

THE NAKED HEROINE



THE NAKED HEROINE

JOHN IZBICKI

UMBRIA PRESS

*To those who, unlike Lydia, did not manage to return,
to those who received no medals but perished,
I wish to dedicate this book.*

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1. Lydia's medals: Légion d'Honneur: Chevalier (knighthood); The Insignia of Free France F.F.L. At the back of this Lydia's Resistance Number-38853; Légion d'Honneur: Chevalier (knighthood); Croix: de guerre 39-40 with palm. Croix: de Combattant Volontaire 39-45. Croix: de Combattant Volontaire Résistant. Croix: de Combattant. Médaille: Déporté Résistant. Médaille: Reconnaissance de la France Libre. Médaille: Commemorative-39-45 avec barrette Libération. Médaille: engagé volontaire. Special Insignia of the Resistance Movement inscribed Lydia de Lipski, Lieutenant of the Group F—I Fighting France, Ravensbrück 1943-45 Croix de Guerre. This is Lydia's Ravensbrück Concentration Camp number with the red triangle denoting the N.N. Block (Nacht und Nebel) and the black circle denoting the Punishment block (Strafblock). Insignia of the Federation des Déportées de In rue Boulin Villiers. Insignia of the Federation des Déportés de la rue Leroux.

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PREFACE

Newspaper journalists are constantly on the lookout for ‘exclusive’ stories – and some journalists even make the mistake of telling their news editors that a story they have submitted is ‘exclusive’. This often turns out to be the kiss of death. News Editors have a tendency to sit on them, believing them to be ‘holdworthy’. Only when other rival papers rush such stories into print are they considered worthy of seeing the light of day. Stories that can be labelled ‘scoops’ are, of course, far rarer than exclusives and should be kept even quieter.

Although I have managed to gather a fair number of exclusives throughout a lifetime of journalism, I can count less than a handful of genuine ‘scoops’.

The first was my interview with a man who had somehow managed to remain unknown to the world, though goodness only knows why. His name: Paul Getty. I met him a matter of days after I had arrived in Paris in the mid-fifties to cover France for Kemsley Newspapers – a large group, which included the *Sunday Times*, the *Sunday Graphic*, the *Sunday Empire News* (believe it or not) and a host of regional papers throughout the U K. It really was an absolute chance meeting. I met a man who told me he was on his way to the christening of an oil tanker. I was still a little green and had no idea that oil tankers could be christened. He then told me of the man who owned this and many other tankers. ‘You ought to go and speak to him,’ he advised. ‘You’ll find him at the George V Hotel.’

And that’s exactly what I did. When Getty heard that I was actually at the grand hotel’s reception, he promised to give me ‘just ten minutes’. We

struck up an almost immediate relationship and the ten minutes turned into about two hours during which he kept me totally mesmerised by disclosing his life and many loves, his fleet of oil tankers and his money – lots and lots of money amounting to many billions of dollars.

The long and detailed feature I filed clearly failed to impress the short-sighted powers that be. Only my lead sentence – ‘*How would you like to be a millionaire forty times over?*’ – made it into Peter Nelson’s gossip column in the *Empire News*. It was a decent paragraph, which had summarised Getty’s proud possessions, but it was not my ‘scoop’! Only the eagle-eyes of some lucky guy on the American Newsweek magazine had spotted that paragraph and produced a cover story some three or four weeks afterwards which showed a portrait of Getty with a caption that filled every column-inch of space and introduced readers to ‘*The Richest American in the World!*’

‘Didn’t you write something about this man Getty?’ I was asked by an embarrassed News Editor the following day. And when I told him angrily and in no uncertain terms that I had written some 1,500 words about him, he asked me to re-dictate the entire feature again.

It was, of course, too late to resuscitate my story but it taught me my first really important lesson to keep ‘scoops’ quiet – just like the one I saw tucked quietly away in the classified columns of *Le Monde* one Tuesday morning. It was a simple announcement in the French equivalent of our Court Circular, of an award of a *Légion d’Honneur Chevalier* (equivalent to a British knighthood) to a woman. Her name was given as Lydia Lova de Korczac Lipski and the award was in recognition of her bravery in the French Resistance. At first I pushed the newspaper aside but after about five or ten minutes, I pulled it back again and re-read the short announcement. Who, I thought, was this woman and what had she done to help the Resistance movement while France was under Nazi occupation? I searched through the other French papers on my desk and found the same brief announcement in the pages of *France Soir* and *Paris Presse*.

I decided to investigate further and discovered from the *Journal Officiel* that Mlle de Korczac Lipski had already been decorated with the *Croix de Guerre* with Palm and numerous other medals, including the *Croix de Combattant Volontaire Résistant* and the *Médaille Réconnaissance de la France Libre*. Lydia de Korczac Lipski, it transpired, was the most decorated woman in France. I was growing increasingly interested in her. Who was she? What did she do in the Resistance? And what was she doing now? I had to find out.

At that time, the war had been over for more than fifteen years. France

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was facing different problems, different troubles. Algeria was beginning to show signs of revolt. French expatriates who had made their homes there were campaigning for an *Algerie française*. The Nazi invasion of France and the thousands of marching jackboots along Paris boulevards were just a distant memory. So the renewed decoration of a woman who had worked with the Resistance Movement proved all the more mysterious. I simply had to find out more.

