

# Le Mystérieux Monsieur Goldkette

by Anthony Baldwin



In the mid-1920s, when the vibrant industrial cities of the Mid-West provided the creative backdrop for all that was most innovative in jazz and hot dance music, the talented Detroit orchestra leader and booker Jean Goldkette was directly responsible for launching and promoting a whole plethora of bands, including three of the Jazz Age's most memorable: the early Casa Loma orchestra, the fabulous McKinney's Cotton Pickers, and Goldkette's own splendid Victor Recording Orchestra, with its panoply of jazz stars - Bix Beiderbecke, Frankie Trumbauer, Don Murray, Joe Venuti, Eddie Lang, Danny Polo, Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, et al. - all driven along by the marvellous, stomping New Orleans bassist, Steve Brown. Long before Berry Gordy popularised Detroit's music with his 1960s Motown label, Jean Goldkette's stable of bands made the sound of Detroit a defining influence in American hot dance music of the 1920s, establishing a template for the great swing orchestras of the 1930s and 1940s.

By the end of the 1920s, however, Goldkette's band business was in trouble, and he eventually went back to his original career as a classical musician, resurfacing briefly at the end of the 1950s when the Billy Wilder movie 'Some Like It Hot' fleetingly revived public interest in a parodied form of 1920s hot dance music. Goldkette died on March 24, 1962, in Santa Barbara, Ca., leaving a modest recorded legacy of Victor 78s that epitomise the spirit of that brief, golden age. However, the personal origins of this pioneering figure in American big-band jazz remain an almost total enigma.

For many years the story put about by Goldkette himself was that he was born in 1899 in Valenciennes, northern France; that he grew up in Greece and Russia, studied music at the Moscow Conservatoire and arrived in the United States with his parents in 1911. Eager to claim him as one of their own, French collectors have periodically ransacked the Valenciennes city archives over the years, but with singular lack of success. This isn't particularly surprising, as the town was devastated by heavy shelling during World War I, then was largely destroyed by fire in 1940. As late as 1959, the liner note of RCA's eminently forgettable Goldkette revival album, 'Dance Hits of the '20s', trotted out Jean's 1899 Valenciennes details again. It also quoted Jean as saying that he'd obtained a union card at 16, two years under the American Federation of Musicians' minimum age: "When they turned me down because I was too young," he recalled, "a friend told me to go back and tell them I was 18. I returned to a different man, and that night I was on the job."

It came as something of a surprise, therefore, to read in American Biography Online that, according to family records, Jean Goldkette was born in Greece in 1893. Indeed, the Ellis Island immigration archives confirm Goldkette's birthplace as the Greek city of Patras, and that on July 17, 1910 he sailed into New York harbour aboard the *S.S. Cleveland* from Cherbourg, aged 17. Even more confusingly, Jean gave his nationality as Danish. From the available evidence, it seems clear that Goldkette was neither French nor born in France, was nowhere near the United States at the age of 16, and so was hardly in a position to apply for an AFM card at that point.

If, as he always maintained to the U.S. Government, Jean Goldkette was born on the 18th of May 1893, the 'boy-genius' anecdote is not only fictitious, it is also curiously pointless. One can see that personal vanity might have prompted an older man to shed a few years, but during his heyday as a bandleader and booker in the mid-1920s Jean would have been under no professional pressure to appear younger than he really was. Rather the opposite, in fact, given the responsibilities inherent in both jobs. Jean's most obvious role-model among successful bandleaders of the day would have been the rotund, prematurely balding Paul 'Pops' Whiteman, who made no secret of being born in 1890, and certainly looked it.

After leaving New York in the summer of 1910, Jean headed west for Lapaz, Indiana, a tiny isolated farming community where the Goldkette family had a few acres. Later that year he made his way to Chicago, where, as a Russian-trained, purely classical musician, he would have needed some time to get his professional bearings and familiarise himself with American idioms. The usual pattern of events for any out-of-town musician was to get known by doing non-union jobs and making friends with local musicians. Jean would have only applied for union membership when he was entrenched enough in the local scene for it to be worth his while. In view of this, it's unlikely that he obtained an AFM local membership before the spring of 1911, i.e. around his 18th birthday. After moving to Detroit in 1916, Goldkette applied for membership of the AFM branch there, Local N° 5, in 1917, giving his birth year as 1894 and his place of birth as Valenciennes, France. In 1940, the Detroit branch expelled him for non-payment of union dues, but readmitted him in 1944. Jean's new

AFM application still maintained he'd been born in Valenciennes, but this time in 1897. By the 1950s, in music interviews and press releases, Jean had pushed his birth date back to 1899. Yet in his dealings with U.S. officialdom he consistently quoted the 1893 Greek birth details. Hello?

