

# **OLYMPIC GANGSTER**

The Legend of José Beyaert – Cycling Champion,  
Fortune Hunter and Outlaw

Matt Rendell



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To Vivi and to my father

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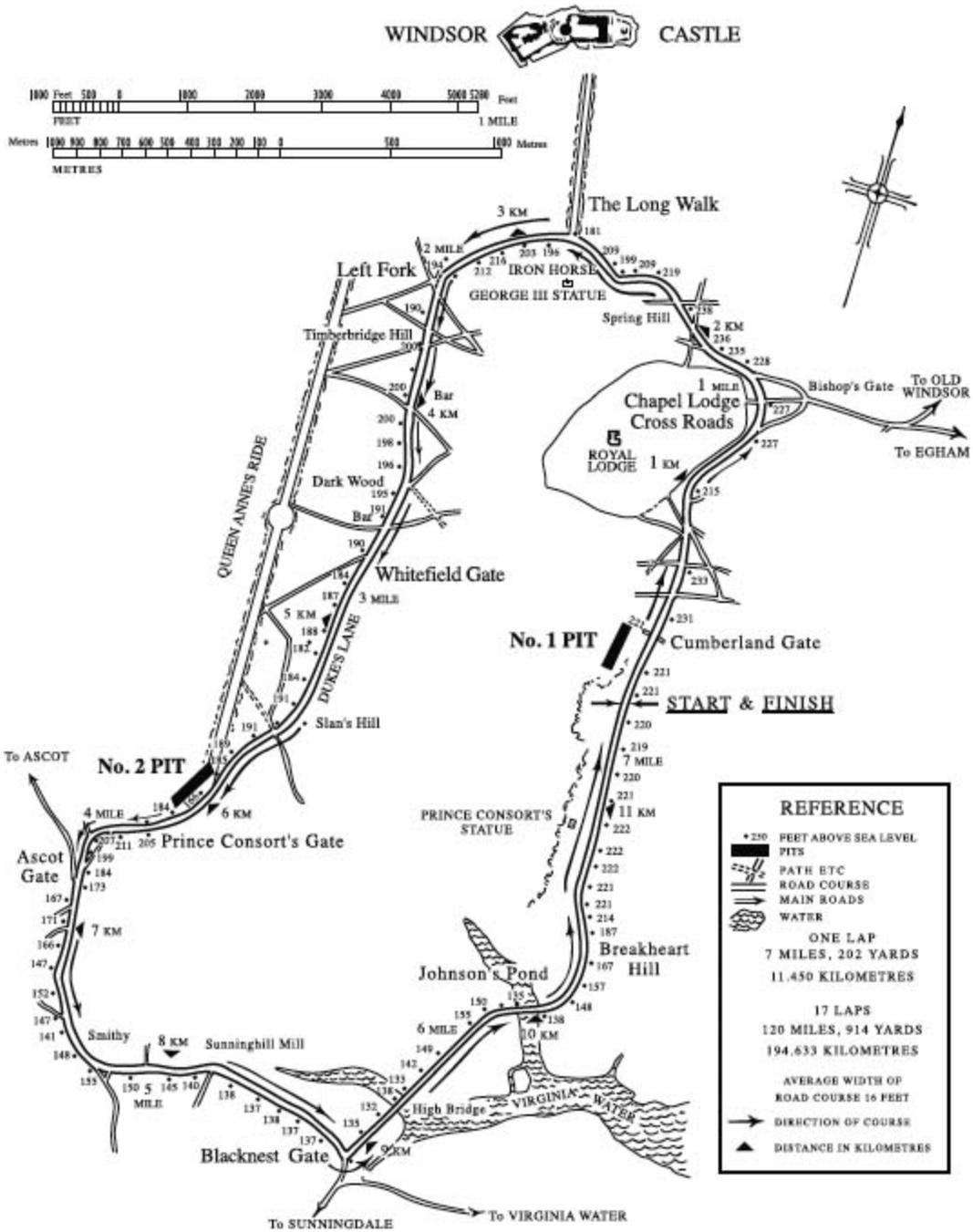
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**PLAN OF THE OLYMPIC ROAD COURSE, WINDSOR GREAT PARK**

## INTRODUCTION: SNAPSHOTS

The print was stained and fading and slightly scratched and by the time I looked at it, really looked at it, fifty-eight years had passed and everyone in it I could put a name to was either dead or had lost their memory. But it was still hard not to look at it and smile. It was one of those black-and-white photographs you somehow see in colour. The sun is shining, that much you can tell. Three or four rows back people are squinting between the bodies in front or craning their necks to see over them, and although the crowd is a blur you can make out enough to see that everyone is looking at the same thing, an item whose momentary loss an instant ago caused the kind of anxiety that starts people scanning the area with the uncanny feeling that some sort of collective inattention is blinding them to the mislaid object, as if the problem were not any absence 'out there' but a pathology of the will and that greater clarity or purpose would be enough to make it visible again. Or catch the thief before he can make good his escape.