The only thing that was clear was that her name was Polish. I telephoned the *Journal Officiel* and asked their newsdesk what they could tell me about Mlle Lipski. I was told that she was a dancer and that she had already received ten other decorations for bravery.

I desperately needed a break and it came soon enough when the telephone in my office began to ring. My *Journal Officiel* contact had phoned me back to tell me that Mlle Lipski was better known as Lydia Lova and she was the top-billing nude dancer of the Folies-Bergère. Within one delicious minute, an interesting little story had turned into a sensational scoop.

The Folies-Bergère had earned itself the title of one of the best music halls of Paris, second only in reputation and excellence to the Moulin Rouge in Pigalle. It was the Moulin which had continued to attract most tourists and a goodly proportion of European royalty. Toulouse Lautrec, the unattractive little hunchback who had become one of France’s finest painters and the Moulin Rouge’s most frequent visitor and patron, also became that music hall’s greatest public relations officer. Indeed, he still retains that unwritten title.

But the Folies-Bergère somehow managed to draw huge crowds of G.I.s after the liberation of Paris and American tourists continue to flock to the theatre that had become best known for its nude dancers. From 1911 onwards, dancers were allowed to cavort around the huge stage naked. There was never anything obscene on the Folies stage. Choreographers of great distinction produced ballets of beauty that brought cheering audiences to their feet. When Lydia Lova joined the cast of dancers as a soloist, the reputation of the Folies soared. Reservations had to be made months ahead or one would have to face disappointment or make do with the second-best – the expensive Lido on the Champs Elysées.

Nudes had first appeared at the Folies in 1911 and it created not only an uproar in the French Press but it also created long, noisy queues leading to the Folies’ box office. The theatre’s newly appointed director, Paul Derval, waited until the end of the First World War in 1918, when he had reached the grand old age of 38, when he went all-out to celebrate the newfound peace by producing a show that concentrated on lavish costumes and dancers who

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2. At the Folies

pirouetted in the nude. Derval continued in this highly successful fashion for nearly 50 further years at the Folies. His shows were to feature such (fully dressed) stars as Maurice Chevalier, Fernandel, Yves Montand, the wonderful Edith Piaf and Charlot, better known in the rest of Europe as Charlie Chaplin.

In 1936, Paul Derval decided to attract Josephine Baker from her tremendous successes on the New York stage to the Folies theatre in the rue Richer, close to the rue Bergère (street of the shepherdess) and the Grands Boulevards. At the same time, he appointed Michel Gyarmathy, who was born Miklos Ehrenfeld in Hungary, the son of Saul Ehrenfeld and owner of a dairy in Balassagyarmath. Later, when the young Miklos had studied graphics and scenography at the College of Applied Arts in Budapest, he changed his name to Miklos Gyarmathy at the advice of a good friend, a woman dancer and singer, who told him: 'You'll never get on in life with a name like Ehrenfeld'. In 1933 he moved to Paris he changed Miklos to Michel – and never looked back.

It is rare for two men to stay with one company for as long as Paul Derval and Michel Gyarmathy. Derval, born in 1880, joined the Folies in 1918 to produce the first of his many glorious shows. It celebrated not only the end of the First World War but also the start of France's "*années folles*", which brought nudism to the stage of the Folies and eventually influenced the founding of America's Ziegfeld Folies as well as the Casino theatre at Las Vegas and the Teatro Follies in Mexico. In fact, Las Vegas decided to produce a straight copy of the Parisien Folies at the Tropicana in 1959. It continued non-stop for just about 50 years, closing its curtains for the last time in 2009. Derval died in 1966, aged 86, having spent half a century at the theatre that had become his veritable child. He was mourned by all who had followed him on the great stage of the Folies and his many thousands of followers among the general public, particularly the tourists who flocked to the theatre during just about every visit to Paris.

Michel Gyarmathy stayed at the theatre 60 years – even longer than Derval – (from 1936 until his death in 1996), designing its posters and costumes and directing its dancers including the beautiful Lydia Lova, who forms the leading subject of this book. Not only did Lydia dance in the nude; she also acted as understudy to the Folies' many stars, singing their songs and even displaying herself in their acrobatic acts. When I discovered that the woman who was being decorated with the Légion d'Honneur for bravery and who had indeed been named as the most decorated woman in France, I simply had to approach her in my professional capacity and write her story.

Lydia was better known in the Fifties as the 'darling of the Folies'. I

expected to have an easy job getting her to tell me her story. I was totally wrong in that assumption. She answered my simple request with a shake of her head and arms: 'If you want to write about my dancing at the theatre, then please go ahead. I have no objections. But please forget the other matter. It is in the past and I'd rather forget it', she told me firmly but with kindness accompanied by a generous smile.

Sometime later I discovered that her objections were not only a question of forgetting the past. It was clear that Lydia would never, could never forget the many gruesome tortures and miseries she had experienced at the hands of the Nazis. Her reluctance to speak freely to me or any other journalist was that she refused to have the name Lydia Lova connected in any way with her real name – Lydia de Korczak Lipski, daughter of a Polish prince. The very idea that people might think she was drawing on her background for cheap publicity was totally abhorrent to her.

