Chapter 2. France

I

After their honeymoon, Jacques returned with Malvina to the town of Nancy in France. Here they would live for the next two years while he completed his studies at the engineering college. Eventually after Josy was born, her parents would give her (in addition to the middle name Gloria which appeared on her birth certificate) a second middle name of Nancy after this French town where they had been so happy during the first years of their marriage.

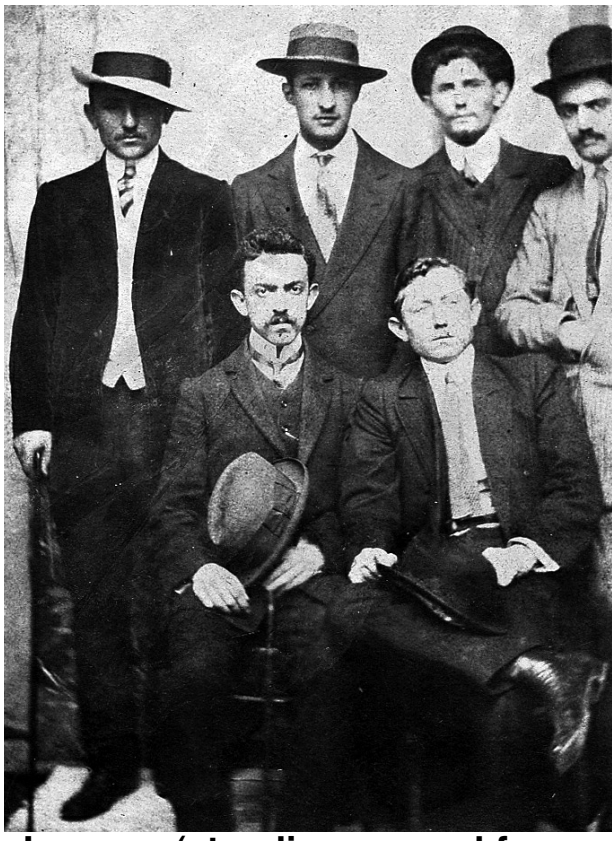
There were many Polish people living in Nancy. Earlier in its history, the town had been presented as part of the dowry of Princess Maria Leszcynska (daughter of the Polish King Stanislaw I) to King Louis XV of France when she married him. Thus in the year 1766, Nancy and with it the entire province of Lorraine passed from Poland to France.

By 1913, Jacques completed his studies and received his degree in Electrical and Mechanical Engineering there. Soon afterwards he and Malvina moved to Paris.

II

From the very beginning they felt at home here. They found a tiny apartment at 6 Rue Gay-Lussac in the Latin Quarter across from Jardin du Luxembourg just off Boulevard St. Michel. Here they would live for the next three years. Jacques got a job as an engineer for the Paris Electric Company. Electrification was just being introduced, and his work consisted in installing and connecting street wiring into adjoining buildings.

On his very first day, he completed seven houses. Concerned, he approached his supervisor to apologize for not accomplishing more. Stressing that he was still new at the job, earnestly he promised to work faster and complete more houses as he gained experience.



Jacques (standing second from left), his roommate, Fuxon (bottom left), a friend, Kaisler (top right), and a Cossack who lived with Kaisler's wife (top left). Taken in Nancy, France in 1909.

"What do you mean, 'work faster'?" the supervisor retorted. "Do you want to put us all out of work? Around here we never do more than three buildings a day! Remember that!"

Malvina also found work, hers at a small *atelier* (workshop) doing cross-stitch embroidery, a style very much in fashion in those days. (By the time she would arrive in the United States, she would have enough expertise to find full-time employment in this line of work.) While in Paris, as she had done in Nancy, she occupied herself with studying part-time, attending classes at the university, mostly in French literature and language.

They made many good friends in Paris, for the most part finding the French people charming, vivacious and friendly. One thing Malvina especially admired was the originality in how the women dressed.

"Regardless of how poor they are," she would later tell Josy, "and in spite of how little money they spend on clothes, they always manage to look chic. Never do you see any two

dressed alike. Even if a couple of simple shop-girls happen to buy the same dress, one will decorate it with a scarf, another a pin, a third might even add a pocket. All of them manage to look different, stylish, and original, no matter what they wear."

She and Jacques also admired how warm and outgoing the Parisians were. Later they would recount how, on various occasions when they got lost and asked directions, it would be quite usual for complete strangers to escort them cheerfully three or four blocks out of their way. Not only that, but they would then actually wait with them to make sure the bus they boarded was the correct one. Years later in the 1970's and 1980's during visits that they themselves would make to France, José and Josy would experience this same generous courtesy from total strangers there.

"French people love to flatter you, even if it's not sincere," Malvina once commented. "It's charming just the same."

"One woman I remember," she continued, "once chased me for two whole blocks, only to tell me, when she caught up to me and caught her breath, that she liked the blouse I was wearing!"

