ESSAY

Heroes and Favorites

by Joelle Ballonzoli

Mr. Louis Lieutaud, Mr. Bibet, one snake eater, Joelle Ballonzoli, Grandma Pasqualina © unknown (contact us for credit)

Tint Journal, no. (), www.tintjournal.com

Most streets in La Ciotat were renamed after World War Two. They were called after the native young men of the French Underground who had been killed fighting the German occupation forces. The indicating plates read their name, age and the date when and the place where their death occurred. Below that, the expression *Mort pour La France*, Dead for France.

In the 1950s, those young deceased and their fellows still alive were the country's heroes as France needed to reclaim its pride after years of occupation, repression and humiliation at the hands of the Nazis. Most survivors from the underground were everyday working people who never claimed any notoriety or reward. In La Ciotat, where the Reds had historically been prominent, we added the veterans of the Spanish Civil War to the heroes list. They were French antifascist volunteers who had joined the thirty-five thousand members of the International Brigades, freedom-fighters from countries throughout the world, to fight on the side of the legitimate elected government of Spain in 1936. A coup had taken place under the leadership of General Franco, high commander of the army, supported by the Catholic Church. Democracy was on the brink of collapse.

Twenty years later, all that remained were victims of the conflict. Brigades whose idealism had turned to ashes when the legitimate government was finally defeated in 1939 and Spanish nationals forced out of Spain by the Fascist winners. Most of those expatriates survived among us in the Red-leaning blue-collar towns along Mediterranean coast. The compassionate tone with which the adults around me spoke about them touched my sensitivity greatly. At 10 years old, thinking about their stories made me feel sad. It was as though I physically felt the heaviness of the melancholy that the exile had brought on them. The subject was so powerful to me that it is quite possible that their despondency was just the fruit of my imagination. With my passionate nature and penchant for romanticism even as a young child, it seemed natural for me to express my feelings about the bitterness of their defeat.

I had been extremely impressed by the power of a piece played in music class, Chopin's *Polonaise Héroïque.* It stayed with me. Somehow interweaving with my empathy for the Spanish refugees, it inspired me to improvise a dance in which I became by turn a warrior fighting for freedom and a beaten Spaniard crossing the French border during a snowstorm in the *Pyrénées* mountains. Slightly handicapped by the lack of a record as well as a player, which would have allowed me to play the Chopin piece in our tiny apartment, I had to trust my memory of the *Polonaise Héroïque* to let my head tell my mouth.

Lalalala, lalalalalalala, Lalalalalalalalalalalalalala…

Proud and glorious, shoulders back, chin up, looking away to the horizon that was in reality the wall that separated our kitchen/living room and my parents' bedroom, I proudly marched dragging behind me the warlike Spanish people. I could see myself crushing Franco's Fascist army with just one punch. I was so powerful. Charging towards the forces with great *pas-de-chat*, my favorite ballet steps, I was destroying them.

"Watch out Joelle! You'll hurt yourself. You're charging right into the ice box," my mother warned.

Time for the defeat then. Trudging through the snow, a very nasty north wind was piercing my body. It was awfully cold and I just had a moth-eaten blanket to protect myself. I had had to get on my knees and beg the Fascist soldiers not to take it away from me when they kicked me out into the mountains. I would die in these mountains. I would never reach the French border. Knees bent, heavy head down, limp torso I was going to die by the ice box to the sound of the defeat portion of the *Polonaise Héroïque.* I had no more strength to even murmur the lalalas, and the whole thing was happening to the sound of a dreary drum; tragique!

The inspiration for the second part of the *Polonaise,* the one of the defeat when my freedom fighter died, had stemmed from the idea that he had been malnourished and did not have the strength to overcome the awful weather. My friend Mimi, a chubby blondinette with blue eyes and dimples on both cheeks, had told me once while speaking about the horrors of the Spanish Civil War:

"Yes, it was unbelievably bad. The Brigades, they had to eat snakes."