But after I had made contact with her father and turned him into an ally, she finally agreed to let me speak with her at length and write a short series of feature articles for my newspaper group in England. She had not the faintest idea – and in truth, nor did I – that my four articles in *The Sunday Graphic* would create a minor sensation and that, as a result, she would have to deal with gangs of hacks and paparazzi for many weeks.

The question then arose whether I should undertake a more detailed task: the writing of Lydia's biography. Again, she displayed the utmost reluctance – until her father decided to ask a family friend to make some discreet enquiries about me. The friend knew the editor of *France Soir* and put the question to him: 'Do you happen to know a British journalist by the name of John Iz-bee-kee? He writes for some big English papers, including *Le Sunday Graphique*.' The editor called a good contact of his – Ronald Payne of *The Daily Telegraph* in the Place Vendome.

And here we were back with coincidences in a small world. My own Kemsley Newspaper office happened to be on the same floor and at the other end of the same apartment as the *Telegraph* and Ronnie and I were good mates. I had passed the Lipski enquiry with flying colours and spent many weeks together with Lydia and her father in his Left Bank apartment, talking, talking, taking a mass of notes and tape recording our conversations.

Whereas my *Sunday Graphic* articles had sketched a large part of her life at the Folies-Bergère and skated through some of her activities during the Nazi occupation of France, the details of her amazing life had a profound effect upon me.

So what was the sketchy part? It showed Lydia dancing to packed houses



3. Lydia: now she can afford a car... though only a Vespa.

of the Folies-Bergère night after night, being cheered hoarse and showered with flowers from American, British, French, Italian and, yes, even German admirers. Her naked body showed no signs of any scars. But beneath the greasepaint and the smile upon her lips lay the agony of a memory of past tortures and the many beatings she had endured in French prisons and a Nazi concentration camp.

One of Lydia's most famous dances showed her in a pas-de-deux with the devil, a physically magnificent young male and almost nude dancer, both of them cavorting across a blood-red stage with real-looking flames licking the edges of a deep pit in the centre of the stage hell. The devil plays a haunting melody upon a glass violin, whose tune is taken up by the orchestra in the theatre's own and very real pit. Lydia, a beautiful fallen angel, pirouettes around the stage, enticing the devil who, of course, falls madly in love with her. He lures her ever closer to him and closer also to the fiery pit and, as they dance together, the flames leap ever higher until these two hellish lovers are engulfed by the flames and disappear into the pit.

This particular ballet always proved one of the most popular with audiences at the Folies-Bergère. But to Lydia, who never failed to make her exit into the wings and back to her dressing room with the tears streaming from her eyes, that ballet brought back her most dreadful memories. It symbolised her past, her childhood. It conjured back the nightmares of Fresnes Prison and Ravensbrück Camp where she had been confronted by the devil incarnate and almost engulfed in the flames of the crematorium.

And when Lydia used to return to her apartment in the rue Hegesippe-Moreau, high over the rooftops of Montmartre in Paris, she used to drink a large glass of milk and go to bed with a prayer that this time perhaps, she would not be visited by those dreadful dreams of death. But they did come. They almost always did.

No medal, however golden, could have ever have wiped clean the past for Lydia or manage to interpret fully the true heroism of that naked dancer of the Folies-Bergère.

John Izbicki,
Horsmonden, 2014

CHAPTER ONE: CURTAIN UP

The stage director replaced one of his five telephones onto its carriage. He had just spoken to Paul Derval, Monsieur le Directeur of the Folies, in his office. It was his normal nightly routine. 'All's ready,' was the stage director's only message. 'Okay, take it away,' replied Derval.

'Beginners please. Come on girls, hurry up. Curtain up in two minutes.' The stage director, standing behind his thirty-six complicated looking dials, switches and loudspeakers, sent his voice out to every dressing-room. Some of the showgirls screamed in mock horror. 'Hold it,' cried one. 'I'm not undressed yet.'

The three 340 employees of the Folies-Bergère stood ready for another show to go on. Usherettes were hurrying the latecomers to their seats; programme sellers were persuading customers to buy the special souvenir booklet instead of just the ordinary programme. And how about a little nude doll that you can mould into whatever shape or position you like? How about that for taking back home? Seventy stage hands stood at their correct places, ready to shift and replace scenery within seconds. The eighteen electricians checked over the seventy-two switches that controlled the 5,500 lights making up the show and pulled down the switch 'Curtain Front'. The soft glow hit the crimson curtain in the front of the house. The conductor made his way into the pit to a faint ripple of applause, bowed, turned to his orchestra and — the overture was being played for the 1,214th time that show.

Lydia Lova sat in her dressing-room on the first floor of the Folies. Beside her, a stack of unopened letters. The stamps on the envelopes signified that

her fans were not only living in France. There were letters from America and Britain, from Italy and Spain, from Israel and the Argentine, from Germany and Sweden. Lydia probably used to have one of the best stamp collections in France.

The tall blonde whose slim but perfectly moulded body had attracted Folies audiences for more than eleven years, slit open one of the letters. She still had a good half hour before she was needed on stage. It was a brief note written in an almost childish hand and came from Germany. In fairly passable French it said :

‘My dear Lydia—You will not remember me but I remember you so well. We were at Ravensbrück together. I just want to say how very happy I am for you that the French Government have recognized all the good you have done for France and for all of us. I read yesterday that you were given the Légion d’Honneur by General Masson. We who remember are very proud of you. Good luck to you, our little heroine, always and all my love —

Rosa Stern (No. 39486): Kiel.’

