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ANCESTRY
The 1890's to 1922

José's grandfather, whose name was also Joseph (and after whom he would be named), came to the United States sometime in the 1890's. He emigrated from the Ukraine, from the town of Bershad near Odessa, with his wife, Sarah Rubin Rabinowitz; two small daughters, Esther and Jennie; and two younger sons, David and Laib. (It was Laib who would eventually become the father of José.)

Joseph had lost both his brother Moishe and a nephew in a pogrom. They had been murdered riding in their wagon on their way to religious services. At that time, pogroms were a repeated occurrence in that part of Europe. These mass uprisings were directed mainly against the Jews, but they terrorized the entire population. Hordes of renegade Cossacks would suddenly appear, riding into villages spreading destruction, killing, robbing, plundering, and raping. Anti-semitism was a common and accepted way of life there. One of the reasons stemmed from the fact that Jewish people had often given protection to the Serfs who

escaped from the Russian estates. Some of these Serfs later converted to Judaism and this the Church strongly resented, complaining that the Jews were interfering in its internal affairs.

Joseph's family owned a tannery which had been in the family for generations. Here they manufactured just three items: women's shoes, pocketbooks, and gloves. The main raw material used was goat skin but, in order to accommodate what was becoming a rather popular fashion style in the area in the late 1800's, they began to import silver buckles, made in Mexico, with which to adorn the pocketbooks. A few families from Bershad, among them good friends of the Rabinowitzs named the Shenkers, had already emigrated to Mexico, from where they exported the silver buckles back to the Ukraine.

The leather business had grown and was thriving but, then, in one of the pogroms of the 1890's, the factory was attacked and completely ruined. Like many other people in the Ukraine, suddenly poor, without a source of livelihood, and constantly in fear for his life and safety, Joseph made the decision to leave Europe with his family and head for what he hoped would prove to be a better life in America.

They came to Philadelphia, where others from his own village of Bershad were already living. He rented a small house at 423 Dickinson Street in the southern part of the city. There Joseph found a job and went to work as a tanner. The family settled into their new life and eventually received their American citizenship. Before long, Joseph was able to afford to rent, and later get a mortgage for, a larger home, and they moved into a two-story house at 426 Federal Street, which was located only a few blocks away from their first house.

That neighborhood of South Philadelphia was cheerful, clean and well cared for. It continued to remain that way through the years that followed. Even long afterwards, when José once came with his wife Josephine and his cousin Rose Steckle Bennett on a sentimental outing to visit the area of his roots (this was in the 1980's), both homes where his grandparents had once lived still appeared to be in excellent condition. Clean and freshly painted, the house on Federal Street had flowers blooming in the window box next to the two stone steps at the front door, and it presented a pleasant appearance. Federal Street and, indeed, most of the surrounding streets gave the impression of still being a good neighborhood, safe and inviting. This was in sharp contrast to other areas of South Philadelphia not very far away which by the 1980's had grown seedy, cluttered with numerous abandoned homes which were fronted by broken pavements and streets littered

with trash. It was satisfying and somehow reassuring, so many years later, to see that both Dickinson Street and Federal Street still remained as pleasant and inviting as they must have appeared earlier when José's grandparents first arrived from Europe.

Even at the time when Joseph had first moved into Federal Street in the 1890's, his home there was no longer a new one, having already known several previous owners. The people who were living there in the 1980's estimated that the houses on that street must have been constructed shortly after the Civil War, which meant that by then they were well over a hundred years old.

One day when Laib was still a very young boy, probably about seven or eight years old, something strange happened that was to change the life and destiny of the entire family. His father (Joseph) went downstairs into the basement, perhaps to check the coal-bin. As he puttered around in the cellar, he happened to notice that a brick in one wall was loose. Reaching up to push it back into place, he suddenly dislodged it and, as it came loose in his hand, something shiny in the recess behind it caught his eye. Prying more bricks loose, Joseph discovered, half-hidden, a metal pot. Pulling it out of the wall, he found, to his amazement, that it contained a large and impressive heap of gold coins. These dated back to the Civil War days and, at the time when Joseph found them, they must have already been hidden inside the wall for about forty to fifty years. (We estimate their worth to have been about two to three thousand dollars at that time.)