I did not doubt her knowledge of that historical era. Her grand-father Louis Lieutaud had been the Brigades recruiter for our district. That awful revelation had gotten to me. I was so dumbfounded by what she was saying that I failed to ask her why they ate snakes. I just assumed that it was a punishment inflicted on them by General Franco. I had never seen live snakes before, but even the thought of them terrified me. At school we had been told that they were cold-blooded animals; the horror! How could you be cold and blooded at the same time? I imagined rattlesnakes being force-fed to my heroes. Just like the ones that crawled in the Arizona desert in the black and white American westerns I had seen on TV. It took me some time and a little more information to realize that snakes were one of the only foods the Brigades might have been able to find during the disastrous time they fought in Spain.

A member of the French underground on August 20 1944 © unknown (contact us for credit)

Louis Lieutaud, an old disenchanted Communist and a true French patriot, had dedicated his life to helping his community and standing up for its people. I looked up to him. To me, he was a double hero because in addition to recruiting Brigades he had also acted as local recruiter for the French Underground. Patriots like Louis came to have many friends in the post-war French government of the 1950s. Most useful were his connections within the naturalization administration at a time when La Ciotat was welcoming thousands of immigrants as the local shipyard production was booming. Immigrants in need of help with paperwork would leave messages with Louis' wife, who ran the Lieutaud family bakery. They could do likewise at *Le Coq Hardi*, my grand-parents' bar-restaurant, which was Louis's favorite hangout. Once they got a hold of him, a meeting would take place at the restaurant in the afternoon, between the lunch and dinner services when the place was empty. My mother Marie assisted Louis as a volunteer secretary and translator. She was fluent in Italian and in the dialects of Sardinia, the Italian island from where my grandparents had immigrated.

"Marie, do you understand what he says? What's your name dear?... I can't understand shit. I think he is Lithuanian."

When neither Louis nor Marie could make out what the immigrants were speaking about, they would send me out to look for someone in the neighborhood who might understand their language. In the street, I would operate methodically, focusing on the buildings where immigrants were living, knocking on doors where languages other than French, Italian and Sardinian were spoken. Finding bilingual individuals was often an arduous operation. It required patience and courtesy. It took time that I could have used more pleasantly. But it was also rewarding for me. I was participating in helping the common good and that made me feel important and proud.

"Bonjour Mrs. Bagdonas, Mr. Lieutaud needs someone who speaks Lithuanian. Is your son here?

"Laba diena maža mergait?. Ko j?s norite?"

"You Lithuanian, your son Lithuanian and French. Is he here?" I mimicked, using my lips and my hands to express myself. And the lady replied

"Aš? N?ra pranc?z? kalb?damas."

More mimicking "L-I-T-H-U-A-N-I-AN and F-R-E-N-C-H — YOUR SON LUKAS."

Mrs. Bagdonas pointing to the window smiling, *“Ak! mano s?nus kalb?jo pranc?ziškai už Lukas. Jo ?ia n?ra.”*

I froze! What is she saying? Lukas jumped the window? Come on you stupid! I would have heard about it. Besides, she would not be smiling. Instant relief!

She offered me a cookie, still smiling.

“Gera mergait?!”

“Thank you, Mrs. Bagdonas.”

Louis, tall for a southerner with only one hand, the other having been taken during World War One, always wore perfectly pressed shirts, light color pants, immaculate white fabric shoes and a flat cap, the type bocce players wore in the summer when the powerful Provençal sun beats on the courts. He showed up for Pernod with his fellow Red veterans at the *Coq Hardi* every day of the week before lunch and again before dinner. Among his group was Mr. Bibet, skinny as a rail, who was a veteran snake-eater, and Mr. Giacopelli. Mr. Giacopelli always wore dark glasses. I don’t remember ever seeing his eyes. His face was scarred. Much later, I learned that he had been taken by the Gestapo, the German SS police, during the war, and had become the victim of medical experiments in a death camp. He had a dark complexion and looked a bit like the werewolf in a book my aunt Lola had given to me for my birthday that year, except for the eyes of course. I found him intimidating. Sometime, accompanying them was also Mr. Lazarini, a lanky Pernod salesman who was always smartly dressed and often walked around with a tipsy glow; his attaché-case full of Pernod sample bottles that he generously distributed.