Lydia read the letter over a second time, her eyes filling with tears. Little Rosa. She remembered now. Little Rosa — the Jewish child who loved to dance. Poor Rosa. She would never ever dance again. Her legs had both been amputated in the camp. Lydia looked at herself in the long, well lit mirror. How long ago it all seemed — those years of horror.

It did not seem quite fair to Lydia as she looked at her greasepaint covered face, her rich looking plumes that she had attached to her head in readiness for her first dance of the evening. Here she was, thought Lydia, in good health — touch wood, still attractive despite her thirty-nine years, with a body that was envied by many a Frenchwoman and certainly by quite a number of other girls in the show, and yet she was being awarded medals while other girls — girls like Rosa Stern had to stay cripples for the rest of their lives and live only on nightmare memories without so much as a letter of thanks from some official at the government. ‘No, it’s not fair,’ said Lydia to her image in the mirror.

The Légion d’Honneur presented to her on March 12, 1960 was her tenth decoration. She had already been awarded the Croix de Guerre and eight other medals. And yet letters of commendation had come from the very highest government sources, the last being signed by President De Gaulle himself. These honours had been paid to Lydia Lova because of her work for the French Resistance movement when she was a mere slip of a girl.

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‘Oh, but it is so long ago, all that,’ sighed Lydia to the mirror on the wall. Three sharp raps on the door of her dressing-room brought her back to the reality of the theatre — the reality of make-belief. ‘Five minutes Lydia,’ the call boy shouted and passed on down the corridor to warn other artists of their cues. Lydia gave a little shriek of surprise. She would be late if she wasn’t careful. Gyarmathy would never forgive her.

Michel Gyarmathy, a small, thick-set man with wavy hair and almost white moustache, was the artistic director of the Folies — the man who discovered Lydia. He was a stickler for punctuality and had, in his time, given proverbial rockets to such celebrities as Mistinguette (of whom the sculptor Rodin said: ‘If I had to personify the Muse of the Music Hall, I would give her the legs of Mistinguette’) and Josephine Baker, Maurice Chevalier and the immortal comedian Fernandel. To be late for one’s cue at the Folies is a cardinal sin for even twenty seconds could have dislocated the whole three-and-a-half-hour show.

Lydia threw off her dressing-gown, touched up her tear-stained cheeks with powder, made a rapid check of the rest of her make up and hurried out of the room. The orchestra was already playing the opening bars of her scene.

The curtain rose upon a deep red, fiery stage. A staircase placed about half-way up-stage led to a realistic pit from which appeared even more realistic looking flames. Lydia, bare-footed, bare-breasted and naked apart from the traditional cache-sex — in this case a piece of gold and sequined cloth in the shape of a fig leaf — strode onto the stage, her long, beautiful legs cutting through the red glow like silver comets in the night. A burst of applause greeted her dance. The audience was not entirely unaware who this girl was. The few Frenchmen who were sitting in the circle or strolling in the promenoir — the part at the rear of the stalls, once used by the better-class prostitute of the area to pick up custom — called out ‘Vive Lydia’ or ‘*Qu’elle est belle, la poupette!*’

Lydia did not hear the voices calling. She danced as usual. Perfect. Joining her dance was an Adonis of a man — himself almost naked, his body well oiled and shining to set off his muscles. He played a glass violin which hypnotized Lydia. This was obviously meant to be the devil himself, and the whole dance a *pas-de-deux* between this handsome Satan and the beautiful girl until, at the end, both would fall into the fiery pit that represented hell.

Few knew the symbolism of this scene where Lydia was concerned. She often had to dance with the devil as companion and had been to the very centre of hell. Indeed, she missed being burned by a matter of a few hours. For Lydia lived in a hell on earth, a nightmare that often returned to her

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4, 5, 6. Reflections in the mirror.

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7. With some of the Folies Bergère Girls in the Wings.

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8. Ooh, la-la!



9. With one of her partners Michel Arène.

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during the nights when she entered her small but comfortable apartment. Home for her was the fifth floor of the rue Hegesippe-Moreau, a modest little street that overlooks the famous Montmartre Cemetery to the north and the Place Clichy and Pigalle to the south.

She adored her street. Everyone knew her. La Mère Berthe, who kept a greengrocery stall a few yards from Lydia's house used to throw her a half-toothed grin and a cheerful wave whenever she came down to do her shopping. Le Grand Jules who gave up pimping in order to marry and open a little bistro round the corner used to offer her an aperitif once a week and recall the old days when he ran a highly successful brothel for German soldiers and collected information via his girls for the Resistance. And the girls themselves — they were still there, too. Josette and Colette and Jeanne.

Of course, things were no longer as easy as before. First it was the brothels that were made illegal. Then De Gaulle clamped down on the girls themselves. What was Paris coming to was what Josette and Colette and Jeanne wanted to know. Even the tourists were no longer the good business they once were. There just wasn't the money about any more. You actually had to bargain your way to a session. Bargain! A girl had her pride, when all was said and done. But, then, a girl had to eat too. If a customer didn't want to go along for forty francs, well, you just had to drop the price a little.

