

LEAVING PHILADELPHIA

In 1957 José was awarded a Fulbright professorship to do research on proteins at the Carlsberg Laboratory in Denmark. There for one year he would work under the guidance of Professor Kai Lindstrom-Lang. Carlsberg Laboratorium was a distinguished research institution, internationally renowned. Selected scientists from all parts of the world aspired to come there for advanced training and to gain enrichment in their specialties. The director, Lang, was an eminent scientist, highly respected and, at the time, being considered for a Nobel Peace Prize in Chemistry.

Several years earlier José and Josy had had the opportunity to meet him personally. Back in 1951 José had been invited to New Hampshire to his first Gordon Research Conference (the first of fifty or so that he would be attending in coming years). Lang, along with three current Nobel scientists, had also been present. José and Josy discovered that he was quite approachable, a warm and charming man who, in addition to being a brilliant scientist was also accomplished as a violinist and a talented artist. During intervals between meetings he would sometimes entertain the group by spontaneously sketching caricatures (amazing likenesses) of those present. He could be quietly whimsical, impish, and occasionally loved to play pranks. All of this contrasted with his outstanding scientific reputation, making him a delightful and unique personality.

Now in 1957 José's Fulbright year promised to be fun as well as enriching. Working under Lang would be not only a distinct honor, but also a tremendous opportunity for professional advancement and growth. He and Josy looked forward eagerly to the coming year in Copenhagen. Yet unusual circumstances arose some months before they were due to set out for Europe, leaving them somewhat apprehensive and uncertain of what the long-range future might hold.

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A few months before they were scheduled to leave Philadelphia the following complication developed. One year earlier when José had initially decided to apply for the fellowship, he had gone first to Dr. C., Chief of Staff and his immediate superior at the VA Hospital, to obtain permission. Dr. C. agreed to hold his position for him during the year that he would be away. But now when notification came that the grant had been approved, he balked.

“I can’t let you go,” he remonstrated. “I have no one to replace you with!”

Stunned, José reminded him that he had given him undisputed permission to proceed with the application. To this Dr. C. exclaimed, “I never thought you’d get it!”

José was dumbfounded. Explaining that he had already accepted the fellowship, he pointed out that he was now committed to go.

At this Dr. C. exploded. Angrily, he pulled open his desk drawer, and extracted from it a paper José had never seen before. It was a resignation form with José’s name on it and everything except the signature filed in. (Eventually José would learn that Dr. C. had prepared one just like it for each member of his staff!)

“Sign here!” Dr. C. demanded.

Taken aback, José complied. Suddenly he found himself without a job.

In hindsight he realized that he should have immediately apprised the Veterans Administration Office in Washington of the situation. But at the time, going over his superior’s head seemed unethical, unthinkable. (Later he would find out that Dr. C. had been subsequently fired once Central Office learned of numerous abuses he had committed regarding government regulations.) But now a real dilemma existed for him. What was he to do for the eight months before his fellowship began in September?

Recalling that he had once received a job offer from Methodist Hospital in Houston, he called Dr. A. there, apprising him of the situation and asking if he might come to work for him on a trial basis until the Fulbright began. Dr. A. immediately accepted. More than once he had tried to recruit José, and now he expressed hope that this might lead to a permanent arrangement, though he agreed that for now it could be considered a trial situation for them both. Offering a larger salary than what the VA had been paying, Dr. A. also agreed to cover José’s transportation to Texas. It was under these conditions that José left to start work at the Methodist Hospital in January 1957. Meanwhile Josy and the children remained behind so she could sell their house in Philadelphia before joining him.

The three months that this took turned out to be a difficult time for them all. José found working conditions at Dr. A.’s laboratory far from his liking and, as he and Josy would soon discover, life in Texas in the late 1950s proved unacceptable in many respects to them both.

Josy went with the children to see him off at the airport. No sooner had his plane left than Malva (almost six years old) planted herself firmly at

the terminal gate and refused to budge. Weeping bitterly for almost half an hour, she sobbed that she missed her daddy, and before long Lois and then Marty joined in, wailing uncontrollably. Josy explained that it would be for just for a little while, that they would all join Daddy in Texas as soon as they could sell their house. Little as they were, for the next few weeks the children then tried to help find a buyer. Once when Josy's father Jacques came to visit, Lois (then three) climbed up on his lap and inquired, "Grandpa, do you want to buy a house?"

Oddly enough it was through the children that they eventually did find someone. Playing outside with a neighboring girl from up the block, Malva told her about wanting to move to be with her daddy, and the girl's mother, overhearing, recommended a couple with whom Josy eventually made the sale.

Meanwhile Jacques gave her some helpful advice.

"You're going to include the refrigerator and washing machine anyway when you sell the house, aren't you?" he inquired. "Then don't mention anything about this at the beginning. Later, just add that you think you might throw them in for no extra charge."

It worked. The buyer avidly agreed, mentioning one other condition.

"I want that trash can out back, too," she announced.

"Fine," Josy agreed, somewhat astonished, and thus the sale got finalized.