Louis’s wife, Marie-Louise, had not fought in any war, but she was a hero in her daily life feats. She was a noticeably stocky brunette with wavy hair and hazel eyes, plump with big breasts and a short neck that made her head look bigger than it was. You could have said that she was broader than high. Just like Louis, Marie-Louise was benevolent. Every morning when the first batch of bread came out of the oven she put aside enough of it to be donated to local impoverished older folks. I admired her ability to run the bakery in addition to her household, which included her divorced daughter who didn’t seem to do much, her daughter’s two children, Rene and my friend Mimi, and Louis who could not bake due to the loss of his right hand. She worked behind her counter, a large starched immaculate apron protecting her like a shield. She closed the store between one and four PM, at which time she would take care of her household duties. She cooked up a storm in the afternoon and there was always extra food for whoever was in need, including a Yugoslavian refugee family that

she had taken under her wing and called “Yusgulavians” instead of Yugoslavians. The only time when nobody wanted to be around her was when, on rare occasions, she would snap. Overwhelmed by all of her activities, she would “percolate” and explode in a very high-pitched voice sounding like a chicken that knows you are running after it to cut its neck. After a bout of this she would suddenly lose her breath and fall flat on her butt into a chair, exhausted.

Marie-Louise closed the bakery in August and spent the month at the two-room cabanon, a stone wall cabin, that the family owned in the hills overlooking the old Marseille road. There, she would cook big Sunday lunches on an old wood stove, for an armada of guests. A favorite was her *merlusse,* salted cod, that she served with aioli — garlic mayonnaise — and potatoes. It was imperative that she not be disturbed when she made aioli. She kicked everybody out of the cabanon and locked herself inside. After a while she would come out beaming with a large bowl full of the creamy whipped yellow mixture. After lunch everybody took a nap; some on the two large beds in the cabanon, others on lounge chairs under the pine trees that surrounded it. After the nap, it was time for coffee. Men played *Pétanque,* a bocce game invented in La Ciotat in 1907, in an area that had been cleared for that purpose a few feet away from the cabanon. Women chatted, sitting around the table on the terrace, in the shade produced by vine creepers running over an arbor that was attached to the cabanon’s front wall. Mimi and I would take a walk in the hills and look for cicadas that we put in an old strainer covered with a piece of cardboard. We hoped they would keep singing for us when we took them back to town. Despite the good fresh leaves and flowers that we fed them, the cicadas never sang after we caught them. Even my brother Gerard’s treatment of gently scratching their belly with a straw, which he professed to be the solution, did not do the trick. The cicadas never sang for us and soon died. After a while we stopped trying to take them home believing that they just didn’t like captivity.

Our neighbor and family friend, Monsieur Marcel Benayer, a recipient of the French Legion of Honor Medal, was my silent hero because he never spoke about his highly risky service to the country during the war. Marcel’s story was a little more complicated than the ones of my other heroes. That made him unique and a bit of a celebrity who’s exploits were often spoken about at low voice. My parents seemed to know that the war was a painful subject for Marcel.

Marcel, as all adults around me familiarly called him, was Jewish. He had come from Paris to La Ciotat in 1941 to escape the Gestapo when France became divided into two portions, the German occupied zone in the north and the so-called Free Zone in the south, which was

administered by the Vichy makeshift government put together at the time of the 1940 armistice. Once in La Ciotat Marcel had opened a club that was a cover for his clandestine activities which consisted of helping Jews escape France from a raw coastal isolated area at the foot of the high cliffs west of La Ciotat. He had a concealed exit built into a wall in the back of his club, which would facilitate an escape in case of emergency. In 1942, the southern portion of France also became occupied by the Germans. La Ciotat's whole waterfront was walled off by the occupation forces prohibiting access by the local population. Marcel's activities became riskier. Nevertheless, he kept working with the Underground. Once, I asked Madame Lucienne, Marcel's wife, a striking skinny blond mid-age model type with very blue eyes, how the club episode had ended. Hanging on to her every word, I listened, fascinated, as she described one of the most consequential events of her life.