'Tu viens chéri? Je peux te montrer beaucoup de choses. Viens, viens...!'

'But I've not got anything like 50 francs. Je n'ay pah 50 francs. Troh chair. Troh chair.'

'Bon alors. Mais tu as sans doute un petit, petit quarante francs—'

'Forty francs? You're mad. I'll give you 25 francs, not a penny more. Ventysank francs, non plus.'

How can you keep your room looking nice and tidy and your child well educated and fed when people just didn't have the money — or, for that matter, the inclination. Sex was getting cheaper, that's what it was. You can get it for free from a lot of those birds you see in them cheap dance halls and Self Service places. Self Service... Who'd ever have thought that you'd ever see Self Services in Paris? *Merde*, what a life when you have even Self Service Sex. Things were not as they had been in the 'good old days.'

Paris had changed. That was certainly true, thank God, thought Lydia as she wiped off her make-up after the show. It certainly wasn't the same. Even if the O.A.S. and the F.L.N. put together were throwing plastic bombs about all over the place and people were being arrested by the French themselves for shouting slogans and scrawling '*Algérie Francaise*' or '*Vive De Gaulle*' across Metro walls and all around the city — it was still better than her

nightmares of 'the old days'. For they weren't the 'good old days'. They were bad, very bad, the days Lydia remembered every night when she put out the light and turned round trying to get some sleep.

At least, she thought, her son was safe now. He was growing up to be a real little gentleman and a wonderful artist. He'd make a great painter one day if there doesn't come another war, another dictatorship, gas chambers and crematoriums. He'd be safe. She'd see to it that Patrick would be safe. He was fifteen and being educated. She had never had the chances Patrick now had. And even if she could not really give him her name, he was hers. He was her son and she'd see to it that nobody would ever be able to take him away from her.

Lydia prayed, closing her eyes and clasping together her long, fine, artistic hands. 'Dear God, let Patrick be safe and grow up strong and healthy and wise and let him not make the same mistakes as his father. And, please God, dearest God, clean my soul of its memories. Please, please, God, let me not dream those dreams again tonight. Let me not dream.'

CHAPTER TWO: FROM POLAND TO PARIS

Lydia de Korczak Lipski. That was the name on the birth certificate, registered in Warsaw, Poland, on January 8, 1925. The Prince Wladimir de Korczak Lipski had been pacing up and down the waiting-room of the Warsaw general maternity hospital for what seemed an eternity and what, in fact, was only six hours when the news was brought out to him that his wife had given him a daughter — by caesarian operation. It had been a difficult operation to say the least. Medicine was primitive by today's standards: Lydia came into the world the hard way and fate saw to it that much of that life was to remain hard.

Not that Lydia was not spoiled. Her parents were rich. Her father, a direct descendant of Prince de Korczak who was King of Hungary in the year 1120, owned three castles in the Ukraine to which were attached large stables, forests and estates. Her mother, who was reckoned to be one of the most beautiful women in Poland at that time, was a ballet dancer — of the classical school. But the Ukraine was Russian and the Lipski property was confiscated by the Communists during the Revolution. Castles and estates and horses and riches and high society soon meant nothing any more. The First World War and the Revolution had evened out the social scales.

*The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate;
God made them high and lowly and ordered their estate...*

The old Victorian hymn had been adopted and sung in Poland before the war taught the preachers and the people that, whatever its meaning, blood ran red in rich and poor alike and both could die for their country.



10. Lydia aged five months with her father and mother in Warsaw.

It was during the First World War that Wladimir de Korczak Lipski joined the British Army. The Poles are a proud race and a ruthlessly hard-working and intelligent one. It was pride and intelligence that made Wladimir volunteer to fight on the side of Great Britain, a country that was still as royal as the king of hearts and that still had all the jingoism of Kipling and Palmerston and Queen Victoria to lead it to victory. The British colonies were among the most respected and richest in the world. The Englishman was looked upon as someone to be trusted in any circumstances, whose word was his bond, whose power was supreme. The British believed and upheld traditions of all kinds; they had a heritage that could not be out-herited and had given the world Shakespeare and Milton and Keats and the little word 'fair'. Poland's greatest literary genius, Joseph Conrad, had joined Britain and had become one of her finest novelists. Wladimir de Korczak Lipski considered all these things and decided that if fight he must, he would lend his allegiance to the British Empire.

When the war ended, Wladimir was kept on the British payroll and, from 1919 until 1922 served as a full lieutenant in the British Secret Service under the command and guidance of General Carton de Wiart, who was at that time the chief of the British Military Mission in Warsaw. It was General de Wiart who, later, appointed Lipski to an official position:

'Prince Lipski, I have called for you today to make you a proposition.' General de Wiart sat at his large mahogany desk, twirled his thick moustache and cleared his throat. 'Your services have not gone unnoticed by our Foreign Office and I want you to take over as Passport Control Officer here in Warsaw.'

Wladimir felt a lump in his throat and an upsurge of pride and gratitude made him blush. 'Thank you, sir,' was all he could muster up at the time, although his thoughts went racing helter skelter around his brain shouting happiness and love. The British were fair. It was true. By jingo, it was true.