And now it has been found. The leader of the Tour de France, soon to be the winner of the Tour de France, has found the missing yellow jersey. You can tell it's yellow because it has a stylised logo embroidered on the breast pocket: 'HD' for Henri Desgrange, the man who created the yellow jersey, the man who created the Tour de France. In 1950 cycling shirts still had a button-pocket across the chest and it is by the flap of that breast pocket that Ferdinand Kübler has caught the thief, who isn't even trying to get away. And there he is, centre-right, the practical joker with

the famous black-rimmed glasses and a mischievous grin: José Beyaert.

Bay. Are. Air. The 't' no one was ever quite sure whether to pronounce or not, which was Marie Legrand's fault. Or, rather, it was the fault of the German soldiers who had raped her mother and sister during the '14-'18 war. Since Marie couldn't tell the German they spoke from her husband's native Flemish, she banned both languages from the house, permanently detaching those three distinctly foreign syllables, bay, are and air, with a debatable 't', from their native tongue and leaving her sons José and Georges with a name more or less unpronounceable anywhere in the world beyond the land and language their father had long ago abandoned.

As for the forename José, Marie's eldest son didn't know where it came from, although he did say, seventy-nine years after he had received it, speaking Spanish now, 'Flanders was occupied by Spain for a few hundred years, Charles V and so on, but who knows?

'The "Be" in Beyaert,' he added, 'is supposed to mean "ruddy", but there's a black line in the family - skin, hair, all that. Everyone else was big and blond. When people wanted to insult us, they called us "Sidis" as if we were Moroccan. And when they said "Sidi", it meant there was going to be a fight.'

And there, perhaps, are the beginnings of this story, or some of them. The name José Beyaert was something like a prophecy.

I had always looked at the photograph and seen Kübler and the two men beside him, and the gendarme and everyone in the crowd, all looking at José and smiling. It seemed to me a magical scene, one of those memories you never forget as long as you have memory itself. But I had been missing something. Ferdinand Kübler, whom everyone called Ferdi and who spoke French with a comical accent and was for a

few years one of the finest athletes alive, is pulling down the lip of the breast pocket and looking inside. José is looking inside too, and so is the smiling figure standing between them (José's team director, Jean Maréchal) and the other one looking over Ferdi's shoulder (possibly the *France-Soir* reporter Jean Coussy). The joke had two parts. The first part was the stealing of the yellow jersey. The second part was whatever was in the pocket. But no one can remember what it was.

On the back of the print José had written, with a number of grammatical errors and spelling mistakes and commas instead of full stops, 'When I put on Kübler's yellow jersey. Everyone was looking for the jersey, me with them. They all laughed, José Beyaert'.

I never found out what was in the pocket. I could never even put a date to it because José remembered it was in Montpellier, but the Tour didn't go to Montpellier that year so he remembered it wrong and none of the press reports from the 1950 Tour de France mentioned José's practical joke at all: the theft of the yellow jersey, even the temporary theft, in jest and quickly restored to the delight and laughter of everyone who saw it, was not something the race organisers either approved of or wanted to publicise. But when they tell you José Beyaert never wore the yellow jersey you'll know what to say.

He was a natural storyteller. He had the gift of gathering his experiences into quick narratives. These he used to conjure up acquaintances and lasting friendships. He fascinated people and during his cycling career his enormous spirit of fun made him a favourite with journalists who needed a comment or an anecdote to fill a column inch. Of his many gifts the two they valued most were the relentless optimism that continually persuaded him to look on the fair side of things and the sanguine turn of mind that allowed him to encapsulate his experiences in pithy, structured tales.

It was much more than just a knack, of course. The very act of telling our lives redefines the way we live them. José was one of those people who largely live to tell the tale. In other words he constructed his existence according to the rules of fiction, in which (unlike in life) something always has to happen. He was never one to sit and read when life was out there, waiting to be lived, but it did seem to me that he had something of that fictional character with ‘an odd autobiographical habit which led him to compose in his mind from time to time a short sentence about himself containing a subject in the third person and a predicate in the past tense’. Which, it goes without saying, made the prospect of writing his story irresistible.

Optimistic and media friendly, José was also instantly recognisable thanks to the thick spectacles he wore with theatrical aplomb. In the years immediately after the end of the Second World War, the period known as the Reconstruction, he was one of several well-known national figures in France famous for their ostentatious round-rimmed glasses. Others included the President of the Republic, Vincent Auriol, and the intellectual Jean-Paul Sartre.

The day before José travelled to the French colony of Algeria to make his debut as a professional cyclist in January 1949, the leading French sports daily, *L'Équipe*, wrote:

**JOSÉ BEYAERT HAS LEARNED THE MANUAL OF THE PERFECT ROAD RACER**

He will start his first ‘pro’ season at Oran with three thousand kilometres of training, plenty of ambition and . . . ten pairs of glasses.

