Chapter 7. Grade 2

I

School reopened in October that year, and Josy was assigned to Miss Hetzel's class for second grade. Miss Hetzel, a pleasant lady, was a mannish hulk of a woman, somewhat gruff but kindly. Her students liked her, but behind her back they would call her "Hetzel the Pretzel".

Jacques often tried to tutor Josy in arithmetic. She would bring her homework answers to him after dinner while he was sitting in his armchair reading the newspaper and looking over the financial pages. He went over the examples with her, but quickly lost patience when she failed to grasp an underlying concept. Though he explained over and over, she was often unable to apply the basics to a particular example. The trouble, he decided, was that she had no idea how to set up the problem. As an engineer fluent in

mathematics, this disappointed him. He tried repeatedly to help her, but had no idea how to other than drill-work.

Every Sunday morning they went for a walk together. While he strolled along, Josy glided along beside him on her roller skates, practicing her multiplication tables.

"How much is 9 times 7?" he asked one time.

"Nine times 7?" she pondered. "Let me see. I know that 7 times 9 is 63, but 9 times 7?"

Suddenly the similarity dawned on her, and they both laughed heartily. That one was the multiplier and the other the multiplicand was a concept she would never realize till adulthood when her daughter Lois (then in second grade at school) would explain it, having been trained in what they would call "The New Math". To Josy, both numbers functioned alike, just in reverse order. Starting in the lower grades, she was taught to memorize procedures automatically without grasping their underlying significance. From second through sixth grades, her teachers gave her lengthy problems to solve, sometimes as many as ten at a time, each with seven or eight rows of six-digit figures to add.

"Never mind! Just add them up," they would tell her. "Don't worry about anything else. Just add them up so you'll get the practice, one problem after the other. Just practice and practice and practice! Keep going! That's the only way to learn arithmetic!"

It was not until tenth grade geometry that she finally had a teacher give her a basic grasp of mathematical principles.

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Her parents had interesting stories and sayings that they passed along to her. One that Jacques loved to tell involved a peasant, forced by poverty to live in a single room with a wife, eight children, and his parents. Desperate, he went to his wise Rabbi for advice, and was told on three separate visits to take into the room first a dog, then a horse, and finally a cow to live with them, which he did after first objecting vehemently. When, following the Rabbi's later advice, he released the animals (one each month) he could hardly believe the newfound spaciousness of his tiny room.

As Jacques often liked to point out, "There is a kernel of truth in every joke."

Malvina, too, had her favorite proverbs. When Josy sometimes exploded in anger, Malvina would quote from the Russian, saying, "Aha! When you hit the table, the scissors jump up!"

"What we get most angry at in others," she loved to point out, "are the very faults we see in ourselves."

Most of the sayings she exchanged with Dina were in Yiddish, among them, "*Me zukt de tohter nor me maint de shneer*" (They say 'the daughter' but they mean 'the daughter-in-law') and "*Aleh hint hoben ain punem*" (All dogs have the same face).

Malvina once made this wry comment: "Had Woodrow Wilson died on his way over to Europe in 1919, when he went there to establish the League of Nations, he would have been remembered as the greatest American president ever. But when the League of Nations failed, the blame fell on him, and after that his reputation was never the same. Sometimes people have to know when to die!"

II

In 1929, like Jacques and so many others, their friend Morris Grodsky got fired from his job. Although trained as a structural engineer, Morris now took any kind of work he could find—reading gas meters, doing temporary social work, sometimes going without a job at all. Then he heard that they were looking engineers to build grain elevators in the Soviet Union. Taking his wife and ten-year-old daughter Masha with him, he moved to the Soviet Union for a year and a half.

On the way back to Chicago in 1931, they all stopped in Philadelphia to spend a few days visiting. In addition to their many interesting observations about life in the Soviet Union, it became clear that they had been somewhat disillusioned. Morris described in particular the conflict he had noticed between accuracy and the generous Russian soul.