'Now, I'm not quite sure how you are going to take this, Lipski, but, if you accept the offer of this appointment, there's just one little snag. You see, to be Passport Control Officer, an Englishman ought really to be appointed. I've put your name forward, you see. But you're a Pole, aren't you?'

'Well, yes, sir, but....'

'So the only way round it would be to give you a British passport. You'd still be a Pole, ol' man, no doubt about that, what? But you'd be really one big step forward. You'd have dual nationality, you see — and British nationality at that. Not everyone's offered British nationality on a plate, what? Damn wonderful chance when you look at it. Damn wonderful....'

And so Lydia's father became British.

But the situation in Poland for the Lipski family worsened day by day. Aristocrats were not popular with the Polish people and were becoming more unpopular still — until those who used to take off their hats to a prince now passed him by without a glance. Later, they refused not only to acknowledge the upper classes but would hurl open abuse at them. So it was, too, with the Lipskis.

And that is why, at the age of seven, Lydia came to France as did many Poles and Russians and Ukrainians at the time. The Lipskis lived just off the Promenade des Anglais in Nice. Every day was a sunny one for the family. Lydia would run naked along the beach and let the rays of the sun burn her body to a roasted brown. She soon became the darling of English tourists who invaded the resort and whose financial glory had helped build Nice into France's leading holiday playground. To the delight of the rich socialites from London, Manchester, and Birmingham, Lydia danced pirouettes in the deep golden sands. Ice cream, lemonade and cream buns were showered upon her by kindly matrons in bathing costumes.

'You'll grow up to be a great dancer,' said one elderly Englishman in white flannel trousers, open-neck shirt and straw hat. From that day on, whenever anyone asked little Lydia what she wanted to be when she grew up, she would reply: 'A great dancer.' The Folies-Bergère, however, were far from her mind. She had never even heard of that theatre.

Since Lydia's mother had been brought up in the traditions of the classical ballet, she felt a natural pride whenever her hard-begotten little girl expressed a desire to dance and showed obvious talents in that field. Money was still no problem for the de Lipskis. Lydia was sent to an Ecole de Danse in Nice and soon showed a flair for dancing that surprised and conquered her teachers.

But Lydia's father wanted his daughter to receive a higher education. 'Nice is all very well for those who want to waste away their lives in gambling and dining and wining, but it's not the right atmosphere for a child like Lydia. If she wants to dance, she can always do so later on. After all, France is full of talented dancers. Every Tom, Dick and Harry is a budding Diaghilev and every midinette sees herself as either a Pavlova or a Sarah Bernhard. I don't want Lydia to grow up with any false ideas. Don't forget, we're not French. We're Poles. And whatever you may think of the French and their seeming lack of prejudice against foreigners, it's there. Deep down it's there. Unless Lydia learns to become a proper French girl, she'll never be accepted by them. Mark my words. She'll never be accepted.'

The day Lydia was packed off to the convent school just outside Paris, the world crashed around her feet. Or so it seemed to her at the time.

‘I don’t want to go. I don’t want to leave you,’ she screamed through hot, burning tears that splashed down upon her starched white frock. ‘Mummy, Mummy, please... I... I’ll die if I’m away from you... I’ll die. I know I’ll die.’ And she wept loudly.

Irenka de Korczac Lipski scooped the child up into her arms, cooing to her, soothing her, rocking her just as she used to do when Lydia was a baby. ‘There, there, there, my little darling, my little baby... it won’t be for very long, darling... not long, I promise you. Soon you’ll get used to it at the convent, my sweet, and after a while Daddy and I shall come to see you and, before you know it, you’ll be finished there and you’ll be able to dance properly. Oh, darling, darling, sweetheart, please, please don’t cry. Mummy is with you, my love. She is with you, always. Always.’

Children soon forget their heartaches. And, after the first days of misery and homesickness, Lydia grew to love life at the convent. Nice and the sunshine and the beach and the sea — all seemed very far away.

Her mother had been right. She was not to be there for very long. On her tenth birthday, her parents surprised her. Mother Marie Josephine came into the classroom. Everyone stood up, all twenty-five little girls with their well scrubbed faces and their oft-washed blue aprons, looked at Mother Superior with childish expectancy.

‘Come out Lydia de Lipski.’ The voice sounded terribly matter-of-fact. Twenty-four faces turned upon Lydia as she slowly made her way down her aisle. What could she have done? What dreadful crime could she have committed? The children contemplated the reason for Mother Superior’s visit, contemplated why she placed her hand on Lydia’s shoulder and led her out of the classroom. Who could possibly continue concentrating on lessons when so great a mystery had enveloped the school? Maybe it was because she had giggled aloud during mass that very morning... or maybe because she had danced in the dormitory after lights out three days ago... maybe she had told something dreadful during confession and Mother Superior had heard about it. Mother Superior knows everything. That is, after all, why she is called Mother Superior. Some of the children silently prayed for Lydia’s soul and that she would not be punished too harshly.

