.

“This is your uncle,” she explained, visibly moved.

Now it was time to go through customs. Stashek had written that, although his wife prized silk blouses, fabric would be taxed with a high import duty if Malvina brought it into Mexico. Their own articles of personal clothing, however, would remain untaxed, so if she could somehow bring the fabric in as part of her own personal wardrobe, it would pay to do so.

On the boat, Malvina had attached a button or two here and there to the ten pieces of yard goods that Mrs. Wyman had failed to sew back home. She hoped that this would make the cloths appear to be her own garments, but she forgot about three pieces of fabric lying at the bottom of their steamer trunk.

A woman customs inspector went through their luggage. Unpleasant and a bit supercilious, she examined each object minutely. When she came to the fabrics that Malvina had basted, she was truly puzzled. Unwilling to show her ignorance at what she assumed must be the latest fashions in the United States, she slowly passed over these without a question. However, the three unsewn pieces caught her eye.

“Aha!” she cried triumphantly. In a torrent of Spanish, she announced that Malvina would have to pay far more in import duty than the material had originally cost.

“Leave them!” Stashek ordered. “They’re not worth it!”

“But I already paid a lot for them,” Malvina replied.

“Never mind! Let’s go!” he insisted.

They left, and the fabrics remained in the hands of the custom inspector, who clearly planned to later claim them for herself.

They stayed overnight at a small hotel on the waterfront. The heat was oppressive and, although Stashek said that the place was reputed to be clean, Malvina came upon a scorpion in one of the showers, and several cockroaches in the hall.

Before bedtime, they went for a walk through the town. Josy was shocked at the poverty around her. Men, barefoot and shrunken under filthy serapes, wearing sombreros too heavy for their heads, pleaded for coins. Old people covered with grime lay on the bare ground. Bedraggled children sprawled on the sidewalk, playing in the dirt. Piteously they whined as they held out shriveled hands, begging. Josy was especially appalled when one woman with an infant in her shawl tried to sell them the baby. It was poverty such as she had never seen before, and it shocked her beyond words.

III

The next morning, they boarded the train for Mexico City for a ten-hour ride. On the platform, her uncle bought Josy an avocado. It was the first time she had ever tasted one, and she ate it hungrily, too much at one time. It was like eating pure butter and, while she loved the taste, she soon realized that it had to be eaten along with something else.

The train ride was unforgettable. After they pulled out of the station at Vera Cruz, the engine gradually began to climb and, before long, they were well into the mountains. Below them they saw clouds floating lazily over a lush, checkered countryside. Here and there a farmer could be seen plowing the land with his burro. Cactus and wildflowers grew everywhere, including the most unexpected places. As the train rolled on, colorful orchids, bougainvilleas, lush jacaranda, yucca, and a variety of other tropical blooms dotted the landscape, often springing up unexpectedly, tucked away under palm trees, along the sides of huge black rocks and in banana groves. Here and there tiny shacks came into view, some of wood, while others consisted of little more than sheets of tin and dirty rags tied

together and supported by poles.

The train stopped frequently. At each station, more and more people got on. Most were Indians dressed in colorful serapes, carrying baskets of fruit, tortillas, and exotic flowers. Eventually, the train got so crowded that there was no room to set down the baskets. Before long, people began to hang them from the ceiling, until the whole car became a riot of color and exuded the aromas of tropical fruit, sweetstuffs, wildflowers, and spice plants. Orchids, geraniums, and wildflowers were everywhere, both inside and outside the train. It was hard to tell which were more colorful, those rolling by outside the window, or the ones hanging in baskets that swayed from the ceiling of the train.

At one station, they got out off the train for a few minutes to walk around. Stashek bought Josy a small box made of banana wood. It was slightly moist, with a pale greenish hue. It was shaped like a cylinder and, on one of its rounded sides, a miniature sliding door had been carved. Inside nestled a fresh, pungent white gardenia. The combination of the two fragrances mingled into a powerful aroma that she would recognize twenty-eight years later when she would next return to Mexico, conjuring up at this later time, almost forgotten memories from the past.

The highest altitude the train reached was at the town of Orizaba. From here the view was spectacular. White clouds floated below them, over valleys purple in the mist. Snow-capped mountains lay green in the distance under a sky so blue that poets often proclaimed it the most beautiful in the world.