‘Each pair has different coloured lenses,’ he told his interviewer, *L'Équipe's* cycling correspondent Albert De Wetter:

‘I have special frames for competition. And believe me, rain and fog don’t bother me. I coat my lenses with a covering so that water and humidity don’t fog them

up.'

A special covering?

'Not really. It was what we used to have on the gas masks at the beginning of the war.'

De Wetter even considered José something of an intellectual. 'Beyaert's replies always follow a clear logic,' he wrote. When asked how he expected to make the leap from amateur to professional cycling,

He pursed his lips and gave one of his customary acute replies: 'I hope I'll take the fast route to success, but you never know. I couldn't wait any longer, in any case. I'm twenty-three, I've seven years of racing behind me as an amateur. I've ridden all types of race, mass start, time trials, climbing, stage races . . . So [as an amateur] I didn't have much more to learn.' . . . Like all riders he dreams of the Tour, but he knows that his Olympic title won't be enough to get him there. He'll have to earn his place.

*L'Équipe* had already named José its 'Rider to Watch in 1949'. Days later José won 'his first major race as a professional', the Critérium de l'Écho d'Alger. He was eulogised in the press. Great things were expected.

All this made him a rather natural celebrity, especially in that less cynical age when people's versions of themselves were still broadly being taken at face value. But it could get him into trouble too.

'I stopped the Tour de France,' he announced on day three of the six or seven I planned to spend interviewing him at his last home, in the tiny village of La Grève-sur-Mignon in the arrondissement of La Rochelle, the historic port town on France's Atlantic coast, in November 2004.

'You stopped the Tour de France?'

'In the middle of a stage. To go for a swim in the sea. At Sainte-Maxime.'

José was seventy-nine and gravely ill and I didn't spend seven days with him but four, after which he had to be taken to hospital. I waited out my empty mornings on long bicycle rides, hoping he'd be well enough to see me later on. The empty afternoons I sat around in my hostel at La

Rochelle, or a café, reading and hoping he'd be well enough the next day or the day after that.

'We were riding gently along the shore in a bunch, and people were complaining: "It's hot! It's hot!" So I rode to the front and said, "Why don't you stop so I can have a quick paddle?"'

Of course! The famous photograph of riders at the shoreline, some splashing water over their heads, others immersing themselves bodily into the Gulf of Saint-Tropez.

'Everyone stopped and a few of us went down to the water's edge. We doused ourselves in water, went back up and set off again.'

I did go back a couple of days later for an hour at most but it was only when I had left José and returned home that I had a chance to look again at the famous image. No more than five or six race numbers are legible, none of them José's, and the riders' faces are mostly obscured by spray or turned away from the camera. But further out, twenty or thirty feet from the shore, someone is swimming backwards, away from the camera but facing the beach and observing the scene through black-rimmed glasses. Could it be . . . ? Well, yes, I thought it could. Conceivably. But I never had the chance to ask.

I had looked for him, on and off, for six years. I had done so because of three things I knew, or thought I knew, about him. I knew José had been a champion cyclist. He remains the last Frenchman to have won, at the Frenchman de Coubertin's revived, modernised Olympics, in that utterly French invention, bicycle racing - more than that, bicycle racing on the road - the quintessentially French title of Olympic road-race champion.

I also knew he had gone to South America to open the velodrome in the Colombian capital, Bogotá, and that he had intended to stay a month but instead he had stayed fifty years. And I knew that in Colombia he had entered dangerous professions: he had been an emerald trader at a

time when the emerald mines were killing fields and there were shoot-outs on the streets of Bogotá, and he had been a logger in the rainforest, where the only law was the strength of a man's personality and his speed with a gun.

And that was all I knew about the white-haired old man I met near La Rochelle that cold Atlantic November.

The Olympic champion had spurned his celebrity so completely that no one seemed to know where to look for him. In Colombia, where José Beyaert had been a champion cyclist, then the national cycling coach and later on a sports commentator on national television, he remains a household name. Even so, I heard the same thing time and again:

'José Beyaert? I think he died.'

I soon learnt that people had been saying so since the '50s. José had something like a craving to disappear. He'd always turn up somewhere else in a new guise.

By 1999, when he finally returned to the place he had once called home, home was somewhere else. France, the country he had represented at the Olympic Games - the country he felt had abandoned him - was merely the place he had chosen to die.

Then, in November 2004, I found him, not dead, just forgotten. I flew to La Rochelle to spend a week with him. On the recordings of those interviews José's voice is often lost in the gasping of a sick old man who knows he is living his final months. He made it clear to me he had no further interest in life. And yet, seven months before his death, he told me, 'I've not lived long, but I've lived more than other people of my age.' The more I learnt about his life the more I felt he was right. 'I've had an incredible life,' he said, 'a life that was special.' But he had other leitmotifs: 'There are things I can't tell you,' he repeated, several times a day. Which made him more irresistible still.