Lydia, herself, was also wondering what the nun’s journey meant as she was being carefully but firmly guided along the corridor and down the long, cold flight of stairs to Mother Superior’s office. I’ve done nothing wrong, thought Lydia. Maybe ... maybe something is wrong at home. Maybe my Mummy is ill. Or maybe it’s Daddy. Maybe... oh, God, no. Maybe they’re dead Oh, God.... The last words she half screamed out aloud and the old

nun stopped in her tracks. ‘Why, child, whatever is the matter with you? You know, you should never take the name of Our Lord in vain. What on earth made you cry out like that?’

But Lydia was crying softly now. ‘Why, Lydia, Lydia! Why are you crying? There’s nothing to be crying for. Goodness gracious, anyone would think you’d be happy to see your parents again. Oh, dear, there, I’ve said it. And there I was, meaning to keep my mouth shut and let it be a surprise like it was meant to be.’

Lydia stopped crying. The words the old nun had spoken had not quite sunk into her head yet. She must have misheard. ‘My parents? Am I to see my Mummy and Daddy again soon. Oh, Mother, do you really mean it?’

By now they had reached the study. The door was flung open and there, before her, stood her parents. She had almost forgotten what they looked like, even though it was barely a year since she had come to the convent from Nice.

The Lipskis had moved to Paris and took Lydia home with them. From the convent, Lydia now went to a lycée in Sèvres. It was at this school that Lydia first took a real interest in drawing and designing. Until now her childish fancies had only craved for the dance. As she grew into her teens she became more realistic. To get on in the world, she thought, one ought to have something more than just dance. As she and her father would go for walks on the roof of the world every Sunday afternoon and look down upon Paris from the tip of Montmartre and the Sacré Coeur, she would look at the artists covering their canvases in the Place du Tertre. Her father would hold her comfortably on his shoulders so she could have a better view over the heads of the crowds gathered around.

She saw the Sacré Coeur painted from all conceivable angles. *Voilà*, le Sacré Coeur from the rue St. Rustique ... and *voilà*, the Sacré Coeur from the rue Azais... and again, the Sacré Coeur from the rue St. Vincent and the Sacré Coeur from the rue Lamarck.... She knew the Church of the Sacred Heart better even than her own bedroom. And the styles! Goodness, the styles! Cubist Sacré Coeur, cut up into little blocks like the ones she used to play with on the beach in Nice; impressionist Sacré Coeur, wish-washy, haziness seen through the mist of white and blue and green oils; realist Sacré Coeur—just like a photograph without any heart or feeling but touchable; tachist Sacré Coeur in glorious coloured blobs dotted over large canvases; some few bearded young men were even painting the church so that it could not be recognized at all even though they swore it was there all right. They called themselves abstract painters and followers of some Spaniard called Picasso.

Wladimir soon realized Lydia had an eye for colour and shape and sent her to the Paris Industrial Design College. There, her teachers praised her for her rapid understanding of the subject and her skill with the pen. Later, Lydia looked back on that part of her education with gratitude. Shortly, sooner than she had ever expected, it was to come in very useful indeed. She also looked back on the part her mother had to play in her upbringing during this period. She was passionately interested in ballet and pleaded with her mother to let her take up lessons again. It did not take long to persuade Madame Lipski, for she had always spoiled her daughter from the moment the child was born.

‘Lydia, how would you like to go to dancing classes three times a week?’ her mother asked one evening. Madame Lipski was knitting baby clothes once again. Her pretty figure had rounded into full pregnancy, but her face had acquired a radiance Lydia had never before seen. She ran to her mother and threw her arms about her for joy.

‘Lydia, careful, or you’ll smother him. Oh dear, you’re not as light as you used to be — and nor is he....’ And she patted the load she had to carry with a gentle hand.

‘Him, Mother?’ Lydia looked at the outlined embryo. ‘How can you tell it’s a he?’

‘I can’t tell. I just know, darling. Well, after all, we’ve had a little girl. It’s only fair that you should have a brother to look after you later on in life, isn’t it? You’d like a brother, wouldn’t you?’

Lydia was still at that age when boys were of no interest to her whatever. She could never understand why men and women stood in long embrace at street corners. Men and women seemed to be kissing each other all over the place in Paris. Even when her parents took her to a restaurant, there would generally be couples who paid more attention to cuddling, fondling and kissing each other than to the food that was put before them. Silly, all this nonsense about kissing. Lydia did not understand any of it. So she just shrugged and said she didn’t really care one way or the other.

‘Tell me about the dancing school, Mother.’ The forthcoming baby was quite forgotten and the very idea brushed aside. After all, dancing was far more important. It was certainly far more fun. Who, after all, could dance with a baby?

‘Well, dear, I spoke to a dear old friend of mine yesterday and she said that if your father and I were willing, she would take you on at her school. Madame Städtz has taught some very great dancers, darling, so you’ll have to be on your very best behaviour. Some of her pupils at this moment are already stars at the Opera National — so you can see what competition you’ll

have. But — ‘and Madame Lipski picked up her knitting again—‘but I’m sure that, if you are prepared to work really hard, you’ll be able to show them a step or two quite soon. You have dancing in you — just as I had it in me. It’s in your blood, Lydia, and you cannot be rid of it. Your industrial what-is-it — design, that you have from your father. Dance you have from me.’