"It was Sunday afternoon. The club was packed. Lisette, the coat girl, opened the peephole to see who was banging at the door. She closed it slowly. Then, with a panic, turned around facing me. Her eyes bulging, she articulated to me without emitting a sound, 'The Gestapo!' I tried to keep my cool, but my hands started shaking, my heart threatening to break open my chest. I felt the blood pounding at my temples. 'Li, just one second.' She took a deep breath, ready to open the door as soon as I would disappear through the crowd of the dancing customers. With an extreme effort to keep my composure, I made my way through to the bar. 'Marcel, the Gestapo!' I muttered, my throat dry. Without a word he grabbed a check pad, pulled a check from it, wrote something on its back and handed it to me. 'Get your ass there as fast as you can,' he replied. To Joseph the bartender: 'Don't take any risks, close the place as soon as you can. You know nothing!' We ran to the back, through the concealed door into the small *Rue Pebre*. We kissed and each of us went our separate way. I spent the remaining part of the war in high Provence living on a farm. We were reunited shortly after the American troops liberated the region in 1944. He never told me where he went. I never asked. We just wanted our nightmare to be over and to start a new life."

Marcel avoided speaking about that episode of his life and about the loss of his family in the war. What he loved to speak about was his youth in Paris between the two World Wars, when he was a performer at *Les Folies Bergères,* a famous cabaret and burlesque show. When he, the man whose stern looks could be intimidating — jet-black hair, a dark complexion and glasses sitting on top of a prominent nose, spoke of that time, he softened into a delightful storyteller whom I engaged as often as I could. He would show me pictures of himself dressed in tail tuxedo on stage, surrounded by female dancers wearing elaborate costumes made of white feathers which made them look like peacocks. I loved to spend time with him and Lucienne at their place across the street from ours.

Feast in La Cité Ouvrière © Garabedian

Growing up, I had various favorite people who had nothing to do with World War Two heroism or the Spanish Civil War. Auntie Irene was one of them. Irene Giuliano, my mother's pal, was a big woman who loved food. I remember her speaking about it all the time whether you ran into her on the street or visited her house. "*Hmm! C'est bon... Hmm!* It's good. Did you try Russian crab? You don't know Russian crab?" Her holiday dinners were gargantuan and she described them with oohs, aahs, "You would not believe how good it was… what are you going to make on Christmas Eve? What about Christmas Day?..."

She organized afternoon-get-togethers for her overweight housewife friends at which there was no coffee-and-cake to snack on, but rather Armenian, Italian, and other ethnic delicacies depending on the background of the host of the day. Those women often complained about their weight until, in the 1960s, they discovered diuretic drugs and amphetamine appetite suppressants that would drive some of them crazy. For the time being, they kept eating, never realizing that afternoon extra meal might well be their problem. In the 1950s, the variety of food was limited. There were only two kinds of chocolate on the shelf at the grocery store — one dark, one milk, one kind of plain yogurt in the ice box at the dairy. On the contrary, local products such as vegetables, fruit, olive oil, wine and other foodstuffs were plenty. That was all those women needed to treat themselves and their friends. I watched them savoring with pleasure by turn anchovies, stuffed vine leaves, smelly Corsican cheese, raw scallions, and other kinds of food that I found repellant. The view and the smell of their delights was unattractive to me as an afternoon snack. Whenever I was there, Auntie Irene always made sure she had something especially for me, usually cookies or pastries.

I think that Auntie Irene would have liked to have a daughter. Instead, she had a son, Jojo, with her husband, Mr. Antoni, a man even bigger than her. One afternoon when my mother and I were visiting her at her house, Auntie Irene took me in front of her linen armoire that towered over me. She opened it to show her collection of neatly folded white cotton and linen sheets, turned to me, bent her knees, crouched a little in order to communicate better with me and said pointing at the linen:

"Hear me well my *Mouninette* — little pretty. I will give you all this if you marry Jojo." Jojo was not unattractive, but I did not see myself marrying anybody. At 10 years old I had already made plans to leave La Ciotat and dance at the Paris Opera House when I grew up. Auntie Irene seemed serious. I felt awful. I did not want to hurt her feelings, so I said that I

would. She kissed me on both cheeks and turned to my mother who was trying to keep a serious face:

“Ah! Marie, now we’re not only friends. We are family. Let’s eat something!”

