

THE FULBRIGHT YEAR IN DENMARK

The time was early September 1957. After a week's visit with her father in Philadelphia following six months of living in Texas, Josy departed with the children for Denmark. Their stay there was to be for one year. José had left Houston a week earlier for Europe. He would meet them in Copenhagen after first attending the Atoms for Peace Conference in Paris. He had been granted a one-year Fulbright Research Professorship at the Carlsberg Laboratorium with Professor Kai Lindstrom-Lang, a nominee for the Nobel Prize in Chemistry.

José had left his job at the VA Hospital in Philadelphia in January 1957 for a trial position in Texas. Now eight months later, he left Houston, flying first to Philadelphia and then on to New York City, where he boarded the Queen Mary for France. From here he would attend the Atoms for Peace Conference before heading for Copenhagen and his Fulbright year there.

Texas:

It was with a feeling of adventure and uncertainty that all this had come about. Early in 1956 José, after first obtaining permission from Dr. Cooney, Chief of Staff at the VA Hospital applied for a Fulbright grant, with the understanding that his job at the VA would be held open for him upon his return. When the grant was approved and he went to notify Dr. Cooney, he received a shock.

“You can’t go,” Dr. Cooney retorted. “Absolutely not! I have no one to replace you with.”

When José reminded him that he had already given permission, Dr. Cooney replied, “But I didn’t think you would get it!”

As José continued to insist that he was already fully committed to the Fulbright organization, Dr. Cooney opened his desk drawer. Inside, neatly filed alphabetical order were resignation forms, one filled out for each member of the VA staff. Pulling out one with José’s name, Dr. Cooney demanded, “Here, sign this!”

And suddenly José found himself without a job.

In hindsight he realized that he should have contacted his superiors in Washington, D.C. But going over his immediate boss’s head was unthinkable to him at the time, and unethical. Here he found himself with several months to spare before his fellowship would take effect.

Remembering an offer he had once received from the Methodist Hospital in Houston, Texas, he called Dr. Allen there, apprised him of the situation, and asked if could come work there in a trial position until the

fellowship began in September. Dr. Allen jumped at the suggestion. And so he left for Texas in January of 1957, while Josy remained behind with the children until she could sell their house at 1334 North Seventy-sixth Street and join him. This finally came about in April of that year.

José had found a partially furnished apartment in Houston just three minutes from the hospital. Half of their furniture they shipped there, while the other half they left with a storage company in Philadelphia. Before leaving they sold their Kranich and Bach baby grand piano. Josy broke into sobs when it was being dismantled for shipping to the new owner. A music teacher had pounced upon it as a find for one of her adult students, a woman related to the Shupak Pickle Company. Josy made her promise to notify her anytime in the future if and when the buyer would agree to sell it back. To her extreme disappointment, some two years later when they were already reestablished in Philadelphia and Josy called, the woman replied, “Oh, they sold the piano to somebody else last month. I’d forgotten you wanted to buy it back!”

In Houston they found most people they met outgoing to an extreme. Josy would get phone calls like the following one: “We got your name from a friend of a friend of a friend. Can we come over and give you a Texas welcome?”

They found out that only about one of every ten people they met there was a native Texan. It made them conclude that most people there had no family ties locally and were free – actually looking to build close relationships.

Especially hospitable to them were Saul and Dorothy Kitt. Saul was a researcher at José’s lab in the Methodist Hospital. Dorothy appeared at the door of their rented apartment just three days after Josy and the children arrived, wanting to get acquainted and know if there was any way she could be of help. Their furniture shipped from Philadelphia was actually being moved in when she appeared. They spent most week-ends and several evenings with the Kitts, enjoying their company very much.

They also contacted the Waldmans, whose name had been given them by Dr. Ralph Myerson back in Philadelphia. These good people not only went out of their way to help, but actually kept Lois for the entire day while José and Josy were occupied with the other two children having their tonsils out.

But their short time in Houston firmly convinced them that in no way did they did want to live there on their return, even though his position at the Methodist Hospital there was being held for him and Dr. Allen, his director, insisted that he wanted him back. José’s experiences with the working

conditions at the hospital, with the social and political climate of Houston in the sixties, and the uncomfortable extreme weather conditions of the area, all convinced both him and Josy that they needed to look elsewhere for a job after returning from the Europe. That Fulbright year, though profoundly enriching in every way except financially, proved fraught with uncertainty. During that period Josy would come to dread a question posed often to them in Denmark, "So what part of the United States are you from?" Some of their belongings were in storage in Texas, others in Philadelphia. They had no idea to where they would be returning at the end of their Fulbright stay.

Looking back, they both agreed how foolhardy they were to sell their house in Philadelphia and embark on a journey of uncertain long-term destination with three children under the age of six. The better part of their financial assets, gotten from selling their house, went for round-trip plane tickets for Josy and the children to Texas and then to Europe. (José's transportation fortunately was paid for by the Fulbright Commission.) Because Marty was still a few months shy of his second birthday, he was permitted to travel round-trip from Philadelphia to Houston and several months later on to New York for free. Then from New York City to Copenhagen he traveled for just 10% of the full fare, this also including his return to the States a year later. The girls, ages three and five at the time, traveled for half fare.