This incredible discovery completely changed the life of the entire family. Joseph made the decision to return to the Ukraine and to use his newly found money to recover and restore his lost factory. Leaving Sarah and the children to wait for him in Philadelphia, he departed for Europe. This was in the early 1900's. Once in the Ukraine, Joseph did succeed in recovering the tannery. He then took over its operation, and the business there began to improve and steadily continued to flourish.

Back in the United States, Sarah and the four children remained in the house on Federal Street. As they grew older, one by one the children left school and went out to work to help support the family. Esther, the oldest, eventually married Sam Steckle, a carpenter. (Her marriage certificate listed her as *Ester Rabinovitch*.) Esther and Sam moved into a house close by at 217 Christian Street. There, Esther eventually had three children. The first was a daughter Rose, spelled Rosie on her birth certificate. (She was born about 1910, thirteen years before José, and was the one who came with him and Josy to visit the old neigh-

borhood in the 1980's.) Esther's second child would be a son named Martin who later died at the age of fourteen or fifteen. (It was rumored that he had been killed in a street shooting in the neighborhood of Strawberry Mansion in the 1930's, although the death certificate, dated January 3, 1932, read that "*Morris*" Steckle had died of "*acute pericarditis*" on December 26, 1931.) Esther would also have a third child, a boy named Solomon, whom she would lose to the flu when he turned six months old.

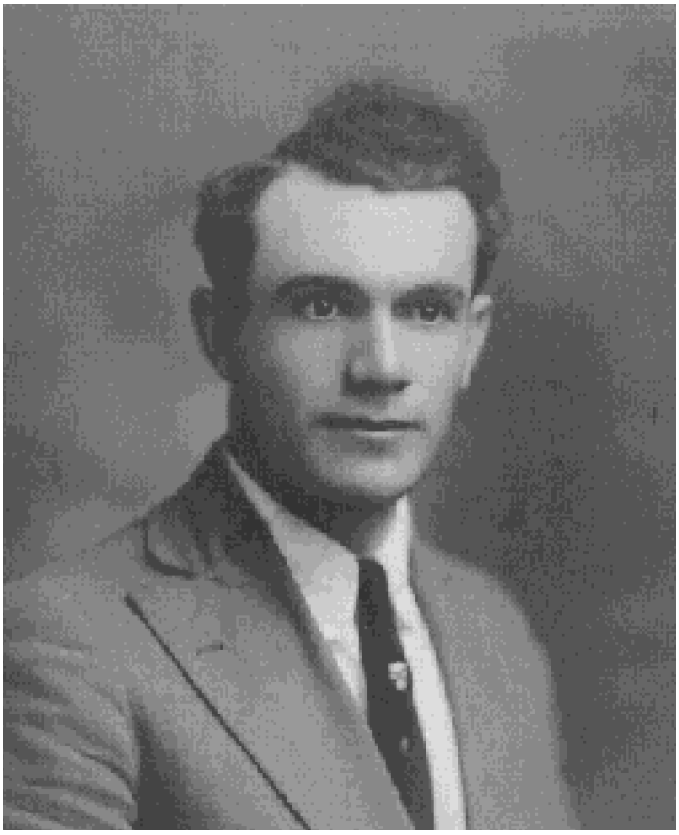
Jenny was the second of Joseph and Sarah's children. She married her cousin, a clothes presser named Nathan Garber. They were to have five children, two boys and three girls born between around 1910 and 1924. The oldest was Moishe (older than José by about fifteen years) and the youngest Joe (about a year younger than José). In between were the three girls (Rose, Flo, and Sarah, or Sis, as everyone called her.)