My first ever crush, at 10 years old, was for one of the Muller brothers who was a year or two older than me and whose first name I do not remember. He never knew that he was my favorite boy. I would have never had the nerve to let him know. He was blond with beautiful blue eyes. I saw him walking about the beach in his tiny emerald green bathing suit, tanned with his hair bleached by the sun, his eyes made even bluer. I never knew what his story was, where he lived or which school he went to. In my eyes no one in that little world of mine could compare to him when it came to handsomeness. With the look and the surname, he probably had some northern European blood, most likely German. It bothered me a little to be in awe before a type of beauty that could have been Hitler’s favorite, but Muller acted like us, spoke like us, he was a member of our tribe.

Muller might have been living in *La Cité Ouvrière,* The Workers Town, a neighborhood built by the shipyard administration at the end of the 19th century to accommodate their workers. La Cité Ouvrière was located close to the beach where we, La Ciotat’s blue collar portion of the population, hung out in the summer. Except for the beach I had never seen him anywhere else, except once at La Cité.

It was on a Sunday. La Cité was having its annual feast. An amateurish variety group was entertaining the crowd from a stage placed on the plaza, located in the center of the neighborhood. A woman came on stage and started singing a popular tune. She was not the best of singers and the verses of the song she had chosen were too long for her to complete in one breath. Making it even worse, the natural pace of the song quickened as it progressed. She would pause halfway through each verse to catch her breath and then continued on; all the while swaying in a rhythmic fashion even through the pauses. The rowdy Cité Ouvrière crowd began accompanying her by filling each pause with a *Pompom, Pompom*, meant to accentuate the beat. Mercilessly mocking her, it started slowly.

The woman: *“A la Gare Saint Lazare”*;

The Crowd: “Pompom, Pompom”;

The woman: *“A l’horloge pendue”*;

The Crowd: “Pompom, Pompom”;

The woman: *“J’ai compté quatre quarts”*;

The crowd: “Pompom, Pompom”;

The woman: *“Mais tu n’es pas venu”*;

The crowd: “Pompom, Pompom”

…

The crowd’s enthusiasm grew as more and more people began to participate, men, women and children coming out of their houses or appearing at their windows to “Pompom, Pompom” along. As the crowd swayed back and forth the “Pompom, Pompom”s grew into a quickening crescendo. Eventually intimidated and overwhelmed, the poor breathless woman left the stage without finishing her song. I felt terrible for her but never dared to ask anybody to stop. The object of my crush, who was standing directly in front of the stage, had taken great pleasure in the event. While I was disappointed in him, it was not enough to extinguish my unspoken awe.

One summer, about ten years ago, my oldest friend Pascal who was living in the Emirates, and I visited in La Ciotat at the same time. We spent a lot of time together and went to the beach almost daily. The place had not changed much. The crowd was still largely made up of locals. One day I recognized a group of guys I had known as a child. They were sitting around a table on the terrace of the concession. One of them was the Muller brother I had found so handsome. Fifty years had passed and to my great disappointment the barrel bellied guy who was sampling Pernod with great gusto on that day had nothing to do with the Aryan god I used to watch as a child. His hair was now white, his face puffy. He recognized me and said hello. I wondered if he might not have liked me too back in the days.

Auntie Irene and Marie Louise are gone. All my childhood heroes and favorite people are gone. The only survivor of that era who is still around is Mado Miglierina, who was once a carrier for the Underground. At the age of eighteen, she regularly carried weapons in a suitcase on her bicycle across the Demarcation Line, which separated the free and occupied zones. The rest of her life was spent cleaning houses as the sole supporter of her family, eventually succeeding in buying her own apartment by dint of hard work. Today she has Alzheimer’s disease and does not recognize me anymore when I pass her on the street. “Mado, this is Joelle Ballonzoli.” “Ah yes! I didn’t recognize you. You’re all grown up. It’s been some time…” she says and walks away.