And so Lydia went to the Städtz Dancing School and first saw the Folies-Bergère. The school was next door to the theatre and quite a number of the Folies chorus girls and boys still came to Madame Städtz to carry on their dancing studies. Everyone had ambitions in those days to join either the ballet of the Opera or that of the Marquis de Cuevas. Very few succeeded. At least, thought Lydia, I shall be able one day to be the prima ballerina of the Opera. Though, she added in her mind, glancing at the tall, beautiful girls practising their steps at the bar, I shouldn’t mind the Folies either.

The Lipskis christened the baby Gerald. His birth had not been any easier than Lydia’s and he was a hefty, bouncing, screaming eight pounder. At first Lydia looked upon the new arrival as a menace. Everyone was looking at the baby as though he was certainly worth more than just a glance. To her, he looked just plain ugly — a red, slobbery face, with no teeth, a tuft of thin silky hair, all wrinkles and forever screaming. Why, he reminded her of the old man who would sit all day long outside the bistro in the next street. He must be about ninety-nine, yet he looked just like Gerald.

But, as the crying died down and people became more used to having the boy around the house, Lydia returned to her rightful place. Neighbours did not merely ask: ‘And how is the little blighter today, bless him?’ but also included her. ‘And how are the dear children today, Madame de Lipski, bless them?’ It made all the difference. Why, Lydia could even look at Gerald now. Before she was unable to get near him for all his admirers. She wondered whether anyone had ever made so much fuss about her when she was Gerald’s age. Suddenly she felt quite old but wished she were much older.

Gerald seemed to grow bigger every day and as he cried less, he laughed more. Now Lydia looked on him as a real live doll with whom she could play. She even learned how to change his nappies and how to make him bring up wind. This new addition to the Lipski household was quite fun.

It was 1938 and the chestnuts were dropping from the trees at the side of the Seine. Gerald could already speak a few words. He could say ‘maman’ and ‘papa’ though Lydia was still a little too difficult for him. So he called her ‘Biddi’ much to the amusement of all the family. There was so little to laugh at nowadays. Monsieur de Lipski had a good job at the Mazda radio valve factory in Paris, but instead of his usual laughter when he returned home in

the evening, his face would be grave. He and Lydia's mother would sit for hours in the evening talking in low voices so that the children — or, at least, Lydia — should not hear. Something strange was happening to Paris and Lydia's thirteen years could not quite understand what it was. People were quieter, more nervous and there was a tension at the Städtz School that she had never before experienced.

There were now not so many pupils at the school as before. Many of the faces she had grown to know so well had disappeared. Michel Rosenblum, the best boy dancer in her class had left France she was told. His parents had emigrated to America and taken him with them. Yes, strange things were certainly happening in Paris.

Her parents who rarely listened to the wireless now always switched on to hear the news and made her be quiet if she was playing noisy games with Gerald. People began to talk of war and someone called 'Itler.

At the school the children were talking of war too. But to them it was not something to be afraid of. It was rather something exciting like a game of Cowboys and Indians. 'My father is thinking of selling the shop and moving Mum and me to the country... just think of it, no more school for weeks and weeks maybe.'

Paris Soir headlines looked bigger and more sombre than ever before. 'Hitler Marches into Czechoslovakia'... 'World on the Brink' 'Chamberlain Flies to Munich' 'The Jewish Massacre'. What did it all mean. Lydia grew frightened, not because she realized the consequences of war, but because she saw her mother crying and rocking Gerald in her arms.

'Mummy, Mummy, why are you sad?' Lydia, tears already threatening to burst from her eyes, ran to her mother who folded her in one arm and wept all the more. 'Ah, chérie, ah, ma pauvre petite chérie,' her mother sighed between her soft sobs, using the little French she had learned to perfection, for Polish was still spoken to a large extent between her and Wladimir. 'It's nothing, darling. Mummy is just feeling a little homesick that's all — you know, like you were at first when you went to the convent.'

Homesick? But for whom? This was their home, here in Paris. What was this talk of homesickness? Lydia felt more baffled than ever by this growing and mysterious sadness that was sweeping the household and the city.

For a whole year the atmosphere had not changed in the Lipski house. Tension throughout the world was mounting. Hitler was becoming a threat to Europe. In the summer of 1939, while the sun shone down on Paris and cherry and apple blossom lent a splash of colour to the fountains of the Rond Point, M. de Lipski helped his wife pack her bags. Lydia looked sad as she,

too, was packing — but it was the baby clothes of Gerald, not her own that she folded so neatly and placed into a suitcase.

'Mummy and Gerald are going to Poland for a while,' she told her closest friend at school. 'Well, you see, it appears that Mummy has not seen her people in Poland for ages and ages and none of my uncles and aunts there have ever seen Gerald, so she is taking him along for them to look at. Gosh, I wish I could go with them. I can't really remember Poland at all. I bet it's a marvellous place, Warsaw. Oh, Ginette, if only I could go with them: It'll be a wonderful holiday for them. They'll be back in six weeks. But Dad says we can't afford for all of us to go, so he is taking me down to Nice for the usual four weeks instead. Huh. I'm so fed up with Nice. Gerald has all the luck — and he can't even appreciate it properly yet.'

At the station the farewell was a fond but normal one. Everyone hugged and kissed everyone several times, Lydia made one more attempt to ask whether she could go with her mother to Warsaw, and then the train steamed out to the accompaniment of handkerchief waving and see-you-soons.

It was the last time Lydia saw her mother.