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In Mexico City, a taxi took them to Stashek's house. His address was Calsada Tacubaya 32, which they insisted that Josy memorize immediately in case she ever got lost. The house was a wide mansion sprawling above a paved walkway that one entered through a wrought-iron gate that was kept locked at all times. Once past the walkway, one entered a doorway on the right, after which a narrow spiral staircase led upstairs to the living quarters. Gucia and their seven-year-old son Alejandro were there waiting, all smiles, at the top of the stairs.

Josy was happy and excited to finally meet Alejandro, but the happiness lasted only a couple of days. Soon she and Alejandro were at each other's throats, quarreling and fighting without a break. He knew no English, she no Spanish, and he turned out to be

uncontrollably mischievous. Often after he had misbehaved, one of his parents (usually Gucia) would jump up from a meal and, shrieking curses in Spanish and Polish, chase him around the table. Nothing seemed to bring him under control. He teased Josy relentlessly, and the only time that she ever got back at him was by pinning a piece of paper with the words “Kick Me!” onto the back of his shirt. Since he understood no English, she wrote it first in English and then in Yiddish with English letters. Both episodes failed to amuse either her mother or her aunt.

There was a phonograph in the house, and they played the tango “El Choclo” over and over. It soon became Josy’s favorite and, although she was unable to learn its title for a long time afterwards, she kept humming it for many months until somebody finally recognized it and gave her its name.

At the side of the house rose a high wall and, attached to this, Josy one day spotted a shack constructed entirely of sticks and colored cloth. This leaned precariously to one side, shifting back and forth whenever the wind blew. Living inside the shack were a man, a woman, and eight children. On the other side of the shack, just a few feet from it, stood an imposing villa that was a music studio. The sight of abject poverty existing starkly between two opulent mansions was something she never got used to.

She hated the taste of the boiled milk, but she had to drink it because milk was not pasteurized in Mexico. She lost quite a bit of weight, but grew in height to almost five feet seven inches, which made her at least a head taller than most Mexican children her own age.

“She’s like a giant compared to them,” Malvina used to say, which made her feel even more miserable.

One day Malvina took her to an Indian barber, where they cut off her long braids. Now she looked even taller and gawker than before.

Stashek knew a family named Meisner. They had a beautiful little blond boy by the name of Kiki, who was about three years old. His coat and short pants barely came to the tops of his thighs, giving his legs a long, puppet-like appearance. The Meisners had a car, and almost every Sunday took Malvina, Josy, and Stashek and his family on various outings. They visited Xochimilco (the beautiful floating gardens), Chapultepec Park, the Pyramids of Teotihuacan, the town of Cuernavaca, and various other lovely sights.



Alejandro.

“What do you want to see all this for?” Stashek asked Malvina frequently. If it were up to him, they would stay home all the time and do nothing. He regarded Indians as worthless.

“They’re nothing but animals!” he would retort when Malvina or Josy mentioned their poverty and miserable living conditions.

Gucia kept locks on everything: refrigerator, breadbox, telephone, bureau drawers, desks, closets, and even some of the bedrooms. Staying in that house day after day was a stifling, unpleasant experience.

When the Meisners heard that Josy had been taking piano lessons, they graciously offered her the opportunity to come to their house to practice. They had a baby grand piano, and Malvina insisted she go every day. Unable to endure the constant bickering at Stashek’s house, Malvina herself tried to spend at least three or four afternoons a week visiting other people. Gucia’s sister Frania Joskowicz, who lived about five blocks away, was a lovely person, and she and Malvina soon became fast friends. Josy and Malvina walked to Frania’s apartment almost every afternoon once the mid-day meal was over. They generally remained until early evening. While the two women talked in Polish, Josy browsed through piles of movie magazines that Frania kept in her small living room.

After about a month in Mexico, Malvina heard about a resort town called Cuautla that was famous for its curative sulfur springs and scenic beauty. She decided to go with Josy for a week. The bus ride took several hours. At one point, they had to change to a tiny claptrap of a van that looked as if it had been constructed from old cartons. The other passengers were mostly peons, many carrying wooden crates containing live roosters and other fowl. The birds cackled loudly as the van bumped along the winding dirt roads, flap-

ping their wings noisily every time it veered around a sharp corner. With every turn of the road, the view became more spectacular. Flowers in a riot of colors, and blue mountains snowcapped in the distance contributed to a beauty that one could only gasp at. Malvina sat mesmerized, her hands rubbing her eyes in wonder and disbelief.