Earlier there had also been the worry of finalizing their destination. Soon after they arrived in Texas, their ties to José's job at the VA Hospital in Philadelphia already cut, the Fulbright Commission suddenly informed them that they were being assigned to Goettingen, Germany instead of Denmark. This came as a shock, compounded by the problem that there were no accommodations for the family there. The Commission was insistent about this. Living conditions in Goettingen were so overcrowded that families who took the chance, choosing to come despite the warning that there was no room for them, were sent back. Josy spent hours on the phone with Lufthansa Airlines, trying to convince them that they should look into the matter and try, against all odds, to find them accommodations in Germany. She tried to stress the point that they, too, stood to benefit, for this would mean the sale of tickets for not one, but five passengers for them. Indeed, the company did look into the matter, but also came up with failure.

There was no longer a house in Philadelphia for Josy and the children to return to if José went alone to Europe for the year. They had few ties to Houston, so remaining there alone was out of the question. José's mother invited Josy to come live with her in Vancouver, Washington for the year if necessary, but let it be known firmly that should they come, then she and not

Josy, would be in charge of supervising the upbringing of the children. It was a dark period indeed, and time was growing short. Not until July, when José traveled to the Gordon Research Conferences in New Hampshire and, meeting Professor Lindstrom-Lang again face to face, convinced him to write to Washington requesting that José be sent to his laboratory in Denmark, did they sort out the matter. It worked. Early in August, just three weeks before it was time to leave for Europe, this request was granted and finalized.

José left Houston a week before Josy. She remained there with the children until the end of the month when their monthly lease for the apartment would expire. Just before he left, they advertised in the Houston Post and sold their car. The buyer was a middle-aged black woman who eyed them suspiciously when they explained their circumstances. They specified that they were asking two hundred fifty dollars for the car, a down payment of twenty-five dollars now, but that they must keep possession for one more week until the very evening of September 1st, when Josy would depart for the airport. Reluctantly the woman agreed, handing over the twenty-five dollars and promising to come for the car with the rest of the money at six o'clock on September 1st. One of José's laboratory technicians, Victor, would come at the same time to drive Josy and the children to the airport.

José left Houston on the date planned. The plan was for Josy and the children to leave a week later, take a "red-eye special" (a low-cost night flight) to Atlanta, change planes there and then go on to Philadelphia. They would spend a week with her father before continuing on to Europe. José would stay in Philadelphia a few days, then would call Josy from New York around nine o'clock on the morning of September 2nd, a couple hours after her arrival in Philadelphia and just before he boarded the Queen Mary to sail for Europe. They would meet in Copenhagen in mid-September after the Atoms for Peace Conference in Paris ended.

Josy spent the last week in Houston packing, tending to last minute details, and getting ready to turn in the keys for the apartment to the real estate people. Her neighbor Dorothy Wellington proved especially helpful, not only with small practical odds and ends, but also keeping her company. They became even more friendly during this time, and Dorothy promised to be there when Josy turned the car over to the new owner.

At seven o'clock on the night of Josy's departure, the buyer arrived. She was accompanied by a surly looking man, and both settled themselves in the living room before making their announcement. She had thought things over, the woman said, and she was willing to pay only two hundred twenty-

five dollars for the car instead of the two hundred fifty previously agreed upon.

“Besides,” she told Josy with a sneer, “I know you’re leaving tonight, so it’s too late for you to get another buyer this late. You’re going to have to settle for my price.”

Josy stared at her in disbelief. She tried discussing, reasoning, appealing to the woman’s sense of honesty, but nothing changed.

“Take it or leave it,” she told Josy. “You’re really stuck, aren’t you! Where are you going to get a better offer this late?”

It was at this point that José’s technician Victor arrived. “Ready to go?” he asked.

“We really have you over a barrel, and you know it,” the man declared.

It was not the twenty-five-dollar difference, but the deliberate ploy to cheat her that got Josy angry.

“No, you don’t” she proclaimed. "I'm not selling you the car unless you pay the agreed upon price. Either pay it now or leave without the car."

"But what will you do?" they exclaimed. "You can't take the car with you on the plane, so you're stuck!"

"Not at all," Josy replied angrily. "I'll leave it with my friend Victor here, and he'll sell it whenever he can and send me the money."

In shock at hearing this, the woman demanded. "Then give us back our twenty-five-dollar deposit."

"Not on your life," Josy replied. "You deliberately welched on the deal. That's what a deposit is for. You came trying to cheat me. If you pay the price we agreed on you can still have the car right now. Otherwise, forget it."

Reluctantly the couple got up and departed, leaving the car behind. With less than an hour to go before leaving for the airport, Josy turned the keys over to Victor, requesting that he sell the car when he could and forward the money to Denmark. It took three months, but he finally found a buyer, and they received a check for two hundred and fifty dollars from him shortly after Christmas.

Hugging Dorothy Wellington good-bye, she piled the children and luggage into Victor's car, and they pulled out of the development for the airport. They had almost no time to spare. Passing every red light, Victor sped along the highways and finally at the airport, he rushed her suitcases inside, while she flung Marty into the collapsible stroller and shouted to Lois and Malva, "Hang on to the handles, girls, let's run!" They raced through the

doors of the building just as the announcement came over the loudspeaker,
"Last call to board for Atlanta!"

"Hold the plane," shouted, a steward, spotting her, "There's a woman
with six children coming!"

And that was how they left Texas.