"I watched a carpenter working on the construction of a new apartment house," he related. "At one point the specifications called for a beam of wood two meters long. The man looked at it, shrugged and then chopped off two and a half meters. 'A little extra never hurts,' I heard him say. And I saw this going on all over. It's just a matter of time before many of those buildings collapse!"

While the Grodskys were visiting, Malvina invited a few friends to come meet them. With everyone seated around the long dining room table, she served the first course, half a grapefruit to each. Faces puckered up as they all started to eat, but no one said a word until she joined them at the table and took her first bite.

"Ugh!" she cried, spitting it out. She had mistakenly topped each serving with a generous teaspoon of salt instead of sugar.

"Why didn't anyone say anything?" she demanded, collecting all the plates.

"Because we didn't want to embarrass you," they replied, laughing.

III

November 2 was a cold rainy morning, with a heavy wind blowing and wet leaves piled high on the pavements and streets, and Josy was late for school. Racing along with her book-bag in one hand, struggling to balance an unwieldy umbrella in the other, she decided to save time by crossing Lindley Avenue on the diagonal. In the middle of the street she slipped on a pile of wet leaves. Books, umbrella, and hat went flying in all directions, while she slid directly into the path of an oncoming car. With front wheels screeching, the car jerked to a halt just inches from her face.

The driver, a young woman, fell back in her seat, panting with fright. Josy, shaking violently, picked herself up, gathered her belongings and, nodding to the woman, ran off. She flew into her seat just as Miss Hetzel started to take roll. She never was sure if the teacher saw her arrive late, but even years later she continued to remember the furious pounding of her heart, and how her entire body continued to shake for almost an hour afterwards.

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Being an only child made her intensely dependent on friendship, and one of her first friends in Philadelphia was Natalie Lerner. Natalie's father had a medical office in the basement of their house at the corner of Ninth and Rockland. Although this was in the opposite direction from where Josy lived she would nevertheless walk Natalie all the way home from school every day at lunchtime before turning back towards her apartment on Duncannon Avenue.

After a couple weeks, a policeman on the corner noticed and grew suspicious. One day he followed her all the way along her circuitous route until he saw her enter the apart-

ment vestibule at Eleventh and Duncannon. Then he went inside, ringing one bell after another until he found the right apartment, and informed Malvina what was going on. After that Josy was ordered to come directly home for lunch every day without any detours. Although she was glad that the policeman was so diligent in observing the children on his beat, she regretted seeing less of Natalie after that.

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She had always been extraordinarily fond of her dolls. They served not only as her "babies" but also companions. She kept them piled in a carriage that she wheeled around inside the apartment and outside on the street.

Her largest doll was Ruth Sweetie, after a girl named Ruth Spear in her class. The original Ruth was plump, dark-haired, and blue-eyed, and Josy admired her greatly. Ruth Sweetie always remained the queen of the doll collection. Almost two feet tall, clad in a fluffy white organdy dress and a beautiful flowered bonnet, her permanent expression was benign and especially endearing. There were over a dozen dolls in the carriage, including a Raggedy Ann and a pair of skinny three-foot long rag moppets dressed one in wine color, the other in navy blue, named Arabella and Araminta. Josy spanked these two regularly, always apologizing and hugging them afterwards. When she put them to sleep she covered their eyes with a cloth, just as she had seen her mother do to keep out the light on those few occasions when Malvina took a nap.

One morning when Josy was seven, she left the carriage next to an open window. It rained heavily that day and, by the time she got home, Ruth Sweetie's "skin" had risen in huge bubbles. Both cheeks and arms were lumpy and badly discolored, and part of her face had melted into a dull grin. Horrified, Josy ran to the medicine cabinet. There she grabbed the cure-all, a bottle of mercurochrome and she applied it liberally all over the doll's face, arms and legs. The effect was hideous, especially after the orange liquid dried. Since nothing could help Ruth Sweetie now, Josy placed her sadly at the bottom of the carriage under the others. She told herself that in this way she had not abandoned Ruth Sweetie, but simply put her out of sight to heal.