However, with no clear idea whether José would recover or when, I flew back to England. There I managed to interest

no publisher in the adventurous but distant life of a partly forgotten champion. Hell, I couldn't find a magazine prepared to give some space to José's story. There was a temporary improvement in his condition but with no funding to pay for research - no money to pay the rent - I never went back to see him. Within seven months José was dead. I'd found him too late.

I was left with eight hours of interviews: a miserly time in which to tell a life although at least I now had some of his stories, told, admittedly, with an indomitable Munchausenism that was as exasperating as it was promising. His anecdotes were darkly humorous, often untruthful, moving in places despite repeated acts of violence and revenge and the occasional bawdy episode. Some had obviously been told so often they had become opaque, masking rather than revealing the reality that lay behind them. There were monologues and sermons on subjects that obsessed or annoyed him, and the occasional stepping too far followed by an instinctive covering of tracks: 'I don't give a damn about my life. It's of no concern to anyone else. It's my affair, no one else's. I have done things that only have to do with me.' All the same, I found myself falling into the trance that comes when a story that has ensnared you demands to be fashioned into a book.

At one time he was a figure of fascination for a variety of French writers. Such and such an author, José told me, 'asked if he could write a book about me because I've done things, understand? I said, "No, you can't."

'And he said, "Well, think about it. If you do it, do it with me."

'So we put it down on paper. I can't remember exactly what it said but if I was going to have a book about my life within the next twenty years, we agreed he would be the one to write it. I thought I'd be dead by then anyway, so why not? And afterwards he left me in peace.'

I later discovered José was a known associate of a variety of French criminals. However French he was, and however famous – and he had been a personality as well as a name in several nations – he belonged nowhere and was forever changing countries and regions, disappearing from one wilderness into another, all the time leaving others supposing him deceased. Perhaps that was what made him so attractive.

Happily, and for reasons I only began to understand some years later, he agreed to let me write about him. He even allowed me to take away a box full of press cuttings, expired passports and photos ('My wife kept everything. I kept nothing. When it's done, it's done.'), among them the stained, fading, slightly scratched print of José in the yellow jersey, which, of course, he never wore.

I say happily because something then happened that changed things. A decision that had been taken in 1946 and had ended up supplying José with the reputation and entitlement that had made possible his unusual existence was taken again in 2005, and this time it made it possible to examine his uncommon life in the form of a book. The International Olympic Committee decided to take the Games to London. By touching on the 1948 London Games, however tangentially, it became feasible to delve into the past and set about recovering fragments, histories, a life, that would otherwise be lost. I didn't need to be asked twice. I retouched the proposal that had done the rounds in 2004 and as the Beijing Games approached in 2008 a publisher appeared. I tidied up my affairs, packed my bags and set off, initially for Paris, Nice and Corsica, and then for a couple of four-month sojourns at my other home in Medellín, Colombia, which became the base from which I followed José's footsteps into regions where, without his guidance and company, imagined, of course, not real – although real enough to me – I would probably never have gone.

There were other difficulties. For long periods of José's life there were no newspaper reports or published memoirs, no sheaves of letters or private diaries with which to corroborate his enchanted version of events. It wasn't just the personal, the innermost level of thoughts that was lost; even the broader structure of names, dates and places, the easy pickings of official records, had gone. José's stories either had no date or biographical context, or these things changed with each telling. In some cases they had been told so many times that they had an opaqueness that seemed to mask out much of the sheer richness of lived reality and reveal only a meagre, schematic abstraction that perfectly illustrated Milan Kundera's observation, 'The present moment is unlike the memory of it. Remembering is not the negative of forgetting. Remembering is a form of forgetting.'

To make things even thornier many of the people who associated with José had every reason either not to speak to me at all or to distort the truth about their activities together. I'd made some effort to get José's biography commissioned but the more I worked on it the less certain I was that my discoveries amounted to anything other than fiction. So, for instance, when I went to the newspaper archives I found no mention of the Sainte-Maxime dip either. I could not positively identify José in the photograph, which was only published later, with a comment by the Tour de France director Jacques Goddet, who fumed: 'Would it not be preferable for the cyclists to learn their gruelling metier, or reschool themselves in its lore, instead of indulging in the carnival antics that put half the peloton in the waters of the Gulf of Saint-Tropez?'

At the time Goddet had his driver pull alongside José to voice his disapproval. 'Beyaert,' he raged, 'you're always up to something, aren't you?'

José smiled and carried on pedalling. That was his story, anyway.