By claiming a French birthright, Goldkette may have wanted to suggest he had the kind of personal refinement and sophistication befitting a textbook maestro. Whether this actually cut much ice with the average dancing Detroit fender-welder is a matter for speculation. However, as a source of reflected European glory, Valenciennes was a decidedly odd choice, since there were dozens of other better-known, more glamorous French cities to be born in. It's hard to fathom exactly what Jean hoped to gain by pretending to come from a gloomy textile town near the Belgian border. It may have been simply that geography wasn't his strong suit and that, ironically, the choice of Valenciennes merely revealed his significant lack of the very kind of sophistication he was hoping to convey.

That might have been the end of the matter, if it hadn't occurred to me to cross-check for other pre-WWI Goldkettes on the Ellis Island archives. The upshot of this was to discover that Jean didn't come to the United States with his parents at all: he was accompanied by an uncle, 31-year-old Baptiste Goldkette, also Danish, described as an "artiste." Two years earlier, in 1908, we find Baptiste returning to New York from Havana with his brother 'Falcini', another "artiste", "born Malmer, Switzerland" [sic]. The odd thing is that on that occasion both travellers are described as French.

But their taste in nationalities was apparently fickle. In July 1914 Baptiste and his brother - now correctly spelled 'Franconi' [sic] and born in Malmö, Sweden - together with another brother, 52-year-old 'Chan' (born Liverpool, England) and his 19-year-old son Constantin (born Avignon, France), disembarked at New York from the *S.S. Rochambeau* out of Le Havre. This time the passenger manifest lists all four gentlemen as English. So, in the space of six years Jean Goldkette's uncles had managed to enter the United States under no fewer than three different nationalities.

On further examination, other members of Goldkette's family seem to have been equally prone to enthusiastic self-reinvention. Whether this was sheer showbiz whimsy, an attempt to cover their tracks or simply the result of clerical incompetence, remains obscure. If anything, Jean's aunts are even more remarkable than his uncles. When they first arrive in the U.S. in 1907 with Baptiste and Franconi, Mina, 30, and 19-year-old Eline are statuesque, dark-haired, Copenhagen-born Danish 'actresses', both 5' 6" tall. Mina is carrying the astonishing sum of \$16,000, her brothers, merely "more than \$50". One rather wonders what precisely the girls did.

On their return from Cuba in July of the following year, both Goldkette women have lost six inches, shrinking to petite 5-footers. Mina has shed two years, regressing to 28, while Eline has gained six years, making her 25. After their 1909 European trip, the sisters manage to get their six inches back, as well as really striking the fountain of youth in a big way: Mini [sic] is now a toothsome 20-year-old, while Eline has become positive jailbait at 17. Mina's new birthplace is Lund, Denmark, while Eline opts for a total change of scene, selecting Mons, Belgium for her original entrance. Yes, these ARE allegedly the same women. Alas, by the time Mina sails into Manhattan again on the *S.S. Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse* in October 1912, the spell has been broken: she's gained 15 years and now admits to being 35. This time there's no sign of Eline, but sisterly loyalty appears to have prompted Mina to shift her Danish birthplace to the Belgian city of Mons, which Eline had fancied for hers in 1909. Incidentally, Mina's brown



eyes are now blue (isn't there a song in there, somewhere?) Anyway, it seems that the girls simply rewrote their identities when it happened to suit them.

One can't help feeling that Jean Goldkette may have been cut from much the same cloth as his aunts and uncles. Perhaps his claims to a French background weren't completely false, but then maybe his Greek origins weren't entirely true, either. In the world of the Goldkettes, reality was a seemingly movable feast.

