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BIRTH AND INFANCY **1923 to 1924**

Laib and Rachel were married in 1922. A year later, in the town of Odessa, José was born. The exact date of his birth still remains uncertain. The registry listed it as November 4, 1923, but Rachel and Laib later admitted that, in the confusion of ongoing events, they had neglected to officially register the birth until several weeks later. To confuse matters further, at that time in the Ukraine a shift from the Byzantine to the Gregorian calendar was in progress. As a result the precise date of José's birth remains unclear. It may actually have been closer to October 4th than to November 4th, but the latter remains the date which appears on all of José's records and papers, and on which he would continue to celebrate his birthday.

It was during the first few months of José's life that Laib and Rachel made the decision to leave the Ukraine. By now, Laib had risen to the post of adviser of

immigration at a check point on the Ukrainian-Romanian border. This was an amazing accomplishment for a man who had only finished the third grade in school. What Laib lacked in formal education, however, he more than made up for in life experiences. Traveled, knowledgeable in his understanding of many different kinds of people, skillful in getting along with every sort, and fluent in four languages, Laib proved effective in his work and functioned with a considerable amount of power. He was the one to recommend who would, and who would not, be permitted to leave the country and what, if anything, they could take out with them. Because of his idealism, however, as well as his own good nature and an innate sense of justice, Laib continued to recommend that one family after another, Russian as well as Jewish, emigrate from the Soviet Union with all of their possessions intact. Several times he was reprimanded for this by his superiors, but he disregarded their criticism and continued to follow his conscience. Gradually, he was beginning to see the problems and inequities in the new Soviet system, and he was becoming increasingly disillusioned. He continued to find himself in more and more trouble with his superiors. At last, they completely stripped him of his advisory authority, withdrew the honors that he had previously received after having been wounded, and eventually they took his job away.

Now unemployed, without the prospect of future work, and with a wife and infant son to support, Laib decided that it would be best to leave the Ukraine. He went to the bank to withdraw the money he had earlier deposited there after selling the family tannery to the Soviets. But by now, devaluation had taken place and, to his shock, Laib found that his savings had become completely worthless.

Leaving the Ukraine now seemed an even more urgent move. It may be remembered that Laib, as well as his sisters, brother, and parents, had all obtained American citizenship after coming to the United States, and Laib wanted to return to his family in America. But two problems prevented him from doing so. The first was that, when he had left the United States, it had been at the period just prior to America's entry into World War I. Because of the timing, Laib had failed to serve in the US military, and his patriotism and sympathies might therefore be questioned. He was afraid that he might be considered a draft-dodger, even though this was not the reason that he had left the United States. The second problem was that, through letters from his sisters, he learned that several members of his family, particularly cousins in New York, were angry at him for having failed to bring back any of the money that his father's tannery had accumulated.

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**Rachel and José leave
the ship in Tampico in
1924.**

Laib and Rachel decided that their best course of action would be to move as close to the United States as possible and, then, to wait there for more favorable conditions before they attempted to return to Philadelphia itself. Remembering that others whom they knew from Bershad had previously settled in Mexico, they now decided to make this country their immediate destination. José was almost nine months old when they were finally able to leave the Ukraine. They traveled by train to Holland. Here, they found a ship's captain who was willing to take them on board to Mexico. They gave him the very last of their savings to pay for their transportation.

During the ocean crossing, they became friendly with the captain. They even ate their meals with him, which was most unusual for passengers in steerage. (It was probably Laib's outgoing nature that led to the development of this friendship.) When the ship eventually reached Tampico, its first stop in the Western Hemisphere, the captain lent them the fifty dollars required by Mexican law that all newcomers had to show upon entering the country. (This was to prove that the incoming passengers had some means of supporting themselves.) Then, as soon as Laib and Rachel had passed through Immigration, they immediately returned the fifty dollars to the captain, thanking him profusely before he set sail for his next port of call. Once, years later, the captain would come to visit them in Tampico, bringing with him a magnificent crab dinner (called *jaibas tampiqueñas* in Spanish) for them all to share. Laib and Rachel always felt a debt of gratitude to this good man for his kindness.

Once ashore, Laib and Rachel were now on their own, penniless and with an infant in a strange new country where they knew nobody, and where the language and the culture were completely unfamiliar to them. Their plan was to remain in Mexico for just a short while, and then work their way into the United States under favorable conditions. They expected that this would take only a short time. Actually, it extended into a period of almost seventeen years.

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