**ONE**

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**EUROPE / AFRICA**

# 1

Marie Legrand's eldest son came into the world at 11 p.m. on 1 October 1925 at 134 Rue du Bois, Lens, a street that no longer exists in a city that had changed beyond all recognition during the previous conflict and would do so again in the next. During the First World War north-eastern France had been shelled into oblivion. In areas overrun by the Germans more than a million people had been forced from their homes. Thousands of buildings had been partially or totally destroyed, livestock all but wiped out and factory machinery systematically disassembled and shipped to Germany. The new town built by a workforce of citizens, convicts and Chinese workers to replace the old Lens would in turn be devastated in the war to come. You didn't say Rue du Bois anyway, or even the du Bois Terrace, it was Pit Four, although the mines are closed now and the argot dead.

They had found coal in 1849. Thanks to the deposits a hundred and fifty metres underground many worlds met in the town that squatted on the surface. Algerian Berbers arrived as the twentieth century began. In 1908, after the Courrieres catastrophe - Europe's worst mining accident, one thousand two hundred lives lost underground - ethnic Poles, many of whose families had already migrated to Germany's industrialised Ruhr region, flooded in. Then between 1914 and 1918 nearly a million and a half French soldiers, 10.5 per cent of France's economically active male population, died in battle. Another 1.1 million were permanently disabled. At the start of the '20s, Italian workers arrived.

Flemish-speaking Belgians, of course, had always border-hopped. José's father, also José Beyaert, had arrived from the tiny Flanders village of Nazareth after the First World War, aged twenty or twenty-one, bringing his mother. He had learnt the Lens argot and believed it the national language until he moved his family to Paris and had to start again.

José, then, arrived in 1925. His brother Georges was born two years later. José told me, 'Georges was inclined to be ill. When he was four, he suffered double-bronchial pneumonia. It looked like it was all over. The priest came to the house. My grandmother gave him hot mustard baths. He was all red in the hot water; I can still see him. These are things you remember all your life. And even when he was a young man, you had to be careful with him.'

Even for families too poor to travel daily life in Lens entailed unavoidable exposure to very different ways of seeing the world. Friction between the communities was inevitable but the Poles and Italians were Catholics like the Flemish and on Sundays they all worshipped together. Georges Beyaert remembered the Polish marriages: 'Children were always welcome. We would swarm around the sweets and cakes. It was fun for kids.' And he seemed to be talking about life in general, not just the weddings.

On all this colour mining imposed a certain uniformity: blackened faces ('I never saw my grandfather's face without coal dust,' José told me), terraces ('When my grandfather, Louis Legrand, came home drunk they shouted, "No Louis, further along, further along!"'), graft ('They were poor people. Poor people who worked hard. Courageous people who didn't watch the clock when they were working.'), men distanced from their families by the shared experience of their life in the mineshafts, adored and idealised by young children. José told me, 'I remember all this. And I see him coming in - I used to ambush him when he came in, I loved

my grandfather – and picking me up, tiny, and putting me inside his shirt.’

José’s beloved grandfather was two metres tall. ‘He was called Legrand and he wore his name well. My mother was tiny.’

So was José’s remarkable father, who stood four foot eleven in his clogs. ‘When he went for his national service, he stood on tiptoe and said he was taller.

‘The officer said, “You’re on the limit. Don’t move.”

“OK!”

‘He said it was the biggest mistake of his life. If he’d known, he said, he’d have done things differently.’

José’s father was a patient and talented man. José called him ‘uneducated but intelligent’. Underground he became a wagon coupler. ‘He worked briefly in the coal mines but he was afraid,’ Georges told me. So José Senior took up his father’s trade and started repairing shoes, learning from a worker he employed to help him.

‘He worked all his life without complaining, starting early and working late,’ José told me. ‘And when he did something, he did it well. He didn’t do things he didn’t know how to. He learnt how to do them first. It was this way with everything: he measured things carefully, finished them carefully. He took the time things take.’

As well as mending shoes, he found work as a tiler. Later, José told me, ‘He was considered one of the best tilers in Paris. He worked with great precision.’ He might have served an apprenticeship as a tiler before leaving Belgium for France, for despite his nationality he was employed on the SS *Normandie*, built in a French shipyard using French-built parts to represent France in the nation-state contest of the great liners.

Like many other Flandrians José Senior’s passion was cycling. In the north he had ridden as an amateur for ten years. He once told the newspaper *Paris-Presse*, ‘I was a very good regional. I won plenty of kermesses, a Grand Prix

of Lens, and finished second in the Special Six Days of Busigny . . . I was very fast in the sprint . . . Cycling is so much in my blood that I've always prepared José's bikes and tubulars.'

José's father was an avid reader of *L'Auto*, the sports paper that had founded the Tour de France: 'It was all he read!' He was friendly with a number of former professional cyclists: Jules Lengagne, a professional in the 1930s with the France-Sport and Lapébie teams; Charles Deruyter, an old Peugeot rider who had finished in the top seven of the Paris-Roubaix three times between 1912 and 1923; Georges Peyrode, who had won the Saint-Étienne Six Days in 1929; a track specialist named André Mouton, who had ridden well in six-day events and twenty-four-hour races; and Robert Jacquinet, a Tour de France stage winner in the 1920s.