All this was feasible because the modern concept of the passport as a compulsory ID-cum-travel document didn't universally apply before World War I. While some more repressive regimes (e.g. Czarist Russia) already used the passport as a means of restricting and monitoring the movements of their citizens, other nations still issued them more or less as letters of introduction, to smooth the passage of the leisured and well-connected. The type of data supplied in passports was not standardised, and many immigrants to the United States had no passport at all. The information documented in a ship's passenger manifest would therefore depend to a large degree on whatever details individual travellers chose to volunteer, fleshed out with a few observations by the ship's purser. In other words, on arrival in the States you could be pretty much who or what you wanted to be. So who were these people?

Around the 1870s, when the stream of migration from Western Europe started to decline, when there was no longer the labour in those early immigrant nations to supply manpower for the growing industrial development of the United States, a new, as yet undepleted area, South Eastern Europe, was discovered by the agents of the New World. The remote



Baptiste Goldkette head?walking in Berlin, Küstrin, 012 June 1834.

agricultural population of Austria-Hungary and Southern Russia offered a fresh labour source to the solicited emigrant trade. Included in this wave of late-19th century immigration there was a thriving community of Russian and Balkan *vitsas*, or bands of Romany gypsies, renowned for their peripatetic lifestyle and remarkable, though often antisocial, resilience.

The Goldkettes display some of the outward signs of gypsy society, particularly the nomadic behaviour and the constant self-reinvention in the face of official scrutiny. Baptiste and Franconi appear to have been itinerant circus or fairground performers ("actor"/ "artiste"), one of the established fields of Rom activity. Perhaps the farm in Indiana was used for raising or training horses, another traditional Rom speciality. The names that appear on ships' manifests might be what Roms call 'travelling' or *gajo* names, to be changed at whim and used for official purposes only. *Gajo* names may even be interchangeable among family members, something one vaguely suspects the Goldkette girls of doing. However, within the *vitsa* itself there would be an entirely different, 'home' name. For example the French Manouche gypsy guitarist Pierre Ferret sometimes called himself Jean Ferret, but his 'home' name was always Matlo.

As the Goldkette women invariably travelled back from Europe with substantial sums of money, where and how did they get it? In traditional Romany society, women were the breadwinners. The most usual female occupation was palmistry and fortune-telling, which could be extremely lucrative. It also happens that the most financially successful Roms in New York around the early 1900s were members of a *vitsa* called the Koleschti, from the Black Sea coast of Bessarabia. "Koleschti" is uncannily similar to Goldkette.

The Koleschtis' considerable wealth came mostly from their women's mastery of an elaborate traditional Romany deception known as the *bajour*. This is a fortune-telling con trick

designed to play on the fears and fantasies of gullible, usually middle-aged, women, the better to relieve them of their life savings. The *bajour* was a major source of Koleschti income, and consequently this *vitsa* was well-known to the New York Police Department in the 1910s and 1920s. If the Goldkette sisters were fortune-tellers, regular *bajour* scams might account for the surprising sums they carried back with them to the States, as well as explaining their constant need to keep on the move - in other words, to be one step ahead of the law.

During these deliberations I made contact with Jean Goldkette's grand-nephew, Alann Krivor, who confirmed that the family had indeed been circus people. Alann didn't know whether they had been 'roms', but said it wouldn't surprise him in the least. He sent me copies of some 19th century Goldkette family papers, one of which was an 1834 German manuscript, emblazoned with an impressive official red wax seal. The thing was written in an archaic, illegible Gothic script that defeated all but one of my German friends. When he'd typed it up, I took my high-school German protesting out of the garage. Ethnically speaking, I was clearly way off track:

*While breaking her journey here on the 5th of June 1834, Mine, née Goldstein, wife of the circus horseman Hartwig Goldkette from Hildesheim, gave birth to a boy. Today, 12th June, the circumcision was performed by Rabbi Samuel Basewitz of Frankfurt-on-Oder, and the boy was given the name Louis, in the presence of the merchants Abraham Fürstenheim, Samuel Fürstenheim and Abraham Frank, as well as Mr. Goldkette's mother, Theresa, née Scholom, which is hereby duly certified for the local Jewish community's register of births and circumcisions."*

signed: Behrend,  
Magistrate.