Malvina, 1932

IV

Periodically all the children were sent to the school nurse for routine physical check-ups. One afternoon Josy came home from school, airily reporting, "The nurse says I have heart trouble."

Malvina was frightened beyond words, and having no idea where to turn for a specialist, she remembered reading in the newspaper that a medical convention was in session that week in Philadelphia. Next morning she rushed to the Convention Center where, after numerous inquiries she learned that a Dr. Isidore Ravdin was "the big name". Forcing her way into the auditorium, she waited impatiently till he finished lecturing, then approached him nervously.

"I'm not a heart specialist," he told her when she had finished, "I'm a surgeon."

"Please help me," she begged. "I'm new to the city, and I don't know where to turn!"

Dr. Ravdin suggested she contact Dr. Thomas Fitz-Hugh.

"Is he good?" Malvina demanded.

"I send my own family to him," he replied kindly.

Immediately she called and made an appointment. Dr. Fitz-Hugh was a genial, balding man, easy to talk to, quiet and humble, who listened patiently to every detail. After examining Josy he directed his questions to her.

"Did you run to the nurse's office?" he asked.

When she nodded, he continued, "And did you run up any steps to get there."

Again, she nodded.

"And were you out of breath when you got there?" he wanted to know.

"Oh yes," Josy replied.

"There's nothing to worry about," he informed Malvina. "Her heart is absolutely normal."

Because of his expertise, patience, and understanding, Dr. Fitz-Hugh later became their family physician for life.

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By 1932 the effects of the Great Depression were felt everywhere. Josy sometimes passed bread lines on her way home from school. Occasionally she noticed men selling apples on the street. She overheard a couple of them talking, apparently well educated and trained professionals, now unable to find work. Once she passed a soup kitchen on Broad Street and saw long lines waiting to get inside for a free meal. Jacques felt lucky to be working at a well-paying job, even though it had meant leaving Chicago. He specialized in flow meters, and eventually would write a book on the subject that Honeywell-Brown would publish.

Although they sorely missed Chicago and their dear friends there, her parents slowly adjusted to life in Philadelphia and began to accept it as their permanent home (though they never grew as attached to the people here as to those in Chicago). They went back to visit as often as possible, usually once or twice a year. Josy listened to their stories of Chicago and fancied it a kind of paradise where friendships came easily. None of the people in Philadelphia ever satisfied her parents in the same way.

"In Chicago," Malvina would say, "practically everybody lives in an apartment. So they aren't centered on their houses the way Philadelphians are. They go out more. They make time for others. Their interests turn outward.

Mordecai Margolius's brothers (left to right): Meyer, Wolev, Bernard, Isadore, and Max) and sister Etka Rosen

"But in Philadelphia everyone is busy with the house. Saturdays they clean, shop, take care of their lawn. Sunday is their day for family dinners, so they have no room for outsiders."