David was the third child of Joseph and Sarah. He got a job working in a clothing factory and there he became extremely active in The International Ladies Garment Workers Union. David eventually (around the year 1913) married his second cousin, Mary Feldman, who also worked for the same company and who was very active there in union affairs. David ultimately changed his surname from Rabinowitz to Rubin. He and Mary later bought a candy store in Northeast Philadelphia. Here they developed a successful business and lived in an apartment over the store. They would later have two children, Gilbert (born in 1921, a couple of years before José) and Sarah (about José's age and who, like Jenny's daughter, would also become known as Sis).

Laib was the youngest of Sarah's and Joseph's children. He was about eleven years old when he left school to get his first job. At work he was referred to as the *gopher*. The term derived from the expression *go for*. Laib was the messenger who would be sent to *go for coffee*, *go for a sandwich*, or *go for a newspaper* for the other workers at the factory. In return for running these errands, he would receive a few pennies, which he brought home to his mother to help supplement the family income. Gradually, the tradesmen at the factory taught Laib some of their skills. This was how he was able to eventually become an apprentice, learning to be a cutter and acquiring various skills in the tailoring trade. He, too, joined The International Ladies Garment Workers Union, and he quickly became popular and very active in union affairs. Although both of his sisters and his brother were all married by now, Laib remained single and continued to live in the house on Federal Street to care for and support his mother.

When he was in his late teens, Laib's mother, Sarah, became ill. Her condition gradually continued to worsen, and finally reached the point where she had to be hospitalized. Laib lifted her and carried her in his arms to the Mount Sinai Hospital, which was just a few blocks away from their house in South Philadelphia, but on the way there she died in his arms. Laib was devastated. As the youngest child in the family, he had always been extremely close to his mother and, now, he remained the only one living in the house on Federal Street.

Laib had grown into an exceptionally handsome man, with refined features and wavy brown hair. Throughout his life people noticed his classical good looks, and many women, in particular, sought him out. But Laib was impervious to all this attention. Instead, he remained passionately concerned with what he considered to be the inequities and injustices of the social system that he observed in life around him.



Laib as a young man (probably taken in Philadelphia in the first decade of the century).

Shortly after his mother's death, a message from the Ukraine came through the American Red Cross. Laib's father, Joseph, was now ill and needed help. The family in Philadelphia notified their relatives in New York, and everyone got together to discuss what could be done. It was decided that Laib, then nearly twenty years of age, the youngest son and the only one without responsibilities of a family of his own, should go to Europe to see his father. They sold the house on Federal Street to obtain funds for the trip. The family hoped that Laib might also be able to find out if some of the profits from the tannery (reported to be financially successful) could be sent back to the United States.

The year was 1916 or 1917. The United States, on the brink of World War I, had still not yet officially become involved. Joseph's sister in New York, Pearl Weinberg, along with some of the other relatives, added their funds to help pay for Laib's transportation to the Ukraine. Because war was raging in Europe, it was decided that Laib had best travel westward, cross the United States, then sail across the Pacific to Asia, and finally travel across Siberia in order to reach the Ukraine. As he traveled through the United States, he found that he was able to find lodging in various labor communes, lodging that was free to him because of his union membership.

From California he took a steamer bound for Yokohama, Japan. He then made his way to Vladivostok in Siberia and from there he traveled to Harbin, Manchuria. He later told José that the only nourishment he had been given in Harbin was hot tea. (They told him there that this was the only food available, and he drank two samovars' full of it before boarding the Trans-Siberian Railroad to cross Siberia.) Laib eventually reached Kiev where, after making numerous inquiries, he finally was able to locate his father in the town of Bershad, near Odessa in the Ukraine. This was how, after more than a decade of separation, Joseph and Laib were finally reunited.