Louis Goldkette was Jean's grandfather. Incidentally, Küstrin (Kostrzyn) is now just inside Poland, 50 miles due east of Berlin. The rabbi came from Frankfurt on Oder, 20 miles south of Küstrin. Hartwig was a long way from his home town of Hildesheim, which is in north-west Germany, about 20 miles south of Hannover.

So farewell my gypsy campfires. At least I'd been vaguely right about the horses. From the various old documents, it was clear that the Goldkettes had been working as a circus family in Europe for at least 150 years before they came to the United States. Jean's great-great-grandfather had performed a tightrope act at the coronation of the Austrian Empress Maria-Theresa at Pressburg (modern Bratislava) in 1741. His great-great-grandfather, Levy Goldkette, had been a celebrated magician, acclaimed throughout Europe. His grandfather, Louis - the one born in a trunk near Berlin in 1834 - had been a trick rider, acrobat and circus owner, and died in France sixty years later, still on the road. These 'artistes' were acrobats, bareback riders, clowns and mimes, while the 'actresses' were vaudeville singers and dancers. Mina and Eline were two members of a four-girl Goldkette sister act, called the 'Quatuor Grec', which played to packed houses throughout Europe during the *Belle Epoque*.

On the face of it, the family were Jewish Ashkenazim, given the similarity of the name Goldkette to so many other descriptive family names from central Europe: it simply means "gold chain" in German. Unfortunately, it's not quite as simple as all that, since a brief word-search of the internet will find you endless middle-European eBay ads for cheap jewellery, but virtually no references to anybody called Goldkette, apart from Jean himself. Holocaust explanations don't really wash, as there were already few enough Goldkettes in 1900.

There is an alternative explanation. This, as I discovered more or less by accident, is that Goldkette was originally a stage name. It was first used in the late 18th century, possibly as the descriptive title of a featured acrobatic number - "The Golden Chain" - but was soon to become the name of the family that performed it. Their real name was Hasloch and they originated in Schleswig-Holstein, which used to be Danish territory at the time, but later became part of Germany.

## 2. Jean, Père et Fils

While the circus background of the Goldkette family makes fascinating reading, it doesn't tell us much about Jean Goldkette's immediate origins. The Ellis Island archives record his stated next-of-kin as being his mother, Angelina Goldkette, a resident of Moscow, but the identity of his father is still a mystery. With the lace-curtain propriety of late-Victorian Europe, the airbrushed version of Jean's parenthood is that his father "died young". The implicit subtext is that the child was the result of a backstage fling during his mother's singing tour of Greece. Indeed, according to Goldkette family legend, this involved a member of the Greek royal house. One can't help being a tad sceptical, however. After all, much as people with notional 'past lives' always manage to have avoided being scrofulous 14th century lepers or suburban accountants, a teenage single mother would tend to score more brownie points by claiming to have been pleased by a prince rather than, say, a cab driver.

Still, the scenario is faintly plausible, if only because, like other Goldkettes of her generation, Angelina was born and raised in Denmark. With the blinding logic of European royalty, so was King George I of Greece (1845-1913), who'd started life prosaically enough as Prince William of Denmark. In 1893 there were three other eligible suitors among George's older sons: Princes Nicholas, George and Constantine, who all had a fluent command of Danish - a signal advantage for a Greek prince wanting to get into a Copenhagen showgirl's good graces. Against this, it's strange that on May 13, 1893, a mere five days before Louis Goldkette's teenaged, unmarried daughter supposedly went into labour in Patras, Louis himself was a thousand miles away in Austria, calmly negotiating with the local authorities for a licence to bring acrobats and clowns to Vienna. One would have thought that his imminent proxy-membership of the Greek royal family might have had a greater claim on his attentions.

As a footnote, many years later King George's fourth son, Prince Andrew (1882-1944), produced four daughters and one son, christened Philip. If one gives the 'royal lovechild' theory any credence at all, the Duke of Edinburgh is Jean Goldkette's first cousin.