V

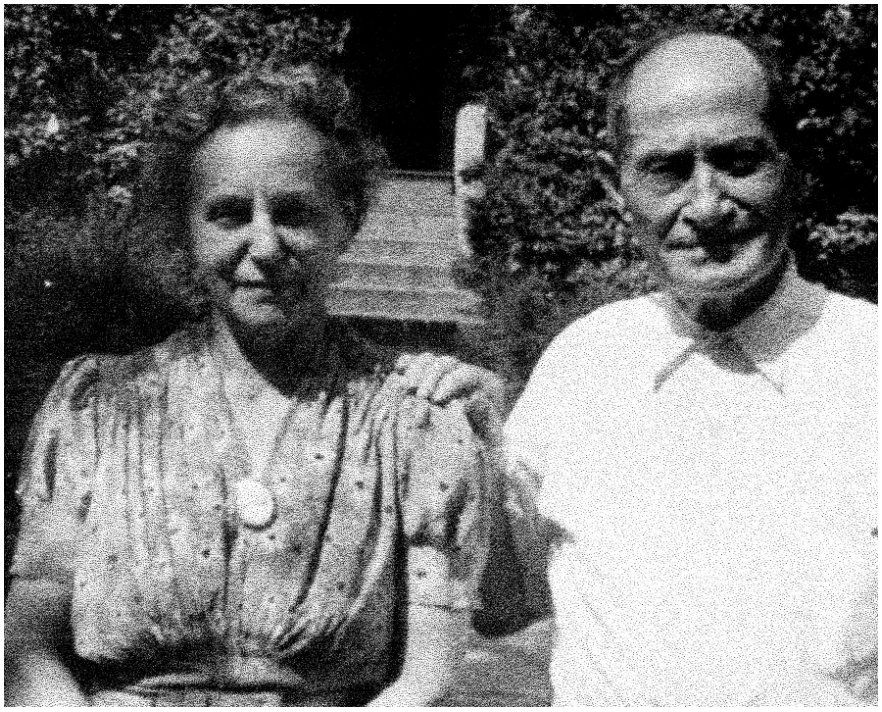
Now that they were settled in Philadelphia, Malvina's Aunt Etka Rosen, along with her husband Uncle Abraham and their son Morris came from Paterson, New Jersey to see them. Arriving by car for their first visit, they parked in front of the big apartment house and getting out, were unsure exactly where to go next. Seeing a group of children playing in front of the vestibule, they approached.

"Do any of you children know where the Feldmarks live?" she asked.

"That's my parents' name," answered Josy, "and they live on the third floor."

Etka beamed, crowing with delight. Later upstairs she recounted the episode over and over, savoring the details of this first encounter with her grandniece.

After that, Malvina took Josy by train to Paterson many times. Not only Etka, but two of her brothers Wolev and Meyer Margolius also lived there, just around the corner from Etka. Silk was the main industry in Paterson, and all the men of the Rosen and Margolius families worked in the silk mills. Etka was the only sister among the seven brothers of Mordecai (Malvina's father) that Malvina knew and Malvina felt especially attached to her. Etka with her husband and three sons (Jack, Morris, and Hymie) had been the first to come to America. They had brought Malvina's brother Ben with them, only



Aunt Etka and Uncle Abraham Rosen.

to have him run away after their arrival. It was Etka's name that Malvina had supplied at Ellis Island when she arrived there, though the authorities had shipped her off to Ben in Chicago instead.

Etka lived a block away from Wolev and Meyer. When they gathered each night after work in her third-floor apartment on Carroll Street, the place took on the aura of a European shtetl, heavy with odors of cabbage, brisket, chicken soup afloat with tiny egg yolks, kugel with mandelin (noodle pudding with almonds), and greebelach (strips of chicken skin rendered of their fat). Yiddish and Polish were spoken exclusively. There was no elevator, and Etka had hung a breadbox outside the dining room to store groceries she was unable to fit inside the kitchen icebox.

She was a gentle and trusting old lady, but Malvina and Josy once arrived to find her in a rare state of outrage. She told them, she had gotten a phone call warning that there was a plumbing problem in the neighborhood and all water would soon be shut off.

"You must fill up your bathtub, and all your pots and kettles, too," the caller had instructed. "We don't know how long everything will be turned off."

Though the voice sounded like that of a young girl, Etka dutifully complied. She filled every container in the house to overflowing, as well as the bathtub and kitchen sink. Then it dawned on her that some of the neighborhood children were playing pranks and there was no water shortage. Etka, kindly soul that she was, failed to understand how anyone could be mean enough to cause so much trouble.

"Ein kleinikeit!"("What a little thing!") she kept repeating. It was her favorite expression, and she used it for every unexpected situation, pleasant or unpleasant.

Once Jacques took Malvina and Josy to the North Philadelphia train station to see them off for Paterson, planning to leave Dina alone at home just for an hour till he returned. He carried their suitcases into the train, but while he was still inside saying goodbye, the train got under way. To Josy's intense delight, he had to travel to Paterson with them. He called Dina from New Jersey to explain, telling her that he would be unable to return until the next morning. That was the only night Dina ever spent alone in the apartment without anyone to help her get in and out of bed.