José told me, 'He had an amateur licence. He rode a lot on the track because he didn't have time to ride on the road. He was a good little rider but a local rider. There are local riders who are champions but who never have the chance to ride elsewhere. When I was a professional I rode against local riders in Brittany and I couldn't beat them. They were champions but they stayed in their village because they didn't have any sponsorship. In those days only bicycle manufacturers sponsored cycling . . .'

José could remember watching his father race in the velodrome and taking trips to the cobbled roads outside the town to see the riders thunder past on their way from Paris to Roubaix. Cycling became the family sport and what José Senior had been unable to achieve himself he decided his sons would achieve for him.

Organised as well as industrious, he worked all hours and scrimped and saved and finally had enough to move his family away from the hell of the mines and start a new life in the capital. Georges told me, laconically, 'He couldn't read very well, but he could count. He took us to a little hotel in the 5th arrondissement and then, since my father

was in the building trade, he bought a tiny house in Bagnolet and built rooms.'

In Paris, as in Lens, many different ways of life were scrambled together and locked in encounters none of their adherents necessarily understood. The French capital had been a haven for refugees from all over Europe since long before the First World War: Armenians escaping Turkish massacres, White Russians escaping the Revolution and civil war, mainly Jewish Poles fleeing Pilsudski's regime, and political fugitives from Mussolini's Italy and the Balkan dictatorships. And that was before the fugitives from Hitler's Germany and the lands he occupied and the flood of Spanish Republicans fleeing execution in Franco's Spain. As we sat talking in a Pantin café Georges told me, 'There were Italians at Bagnolet. Masses of Italians. And here there were lots of people from the north. They arrived through the Gare du Nord and stayed in the vicinity. The Bretons arrived at the Gare Montparnasse and stayed nearby. And at the Gare de l'Est there were huge numbers of immigrants from Alsace. Those were the quarters, more or less, in those days. Afterwards it got far more mixed up.'

Very little of this was picturesque. On the eve of the Second World War almost a third of France's 9.75 million dwellings had been declared unfit for human habitation. In 1920 twelve francs bought a US dollar. In 1925 it took twice that. Inflation made it politically impossible to lift rent controls, which had been imposed in 1914 as a war measure, so landlords were refusing to modernise properties and investors were reluctant to put money into housing.

Bagnolet, crowded with small, cramped dwellings, was something of a black spot. Its population of cobblers, upholsterers, locksmiths and tapestry makers was hit hard by the Great Depression. By 1935 unemployment was among the highest in the region.

It was then that a chance meeting in the street gave the Beyaerts a way out.

Jose's other grandfather, Evarist Beyaert, five foot six, black hair, brown eyes, born in Nazareth beside the Belgian town of Ghent, perhaps never intended to stay away. He had entered the United States of America on 29 April 1912 after nine days travelling steerage aboard the *Nieuw Amsterdam*. At Ellis Island he was designated a 'non-immigrant alien', meaning he had a return ticket he was required to use. Two other Nazareth men were with him: Theophile Mehuys, thirty-five, Evarist's age; and twenty-six-year-old Auguste Defauw. They told immigration they were farmhands headed for St Louis, Missouri, and a friend named Verhaeghen, whose address in the records is illegible. Evarist claimed he'd been to St Louis in November 1909 although there is no record of an earlier entry into the United States.

Mehuys' trail disappears at the water's edge. Defauw made it to Detroit and beyond: in October 1915 he crossed Lake Huron from Canada with dozens of other Flemish labourers and headed back to lodgings at 1028 Lafayette. He had a hundred and fifty dollars in his pocket. The 1920 census records neither name. Perhaps their stories are hidden behind new ones: Defoe, Mays, Muse? They, in any case, were single men chasing their fortunes. Not Evarist. Chasing a future or fleeing the past, he had left a wife, Leoncine, and children in Nazareth, and had a hundred dollars in his pocket as the Manhattan dreamscape rose over the Hudson: the astonishing Singer Building, the world's tallest, and the Woolworth Building emerging to challenge it. No way of knowing whether any of them reached St Louis, if that was their destination.

Georges told me his grandfather decided not to return to his family. 'In America there were lots of migrants but all of them were men. Evarist couldn't find a woman, so he went back to Belgium to look for one, intending to take her out there. But when he got to Europe the war meant he couldn't go back. He fled to France because he didn't want to fight and in Paris he found a woman and stayed.'

Evarist, a shoemaker, had a small business at Pantin, north of Paris. One day, and according to the family story it was by pure coincidence, Evarist met his son in the street and sold him his shoemaker's workshop. José, Georges and their parents moved away from dank Bagnolet.

José was severe with his grandfather: 'He abandoned his wife with three children. You can't respect people who do that.'

'Did he flee to the US to earn money for the family?' I asked.