On balance, the inference is that, while Angelina Goldkette and her sisters are definitely known to have warbled their way through the Balkans in the early '90s, there is no more documentary evidence for Jean's 1893 birth in Patras than for his 1899 one in Valenciennes. In neither case has anything like a birth certificate ever turned up. From the Goldkettes' lengthy track record of juggling nationalities, swapping identities and generally fudging personal biographies, it's also clear that they enjoyed rich fantasy lives. Unfortunately, none of this makes it any easier to establish Jean's pedigree.

Given this virtual dead-end, I had another look at the passenger manifest of the *S.S. Rochambeau* during the Le Havre-New York crossing of July 1914. The Goldkette contingent consists of Jean's two acrobat uncles, Franconi and Baptiste - the one who took Jean to the States in 1910 - plus their older brother, 52-year-old Chan, and his 19-year-old son, Constantin. It suddenly struck me that 'Chan' might well be an

immigration clerk's mishearing of 'Jean' in its French pronunciation. If so, the future bandleader would seem to have been named, curiously, after his own uncle. As Constantin is listed as having been born in the southern French city of Avignon, there seemed a good chance of picking up the family's trail there. The town was virtually untouched by the two World Wars, so local records would probably be intact.

I finally managed to make it over to Avignon one bitter November day when the Mistral was howling down the Rhône valley and rattling the windows of the old Papal Palace where the regional archives are located. I trawled through every birth, death and marriage between 1830 and 1900 and found absolutely nothing. I even combed through a regional circus-and-fairground magazine for the 1890s, which told me about bearded ladies absconding with the night's take and monkeys running amok, but nothing about the Goldkettes. Towards 4 p.m. I asked one of the archivists if there was anything I might have overlooked. He gave me a withering once-over. I instantly recognised the kind of bureaucrat who feels duty-bound to tell you as little as possible, as late as possible. "You realise, of course, there's nothing here about Avignon itself later than 1890?" - now he tells me! - "the rest's over at the Municipal Archives, *naturellement*." Not having a semi-automatic weapon about my person I couldn't make a very useful reply to this, so merely got out of there as fast as I could, to try to reach the other archive before it closed. Twenty minutes later I was looking at the original manuscript of Constantin's birth certificate. It is the only Goldkette birth registered in France between 1870 and 1915.

Constantin Goldkette was born at 4 am on the 6th of August 1895 at 21, rue Colombe in Avignon. His father was 32-year-old Jean Goldkette, *artiste*, clearly the same person as 'Chan' on the *S.S. Rochambeau*. 'Constantin' is an unusually Greek or Russian form of a name which would normally appear as 'Constant' in French usage. Constantin's mother is identified as the Russian-sounding Olga Stéphanie Dodoukalow, 23, noted by the Avignon registrar as being "without profession" - so possibly a middle or upper-class woman. If there is a dim memory among the Goldkettes of some aristocratic connection, perhaps this is what it was about. It's worth pointing out that the queen of Greece, King George's consort, was Grand Duchess Olga Constantinova of Russia (1851-1926), the daughter of Grand Duke Constantin Romanov. Could Constantin Goldkette's mother have been a kinswoman of Queen Olga, and he himself named after the old Grand Duke, like King George's eldest son, Prince Constantine?

In Paul Eduard Miller's 'Yearbook of Popular Music' for 1943, there is a significant variant of Jean Goldkette's biographical details, namely that he was "born about 1895 in France", with no mention of Valenciennes at all. It also states, with surprising accuracy, that Jean originally came to the U.S. in 1910 - not 1911, the date invariably quoted over the last 60 years or so. This precision might be grounds for taking the 1895 birth date more seriously. Since Constantin was born in 1895 and his father was called Jean, perhaps it is a case of Jean, père et fils.

While we have no photograph of Constantin, his physical description in the ship's manifest of 1914 is close enough to Jean's of 1910. Neither youth is very much over 5 feet. The only marked anomaly is in their eyes, which are brown in the case of Constantin, whereas Jean's are blue. Still, when one recalls how in 1912 Mina Goldkette's brown eyes miraculously turned blue, this may not be so remarkable.