Laib found Joseph feeble and ill. He moved into Joseph's house and stayed to take care of the old man. Laib spoke very little Russian when he first arrived in the Ukraine, but he quickly became fluent in the Russian language. Just previous to his departure for Europe, he had taken lessons from a family on a farm in New Jersey so that he could learn the basics. (Years later, in the 1960's, Jake Steinberg, the grandson of this family, married Bernice Waldman, the daughter of a dear friend of the Rabinowitz family but, at the time that Laib was studying Russian with the Steinbergs, the two families had no connection with one another.)

While tending to his sick father Laib also helped to direct the operation of the tannery. Gradually, he began to take on more and more responsibility there, and became familiar with its operation. Then, after a year, Joseph died. At this point, Laib made the decision to remain in Bershad for a while longer and continue to run the tannery. This he continued to do successfully until the Russian Revolution came to Bershad. Now, private ownership of property became disallowed, and Laib was forced to sell the tannery to the Ukrainian Soviet. They paid him a sizable sum of money for this, and Laib immediately deposited this paper currency (rubles) into a bank.

Meanwhile, the ability he showed in running the tannery had been noted by those in power. Impressed not only by his business ability and his language skills but also by how well he got along with his workers as well as his equals, the officials soon appointed Laib to a post in local government affairs. As time passed he gained further recognition and began to receive additional appointments of greater and greater responsibility. These eventually led to the salaried post of adviser to the Customs Bureau at the Ukrainian-Romanian border.

Before this, however, during the time when skirmishes had been occurring more and more frequently between the White Russians (Cossacks) and the Communists, Laib was sent in with Ukrainian troops to help defend his village of Bershad. While fighting in the trenches, he received a two-inch-long saber wound to his right temple, inflicted by a Cossack on horseback. Left for dead, Laib was eventually found and taken to a nearby hospital. Here, he remained for a long time, slowly recuperating. The hospital was run by American Quakers. Many years later in Mexico, José saw among his parents' possessions a dark green woolen American army blanket which, his father told him, had been given to him by the Quakers.

Fortunately, the saber wound that Laib received caused only bone damage. His speech and movements remained unaffected, and slowly he regained his health, although the wound left him with a scar on the right side of his forehead which he carried for the rest of his life. (His hair eventually covered the scar.) During his stay in the hospital, Laib's head remained bandaged for a long time. He was sometimes taken outside with some of the other patients to sit in a nearby park in the sunshine to convalesce.

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There was another patient in the hospital by the name of Rachel Borisovna Loshak-Wallach. She was the daughter of innkeeper Beryl Loshak and his wife Gittel Wallach[1] from the nearby village of Chichilnik. For years, Gittel's parents (Manya — or *Moises* — Wallach and his wife Essie — or *Este* — Gosbesde Wallach) as well as Gittel's grandparents before them, had owned a stable of horses attached to the local inn. Here travelers could rest, water their horses, stop for a meal, and spend the night if they wished before continuing on with their travels. As had happened with the Rabinowitz tannery, the Loshak-Wallach inn and stable, which had belonged to Rachel's family for several generations, had also recently been taken over by the Soviet government in their confiscation of private property.

Rachel was about seventeen years old when Laib first met her. He noticed that she continually wore a shawl, which she never removed, over her head. It turned out that she was recovering from typhus at the time, and she had recently had her head completely shaved. In spite of the shawl, Rachel's appearance was striking. She had very dark, intensely expressive eyes and, despite her illness, she was a most beautiful young woman. But her hands remained her most elegant feature. With thin tapered fingers and extremely long fingernails, which she unfailingly kept elegantly polished, their beauty was such that a local artist had once insisted upon making a clay mold of them. It was said that this mold was displayed for many years in a museum in the Ukraine.