“I always thought that Switzerland was the most beautiful country I ever saw,” she told Josy, “but this is more exquisite by far! Switzerland has a cold kind of beauty, but here—the colors!” And she lapsed into silence, unable to find words to express her emo-



Frania Joskowicz.

tion.

At Cuautla they checked into a three-story hotel, supposedly first class. The next day they swam in the waters, which smelled heavily of sulfur. Huge leafy ferns and bougainvillea dangled above them from branches extending over the springs. The area was lush with vegetation.

Everything was fine until Sunday night, when Malvina realized that most of the visitors had left. She found herself the only woman guest amidst military men in uniforms, several carrying pistols in their belts. She grew afraid even to go out for a walk, so she and Josy went up to the roof of the hotel, where they strolled around for half an hour to get some fresh air. In all directions along the horizon they saw snow-capped peaks framed by the towering palm trees in the streets below. The mountains grew purple as the sun sank, and then turned silver in the moonlight. The view was breathtaking and unforgettable, the silence broken only by the chirp of crickets. Next morning, Malvina and Josy boarded a bus back to Mexico City, returning to Stashek's a couple days ahead of their original plan

IV

Josy's favorite activity was going to the movies, and she went as often as Malvina allowed. Most of the films were imported from the United States, in English with Spanish subtitles. They usually presented each full-length feature film only once or twice during the day. She attended several such features, so going to the movies could turn into a full day of entertainment for the price of one admission. Josy adored this arrangement

The Cinelandia Theater showed cartoons only, and here at last Josy could get along with Alejandro. Each week Stashek dropped them off at the theater for a couple hours. One time they remained spellbound in their seats from one in the afternoon until seven o'clock that evening. Malvina and Gucia, distraught with worry, had to go inside the theater to find them. Josy came out grudgingly, but Alejandro kicked and screamed and carried on with such fury that one of the ushers had to help escort him out.

In Mexico City Josy first saw the film *Naughty Marietta* starring Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy, and it became one of her favorites. Josy read in movie magazines that one woman had actually seen *Naughty Marietta* thirty-four times without getting her fill of it. Malvina scoffed when Josy told her about this, but Josy thought it quite understandable.

V

Their stay in Mexico lasted ten weeks. At the end of August, Malvina and Josy took the train back to Vera Cruz. Not long after they pulled out of Mexico City, Josy began to feel warm and uncomfortable. She grew feverish and, the further they rode, the sicker she became. Malvina was terrified. Nobody else on the train spoke English, and she was surrounded by Indians who, seeing the situation, tried to give her all sorts of herbs. It was a frightening experience. The smells of fruit, flowers, and fish made Josy even more ill, and the ten-hour ride seemed to last forever. They finally reached Vera Cruz, where a cab took them to the wharf. Once on board, Malvina heaved a sigh of relief. The ship and, especially, its infirmary were clean and spotless. An American doctor tended to Josy. After a brief examination, he assured Malvina that a good night's sleep would restore her, and this turned out to be true.

Aboard the ship was a crew member who had also served on the voyage taking them to Mexico. He pointed accusingly at Josy, demanding of Malvina, "What did you do to that child?"

Josy looked washed out. She had grown a head taller and lost weight, and her long auburn braids had been cut off. He left Malvina with a deriding glance, implying that she had been a neglectful mother.

The day before they reached New York, a passenger came out of the bar, where she had been ensconced since the beginning of the trip, and ran over to Malvina.

"Please," she pleaded, "tell me a few things I should know about Mexico. I really have to have something cultural to tell people back home!"

"How long were you there?" Malvina asked.

"Oh, the same as you," came the reply. "Don't you remember? We sailed on the *Siboney* together last June!"

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Jacques met the boat in New York. Josy was deliriously happy to see him and be home.

"What I missed most," she told him, "was you— and ice cream sodas!"

After that she spoke little about her trip to Mexico. (She was afraid they might ask

her to give a report in assembly at school, as had happened to a sixth grade boy who had visited Mexico the year before) but this never came up.

As the years went by, she slowly came to realize how the many images from that country had remained with her. They affected her appreciation of color, left her with a subconscious recognition of several Spanish words, and infused her with a broader perspective of a culture other than her own.