Details of what Jean did between 1910 and 1914 are sketchy. The other Goldkettes were constantly going back to Europe, so perhaps at some point Jean went too, returning to the States under his real name of Constantin with his father and

two uncles in the summer of 1914. Constantin then drops off the scene completely, and current members of the family don't seem to have even heard of him. This disappearance would make sense if he and Jean were really one and the same person. It would also authenticate Jean's story about trying to get a union card at the age of 16. If Jean/Constantin was born in 1895, he would have been 16 in 1911, the year after he arrived in the States. While the original 1910 passenger manifest had Jean down as 17 not 15, this might have been due to his own teenage bravado. Young men lie about their age, but usually upwards. However, having once put 1893 down in writing for the U.S. Government, even the artful Jean may have never had the nerve to correct it.

The Valenciennes story may have been deliberately concocted to coincide with Constantin's convenient fade-out. Less than a month after Constantin's ship docked in New York in July 1914, Europe was at war. As a 19-year-old French-born male, Constantin would have been liable to be called up, with the imminent prospect of a nasty, pointless death on the Western Front. By ultimately contriving to be 'reborn' in the distant, devastated battle-zone of Valenciennes, Jean/Constantin became retrospectively under age for the French draft. He could claim his documents had been destroyed in the bombardment of Valenciennes, which in any case was inaccessible, being behind German lines right until the end of the war. Meanwhile, the slight phonetic similarity between Avignon and Valenciennes meant that Jean/Constantin could sidestep awkward home-town questions.

Towards the end of 1918, during the last weeks of World War One, Jean Goldkette enlisted in the U.S. Army, too late to put himself in any danger, but early enough to benefit from the virtually automatic granting of U.S. citizenship to all foreign doughboys with an honourable discharge. Hey presto! - a disappearing act worthy of his distinguished ancestor, Levy the magician.

The enigmatic Goldkette French connection was finally beginning to make some sense. By any standards, the tale is an unusual one, and so it's hardly surprising that towards the end of his life JG made several attempts to sell his story to Hollywood. After all, recent bandleading biopics had been made about Glenn Miller (1954), Benny Goodman (1955), and even Red Nichols (1959). Unfortunately, by the late-1950s few people in the film industry could remember who Jean Goldkette was, and by the time JG died in 1962 the project still hadn't come to fruition. If it had, the resulting movie might have included a curious final chapter: a few weeks ago, I received a copy of a death certificate made out for a 57-year-old Los Angeles musician who'd had a fatal stroke on 30 December 1952. The dead man was described as a "bandmaster" [sic]. He'd lived in L.A. for eight years, working with his own band, having been born in Avignon, France in 1895. His name? - Constantine [sic] Goldkette. On this evidence, the inference is that Jean and Constantin were indeed two different people, who, coincidentally, were both bandleaders and latterly had both worked in southern California. Still, it's odd that, apart from the professional details noted on this 1952 death certificate, there is no other apparent trace of Constantin's bandleading career; in fact, virtually no trace of Constantin after he arrived in the States in 1914. Was the man in the coffin really Jean's cousin, or just a hobo from the morgue serving as a convenient stand-in? One has the sneaking suspicion that perhaps Jean Goldkette had the last laugh on this.

## *Epilogue:*

Constantin Goldkette's death certificate states he was also known as "Constantine Thereses". Recent perusal of the Ellis

Island archives reveals that on 2nd August 1904, Chan and Olga "Thereses" and their son Constantin arrived in New York from France. These are identifiably the Avignon Goldkettes. (Remember, JG claimed to have originally arrived in the States "with his parents")

On 17th September 1910, a "George Thereses" arrives in New York from Southampton. He is a 17 year-old Dutch resident of Brussels, "born in Patras, Greece". He is 5ft 1inch tall, with brown hair and brown eyes. This is allegedly his first visit to the States, and his next-of-kin is a certain "C. Thereses" of Brussels. The birthplace, age and physical description of "George" are virtually identical to the arrival details volunteered by JG in July that year. The stated next-of-kin, "C.Thereses", is arguably Chan Goldkette, and therefore "George" would appear to be Chan's son. But we know Chan's only son is Constantin, yet the description of "George" is that of JG. Therefore Constantin and Jean Goldkette can be reasonably construed to be one and the same person.

Finally, some time later a certain "George Goldkette" surfaced as the composer of *In The Harbor of a Dream* for the Standard Music Company of Chicago. No prizes for guessing who he was.

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