'No, it was to earn money for himself. And he was an alcoholic too.'

But if Evarist Beyaert's story met with his grandson's disapproval the memory of it would resurface when José was in his twenties, reinforcing his resolve to strike out on his own and see the world.

José and Georges moved to the school at Rue de Montreuil. Georges told me, 'We didn't go out in the evenings. We worked in the shop with my father because in a shoemaker's there are lots of little jobs children can do. We gave the shoes to the clients, we mounted the glissoires on the shoes. We had to sweep up, clean up. If there was a bit of painting to be done, the boys did it.'

The two boys finished their Certificat d'Études and started work straight away. The workshop was called 'La Cordonnerie Moderne'.

José's father was also a good teacher. José told me, 'We made shoes to measure and I started working on them aged twelve and aged fourteen or fifteen I was already making shoes. I took measurements and cut the leather. I enjoyed making shoes.'

The business gained an excellent reputation. Clients included at least one celebrity. José recalled, 'One day I made a pair of shoes - I was fifteen or sixteen, I don't know which - for a man named André Dassary. He was a great singer.'

André Dassary sang with the Ray Ventura band but he was also a regional athletics champion and played rugby. As well as taking singing classes he became a physiotherapist and accompanied the French team to the World University Games in 1937.

José remembered, 'We'd been recommended to him and I made his shoes personally. When I finished them I showed them to my father, all stitched by hand. My father looked at them: he waited a moment, then said, "Not bad." *Merde!* I got angry. "You don't know how to say, 'They're good.'"

'He looked at me and said, "Listen son, to someone who's learning, you never say, 'It's good.' That way, he always tries to improve."

'He was right.'

Like his father, José would develop an infuriating didactic streak. He would also acquire a beautiful singing voice. Whether he sang for Dassary we do not know.

## 2

It is easy to imagine José enjoying popularity among his peers at school. No one could have spoken more excitedly about boxing or cycling or have had a better sense of humour or a keener wit or been more fun to be with in the playground or on the walk home, denying the existence of God, boasting of his free-thinking, perhaps even singing with his magical voice. He charmed a schoolgirl named Louise Poulalion, known as Louissette, whom he had known since he was six. Many years later they would marry.

But there was always another side to José. He had the reputation of being a hard case. He was always in trouble. His brother Georges told me, 'From when we were at school absolutely no one bothered me because they knew that if anything happened my brother would get involved. I could relax!'

When José saw his first professional prizefight we do not know: perhaps at the Vélodrome d'Hiver - the Vel d'Hiv or 'Winter Velodrome' - on Rue Nélaton near the Boulevard de Grenelle Métro (now Bir-Hakeim), where the American literary set - Hemingway, Dos Passos and so on - lost entire nights at the legendary six-day series in the 1920s. Fight nights continued there through the war. Or perhaps it was elsewhere: Paris after all was a boxing city. In *A Moveable Feast*, his memoir of life there, Hemingway excuses himself for making 'no mention of the Stade Anastasie where the boxers served as waiters at the tables set out under the trees and the ring was in the garden. Nor of training with Larry Gainst, nor the great twenty-round fights at the Cirque d'Hiver.'

Either way José at once fell in love with the sport. His father seized the opportunity to encourage his enthusiasm and the boys gained access to a gym where boxers trained. The Pantin Ring was home to a couple of celebrated Parisian prizefighters, Théo Medina and Emmanuel 'Titi' Clavel. Medina, born in 1918, was a bantamweight who fought his first professional bout aged twenty and was French champion by the outbreak of war. Middleweight Titi Clavel was José's age. Titi's first professional bout was in 1947. Within two years he would be French welterweight champion. Given their age and size, there is every possibility José and Titi entered the ring together. It would have been an explosive confrontation because, as Georges told me, 'José was the same height as me but his punch was very hard. One blow and it was over. In the beginning he wanted to box. He had four bouts and he won all four with a knockout.' *L'Équipe* made it three: in spring 1948, during the qualifying races for the Olympics, it described José as 'a former boxer (his record shows three bouts in the colours of coach Guérault, of the Pantin Ring. He won all three by knockout)'.

For a couple of years José and Georges Beyaert trained there most evenings. There could hardly have been a greater contrast between the two brothers. Georges was younger, of course, and more slightly built. He would one day be a professional cyclist like his brother, but a climber not a sprinter. José was so robust he developed the habit of speaking with detached curiosity about his own physique. As an old man he told me, 'I was very, very, very, very strong, and I'm not talking about cycling . . .'

He was a natural gymnast too, always walking on his hands. Looking back on those years José told me, 'I did physical culture: parallel bars, the rings, the floor. My father made me do sport. He said, "Do this, do that," but without putting too much pressure on me to achieve results. He was preparing me for cycling. He didn't have money to buy

weights so he made them. I built up my chest. I had big lungs so I'd recover more rapidly. My father hadn't had the opportunity to study but he understood things. He knew what would be good for me. Little by little, he prepared me like that. And I enjoyed it.'