It had taken them little time to grow accustomed to the ways of the French. In their native Poland, French culture had been highly respected. Back in Nancy, both of them had become fluent in speaking the language. They soon became exposed to many customs entirely new to them.

One hot summer night as they were eating supper in their apartment, the *concierge* (landlady) happened to pass their door, left ajar to let in the cooling air of evening. Glancing inside from the landing, she suddenly stopped short

"*Comment*? *Pas du vin*?" she gasped in disbelief, appalled. "Oh, *Mon Dieu*, *quels pauvres*!" ("What? No wine? Oh, dear God, the poor things!")

Running downstairs to her apartment, she returned with a bottle of wine, which she presented to the young couple.

"Nobody should ever have to go without wine!" she snorted vehemently, "no matter how poor they are!"

Although it was not because of poverty that they had no wine, they actually earned very little money. On one occasion when they decided to sell a few possessions, Jacques located a pawnbroker's shop, entered nervously, and placed a bundle of assorted items in front of the owner. Casting a quick glance at his customer, the pawnbroker hastily scanned the lot, then pushed everything aside except for one piece, a silver spice box about nine inches high, intricately carved in the shape of a small tower topped by a spire. At its cen-

ter rested a miniature cage, its tiny ornate door swinging open and shut. Designed to hold spices during the ceremony that concludes the weekly Sabbath, it was what is called in Hebrew a "*koufsat besamime"*.

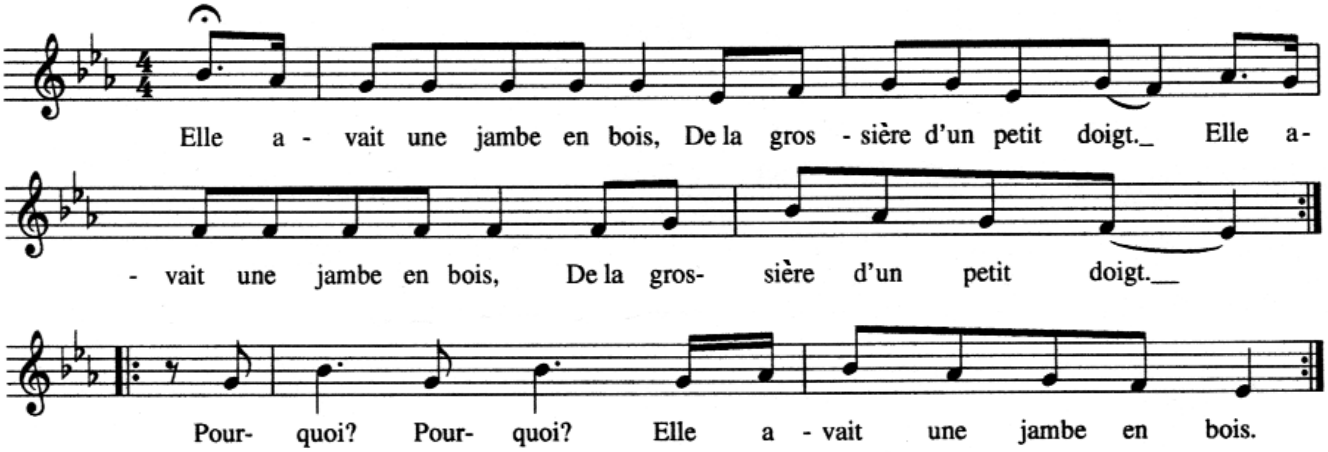
"Now *this*," muttered the pawnbroker, "this is worth something! This has value!"

And he reached into his drawer, offering, to Jacques' amazement, a substantial sum for the piece. For the remainder of the items he gave only a few coins. That spice-box had been in the family for as long as they could remember, but never before had they realized its worth. About a year later, just before leaving Paris, Jacques returned to the pawnshop and bought it back. It has remained in the family ever since.

III

Some of the songs popular during this era remained clearly in Jacques's memory even after they left France. Four in particular he would hum from time to time, even well into his later life. In vogue between 1913 and 1916, these melodies would often echo through the house as Josy was growing up, Jacques singing or whistling them. After she reached adulthood, Josy would be amazed to hear two of these refrains in completely separate and unexpected contexts.

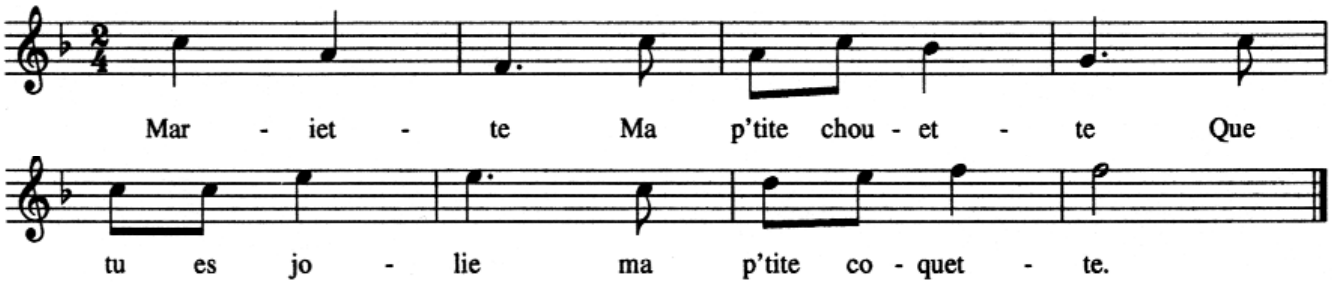
The first she would recognize as a refrain from Stravinsky's *Petrushka Suite*. The melody and saucy French words to the tune that Jacques had picked up from students in the cafés of the Paris Latin Quarter went like this:



"She had a leg of wood
The width of a little finger,
She had a leg of wood
The width of a little finger.
Why? Why?
She had a wooden leg!"

Another French song she would come to recognize was one of the more striking tunes in a Mexican mariachi medley. The melody, which her father had learned during his days in France, must have already been very old by then; it must have been brought over to Mexico when the French armies of Maximilian arrived there in the mid-1800s.

One phrase of the lyrics Jacques liked to sing was the following:



"Mariette,
My little darling,
How pretty you are,
My little flirt!"

There was still another charming French song Jacques loved, popular during pre-World War I days, that exuded an air of contentment ("all's right with the world"). Conveying an image of moonlit Parisian boulevards filled with young couples taking their evening stroll, it includes the line *"Chaque avec sa chaqu'une"* ("Each fellow with his own girl"). Josy always regarded that line as a perfect example of wording that defied succinct translation. In English the word *each* has only one single non-gender form, but in French, its equivalent *chaqu'un* has a second form (the feminine *chaqu'une*) that cannot be expressed in English in just one word. The French words and, indeed, the entire phrase have a unique lilt completely lost in translation.

Still another song popular around 1914 had a tongue-in-cheek roguishness that students of the Latin Quarter would adapt to fit a variety of professions. As an engineer, Jacques applied his personal version to refer to his own colleagues:

"Who gives a damn?
A digue digue digue,
Who gives a damn?
A digue digue doo!
Long live engineers, Mom!
Long live engineers
Who make love without steam!
Long live engineers!"

These songs with their catchy melodies and unique lyrics would continue to linger in Josy's memory, perhaps because she heard her father sing them so often.

IV

World War I erupted the year after Jacques and Malvina arrived in Paris. As hostilities escalated, patriotic fervor intensified. Young men rushed off in droves to volunteer for military service, to fight *les Bosches*. It was the popular, expected thing to do.

One day, without a word to Malvina, Jacques went with several of his friends, both French and Polish, to enlist in the French Army. That evening when he told her, she exploded. Heatedly she berated him for his recklessness, upbraiding him for how foolhardy he had been. The political and military situation in Europe, she argued, had no solution. How did he think he could resolve it—by giving up his life?

They quarreled heatedly for days. Finally, to make peace at home, he gave in. When it came time to report for military service, he stayed behind while his unit left without him. Then, no more than a week later, he read in the newspaper that his battalion had been sent directly to the front, and most of his unit had been wiped out in the Battle of the Marne. It was then that the shock and immediacy of the situation struck home.

Relunctantly they decided that they had no choice now but to leave France. Though a Polish citizen, he was still a young man of military age already enlisted in the French Army and, as such, it might even be illegal for him to leave the country. Their best course of action would be to go to America. They agreed that Malvina should leave first by herself, and later Jacques would somehow find a way to join her there when the opportunity presented itself.

She already had relatives in the United States: her brother Ben Margolius in

Chicago, and Aunt Etka Rosen in Patterson, New Jersey. Ben, eleven years old when he had left Poland with Etka's family some years before, had gotten as far as Chicago with them (by way of Canada) and then, headstrong and rebellious, had run away. The Rosens had continued on to New Jersey without him. After a turbulent adolescence, during which he had joined groups of young thugs carrying banners for labor organizations, breaking windows, throwing stones and getting into trouble with the law, he finally married Liba Gussman, nine years older than himself. Apparently he had met her while she was a patient in a hospital where he did volunteer work.

By now Ben was working at a Chicago department store wrapping glassware and packaging dishes at a low salary. Also living in Chicago were numerous cousins, some of whom Malvina remembered from her childhood.

In the spring of 1916 she wrote to Aunt Etka informing her that she was coming to New Jersey. She and Jacques sold most of their belongings so they could afford a single one-way steamship ticket for her. Leaving Paris, they headed for Bordeaux, choosing this port because they had friends from Poland and Nancy living there. Shortly after arriving, they booked passage for her on the first available ship, the *SS Lafayette*. While they waited for her departure, they went to a photographer, where they had a picture taken of her, probably intended for Jacques to keep as a remembrance after she left.

On May 14, 1916, with what must have been very mixed emotions, they said goodbye to each other and she sailed off to America. The ocean crossing took eight days. The *SS Lafayette* docked in New York Harbor on May 22, 1916.