Packing their belongings proved complicated. Josy finally divided everything three ways: those items going to Texas, those to be placed in storage in Philadelphia awaiting their return (even though they had no certainty where in the United States they might be returning to later), and those of their possessions that remained to be sold. She placed an ad in the Philadelphia Inquirer, and after two grueling days and nights of stranger after stranger, many extremely odd, coming to the house and bargaining with her, she managed to sell the last of the items.

The hardest to part with was their baby grand piano. Josy broke into tears as it was being dismantled for shipment to the new owner. She had had the Kranich and Bach ever since she was eleven years old. It had moved from place to place with her whenever she moved, once having even been hauled into and later out of a fourth-floor apartment building, as well as at other times into various apartments and houses where she had lived both before and after being married. Every piano tuner who had ever come to the house had remarked on its magnificent tone and sparkling keyboard touch. Now it felt like parting with a member of the family.

A music teacher, a Mrs. S. (related, it turned out, to the pickle manufacturer of the same name) pounced upon it while piano shopping for one of her adult students. Josy gave her Jacques' telephone number and made her promise, after over a year had gone by, to notify her in case the buyer ever decided to sell it, promising to buy it back. Actually, to her extreme disappointment, some two years later after resettling in Philadelphia, Josy would discover that the piano had indeed changed hands again, but now it could no longer be located.

"Oh, I forgot you wanted it back!" Mrs. S. would tell her when Josy would call to inquire. "My pupil sold it to somebody else just last month. I'm so sorry!"

At that point José bought her another piano, though they could ill afford it at the time — a Jesse French & Sons spinet with a lovely keyboard touch much resembling that of the baby grand. Though thankful, Josy would never quite form the same deep attachment to it that she had felt for the Kranich and Bach.

They also decided to sell their car before leaving for Texas, their 1952 green Plymouth. This, too, had special sentiment for them — it was the first car they had ever owned, the car on which they had both taken their original driving tests, and the one on which Josy had first learned to drive. She kept the car until the very last night before leaving Philadelphia. That evening Adek, her cousin Krysia's husband, followed her in his own car, coming along so she would not be alone while completing the transaction.

The emotional upheaval of all this and the prospect of moving such a distance away, uncertain of their long-range plans, caused enormous anxiety, and as a result Josy suddenly lost her voice temporarily. When José called from Houston to find out how the car sale had gone, Adek answered the phone.

"She can't talk to you," he announced. "She can't speak."

Uncomprehending, José grew frightened. "I want to talk to my wife right now!" he roared. "You better put her on the phone — at once!"

Reluctantly Adek complied. Hoarsely in a croaking whisper Josy explained that everything was really all right. (They all laughed about this later.)

Krysia and Adek proved especially helpful during this period. One afternoon, when Josy felt particularly lonely and desperate for a break from the upheaval of sorting and packing, she called Krysia and suggested they spend the afternoon together. Krysia knew a woman (a friend from the concentration camps of Europe) who now owned a small dress shop in Strawberry Mansion. With the children in the back seat of the car, Josy

stopped for Krysia and they decided impulsively to pay this friend a visit. The woman, after a warm welcome, sent them all upstairs to an empty bedroom where Josy and Krysia tried on dress after dress selected from the merchandise of the store below while the children crawled around on the floor playing happily. They spent the entire afternoon modeling clothes in front of a full-length mirror, between the two of them buying not a single item. Yet the owner hardly seem to mind, happy just to see Krysia again.

Another afternoon Josy took the children to visit the apartment at 1715 North Eighth Street where she and José had lived for close to five years before moving into their present house. Ruth, the daughter of the owner, opened the door. A dwarf in her late thirties with a hunched back and nasal voice, she was possessed of a gossipy nature. She had always been convivial, actually aggressive and sometimes even intrusive when they had been living there. They had occupied the second floor of what Mr. G. had converted into a walk-through apartment in the big four-story house, and on more than one occasion Ruth had blatantly opened their living-room door and entered without being invited in, sometimes plopping herself on the sofa for a long chat. Now with the front door of the house slightly ajar, she kept Josy and the children standing on the outside steps, frowning suspiciously. She said that she refused to believe that José and Josy had moved away to buy their own house. She kept insisting, “You moved to another apartment, not a house! I know!” None of Josy’s protests or explanations to the contrary could convince her otherwise.

Then suddenly noticing the three children, she refused to let Josy inside. Josy had hoped to say hello to Mr. and Mrs. G. with whom they had always had friendly relations but now, with a cool good-bye, Ruth firmly closed the door in her face.

Alone with the children since José had left, Josy missed him terribly. She felt extremely lonely and realized that she badly needed company. One night, suddenly aware of how quickly the end to the Philadelphia part of her life was approaching, she impulsively got on the phone and invited as many of her high school classmates as she could get hold of after not having seen most of them for fifteen years. Some ten of them came to say good-bye. She served trays of cheeses, jellies, cakes, and tea, but everyone felt too emotional to eat and instead, leaving every bit of food untouched, they spent the entire evening chattering excitedly and catching up on old stories and current personal experiences.

When it finally came time to leave for Houston it would be Krysia and Adek who drove Josy and the children to the airport. The plane was the red-eye special. It left from Newark, New Jersey, around midnight. Josy had

chosen this flight because it would save some sixty dollars that they would have had to pay had they left from Philadelphia.

This was how, then, after a tumultuous few months, she and the children finally got to join José in Texas.