A photo among his papers shows the effects. It is a studio shot dated 1941 on the reverse, a portrait from the midriff up, naked but for the tortoiseshell glasses and greased-back hair, with clenched fists, big forearms, a muscular torso. Light, robust, powerful: a boxer's physique but for the glasses. They, and the sweet smile, masked a savagery. José wanted to win every battle he fought and he wanted to do so decisively. He didn't restrict his punches to the ring either: 'He always threw the first punch. At times, an argument started and wham! We'd say, "José, don't hit people straight away. Try reasoning with them first." And he said, "I do, it's just that I prefer to reason with them while I'm on my feet and they're on the ground!"'

Gymnastics gave José a profound understanding of anatomy. This, the boxing skills he quickly acquired and his innate strength allowed him to bring down much bigger men in seconds. Many years later in Colombia, one of my interviewees gave me an example of José's blend of speed, strength and technique.

'José had a problem in the street. A policeman threatened him with a gun. In a second, José immobilised him and disarmed him and then frog-marched him to the police station.

"Take me to the General."

"This officer's a danger to society. You can take him from here. And here's his gun."

Boxing no doubt imposed restrictions on José's strength of character. It gave him control and inner hardness and some standing away from the street. It may have helped save him from the nightmare of a life of uncontrolled violence. By going to the gym and learning to accept the subtle

humiliations of boxers who were better than him – a role Titi Clavel may very well have performed – he might have begun to learn to make a kind of peace with so much that was unsettled in him, although if the Beyaert-Clavel bout took place it left no trace, and José's career in the ring was destined not to last. His brother again: 'He couldn't carry on because he wore glasses. He was told, "You can't box because of your eyes," although he was long-sighted and in a boxing ring he could see perfectly well. That's why, in the end, he wasn't a boxer, despite the fact that he preferred boxing to cycling.'

Years later, in June 1949, after winning his Olympic gold medal, he made *L'Équipe's* front page by performing a sideways handstand on a chair for a picture. The accompanying article, 'Athlete, Gymnast and Boxer, Too', reads:

Beyaert, who can ride on the flat, climbs well and sprints, appears to be an especially complete rider. More than that, he's an eclectic athlete who practised gymnastics, athletics and boxing before choosing the bicycle. José gave us proof of his gymnastic talents by performing, in the middle of the editorial offices and before our photographer, a perfect balance, and he had to repeat it a good ten times!

He is described as being as 'at ease with a skipping rope or on the parallel bars as he is on a bike. As you can see, he performed this handstand with a smile. And it's true: the Olympic champion, with his excellent morale, is always smiling.'

But cycling was his calling, and its asceticism, the bruising falls and injuries and pushing on in pain, the dietary self-control, the exertions that left the taste of blood, took over the task of tempering his tremendous strength and energy where boxing left off.

Cycling was immensely popular in France. There was that run of Tour wins, 1929 to 1934. And more than wins, personalities: André 'Dédé' Leducq – '*Gueule d'Amour et*

*Muscles d'Acier* (how shall we put that? 'The steely-armed love mug?') - who won two himself and played a supporting role in three more; and René Vietto, who as a twenty year old won four mountain stages and yet sacrificed himself by surrendering one of his wheels, then his entire bike, to his team leader, handing him overall victory too. And there was that 1933 team, a Harlem Globetrotters of cyclists, all French: Georges Speicher, France's first world road-racing champion; André Leducq, winner in 1930 and 1932; Antonin Magne, winner in 1931 and 1934; Charles Pélissier, the winner of eight stages in the 1930 Tour de France; and Roger Lapébie, who would win the Tour in 1937. These were heroes whose images drifted before the dreamy eyes of young French children as they fell asleep. At the 1936 Olympics Frenchmen had won in the pursuit and taken gold and silver on the road. In 1939 the national cycling body issued 950 professional racing licences. Compare that with 157 in 2007.

At the start of the war Paris had seven velodromes: the Buffalo at Montrouge; the Cipale - better, 'La Cipale' - at Vincennes; the Saint-Denis, Vaugirard and La Croix-de-Berny tracks; the Parc des Princes; and the great Vélodrome d'Hiver. The Parc and the Vel d'Hiv were owned and managed by Henri Desgrange and Victor Goddet, whose portfolio included majority shares in the newspaper *L'Auto* and its showpiece race, the Tour de France.

José and Georges made their father's enthusiasm their own, even if it meant an adolescence of rigorous discipline. José told me, with comedic emphasis, 'In my youth, I never went to dance in a nightclub. Never. I never danced. Never. Not once. Never. Because my father had ideas about things. Walking wasn't good. Playing football wasn't good. Beer wasn't good. I did everything for the bike. At times it was good; at times it wasn't good. But it served as experience. There's no secret, you know. There are details, but the