

# THE NEW YORKER

## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### NEW ORLEANS POSTCARD

#### CONSULAT D'INFLUENCE

by Dan Baum

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**A**t the corner of Prytania and First Street, in New Orleans, stands a brick mansion with a French tricolor drooping from the gable. Eleven days after the levees failed, last August, heavily armed federal agents were banging on doors all over the city to order a “mandatory evacuation,” and the residents of the mansion were hastening to comply. A thin middle-aged man feverishly loaded file boxes into the back of a silver S.U.V. He introduced himself as Pierre Lebovics, France’s consul-general, and sidestepped the question about whether he felt that his rights had been violated by the evacuation order. “You have your, your—” he circled a hand impatiently in front of his face. “Your Bill of Rights, your Constitution.” He flapped the hand dismissively and got behind the wheel. “I am going to Baton Rouge!” he shouted. “But I will return.”

The house stayed empty for weeks, but recently Lebovics answered the door, in an open-necked shirt with a green cashmere sweater draped over his shoulders. Lebovics is fifty-four but looks much younger. He is serious to the point of dour, with longish dark curls and circular horn-rimmed glasses. “France opened its first consulate in the United States right here in New Orleans after the Louisiana Purchase, in 1803,” he said as he sat himself primly on a red sofa. “But we have been in this house only since the nineteen-fifties.”

Lebovics spent most of his life as a Russian scholar, and after becoming a diplomat he was assigned, with the logic of foreign ministries worldwide, to two non-Russian-speaking countries: Israel and the Czech Republic. He took over in New Orleans less than a month before Katrina hit, and, despite the chaos the storm has wrought, he relishes serving in this most French of American cities. “There is a part of French culture tinged with Cajun and Creole culture,” he said. “These roots run very deep in France.”

New Orleans has long been a tourist destination for the French, several of whom got a lesson, from Katrina, in how American the city also is. “The Saturday before the storm, I got a call from some French tourists who wanted to evacuate,” Lebovics said. They went to the most logical place, for Europeans: the train station. “Someone had decided to close the railway station on the day they were telling people to evacuate. These tourists found that quite extraordinary.”

Lebovics enumerated the ways in which France has come to the aid of New Orleans, including sending tons of food and supplies, a team of divers to help assess and repair damage to the port, and funds to reopen bilingual-immersion schools where young teachers from France, on loan to Louisiana, have for thirty years taught what Lebovics called “French French.”

The French Minister of Culture, Renaud Donnedieu de Vabres, was the first foreign dignitary to visit New Orleans after the storm, and the government quickly decided that France could be most useful in helping to preserve the city’s artistic attributes. A “solidarity” concert in Paris raised money for musicians; the Louvre, the Georges Pompidou Center, and the Musée d’Orsay are planning a major exhibition of French art at the New Orleans Museum of Art early next year. And the French government raised a million dollars for Louisiana schools. The French are offering six-week residencies in France for artists displaced by the flood. “The idea is to offer them good conditions—lodging and a stipend, and contacts with people,” Lebovics said. “A fresh oxygen.”

Lebovics was looking forward to Mardi Gras this week; the mayor had invited him to be part of the delegation that welcomes Rex, the Mardi Gras king. “As Frenchmen, we are attached to whatever pertains to memory,” he said. “When you’re raised in a house and you move away, and you pass by forty years later, you remember. It is the same with Louisiana. Katrina provoked an immediate outpouring of emotion in France that came from a feeling that this state and this city—we are attached to it. Whatever happened after the Purchase, we felt connected. This is a feeling you do not control. It was very fresh.”