One day Rachel and Laib struck up a conversation and, when they discovered that they both knew Yiddish, they managed to meet often during their convalescence. Rachel, it turned out, was the oldest of ten children, only seven of whom had survived past infancy. Five of her siblings were boys, while the next to the youngest in the family wasto be a girl. Although quite young when Laib first met her, Rachel had already suffered a great deal in her life. During her childhood, Cossacks had overrun Chichilnik several times. During one of these pogroms, when Rachel was still a very little child, her family had rushed to hide, as they usually did during these raids, in an underground shelter where an old well had once been located. This time, however, a mishap occurred. As she rushed to jump down into the shelter before the Cossacks' arrival, Rachel's mother fell

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[1] The name *Wallach* later became spelled as *Bolig* and, by the third generation, as *Bolij* in the branch of her family that would eventually settle in Argentina. It would also appear as *Vuli*, *Vulih*, and *Vulik* in the part of the family that settled in Peru.

and broke her leg. The family dragged her into the shelter, after which nobody dared to venture outside until they could be sure that the Cossacks had all left the area. Many days passed before they were able to come out. Once outside, they immediately took Rachel's mother to a doctor but, by this time, gangrene had already set in, and her broken leg had to be amputated.

Soon after this tragedy, unable to cope with so many small children in a family under the care of a newly crippled mother, the parents chose to send Rachel, their oldest child and only daughter, away for a time. She was to be accompanied by one of the other children, the youngest brother that her parents felt Rachel could manage. Rachel must have been no more than seven at the time, and her brother Boris (always called Bouzzie) about four. The two children were sent by train to stay with their paternal grandparents (Yankel and Sarah Feeh Loshak) who lived in a village in the Crimea. It was a journey of about three hundred miles to the east, and both children traveled alone together without any adult supervision. As they got off the train upon arriving at their grandparents' village, Rachel suffered an extremely nasty fall. She hit her head so severely that she completely lost her memory, and she failed to regain it for some time to come. Eventually, however, her memory did return, and later she and her brother were finally sent back to their parents' home in the Ukraine. But Rachel never forgot the sense of rejection that she felt from having been sent away at such a young age. She always remained very bitter about this, and she never completely forgave her parents.

Rachel was an exceptionally bright child and, in her teens became one of the few girls to be admitted to, and eventually graduated from, the Gymnasium. The Gymnasium was the equivalent of what, in the United States, would be a respected senior high school of high caliber and prestige. In the Ukraine, attendance at the Gymnasium was considered extremely noteworthy and an honor of considerable merit. For a Jewish girl to accomplish this was almost unheard of, but Rachel managed to achieve this rare distinction.

When she was fourteen, Rachel again suffered an unforgettable indignity from her family. During this period, she tutored other pupils in their studies of Russian and French. One Saturday, her father came upon her giving a lesson to another girl. An extremely religious and fanatically orthodox Jew, he considered labor of any kind on the Sabbath an unforgivable sin. Outraged, he dragged Rachel out to the village square, where he had her publicly flogged. From that time on, her attitude toward any type of organized religion remained one of embittered rejection.

Despite this, however, Rachel never lost her respect for learning. She continued to revere education deeply, and she studied every subject about which she could find reading material. Well into her old age, she would continue to read everything she could find on matters as diverse as automobile mechanics, medicine, literature, philosophy, current events, home remedies, and gossip about public figures, and she always remained quick to challenge everybody and everything. This respect for education never left her, and she became well versed and deeply knowledgeable about a most astonishing variety of topics.

During another pogrom, which occurred when Rachel was about fifteen, protection came to her in a unique way. Her elderly grandmother, Essie Gosbesde Loshak, who was bedridden with illness, took Rachel into her own bed to hide. She directed the girl to crawl beneath her, into the area between the springs and mattress of the bed. Here, Rachel was to lie silently and without moving. In this way, when the raiding Cossacks entered the house they saw only a sick old woman in bed. They completely failed to discover, hidden under the mattress, the young girl, whom they would otherwise undoubtedly have raped and brutalized.

Laib and Rachel thus discovered that they had both experienced hardships during childhood, many of which stemmed from the atrocities inflicted by Cossack terrorism around the turn of the century. They soon fell in love, finding solace and companionship in each other, and this was to take them through a lifetime of strange and interesting experiences together.

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