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TAMPICO
1924 to 1929

As it later turned out, a few families from Bershad were now also living in Tampico. One family, the Shenkers, had, years before, emigrated from the Ukraine to Mexico. They were the ones who had earlier exported silver buckles, those used for adorning the ladies' pocketbooks which had been manufactured by the tannery belonging to Laib's father. The Shenkers later mentioned that they had been walking along the waterfront on the very day that the boat carrying Laib and Rachel had arrived in Tampico. The Shenkers described how incredulous they had been to see people from their own native Ukrainian village debarking in a small seaport of Mexico. At the time, however, they felt that it would be prudent to keep their distance and not interfere in the apparent confusion of the moment.

Laib went to work as a driller in the oil fields of Tampico. Oil was the main industry, and an important one, in the area. Laib began to do well, especially since

he spoke several languages. Most of the foremen there were Americans who spoke only English. After a couple of years, Laib managed to save enough money to purchase a street stand near the oil company offices. From here, he sold candy and fruit to his former coworkers and to the many friends that he had made. His small business began to flourish. From this humble beginning, he was soon able to get a mortgage to buy a house. It looked as if life was finally about to stabilize for him and his small family. Then, a bizarre and traumatic experience occurred.

The year was 1925, and it was May 1st, a holiday commemorating workers throughout many parts of the world, including Mexico. People marched in parades on the streets; noisy crowds pushed their way along the boulevards and through most of the public places; the reverberation of music, firecrackers, and mariachi bands exploded everywhere. Laib put the baby, José, then a year and a half old, into his stroller and took him out for a walk to see the colorful sights and the celebrations. Along the way, Laib decided to buy a newspaper. He stopped at a small shop, parked the stroller outside, and entered the store to pay for the paper. He was gone for no more than thirty seconds but, when he came out, the stroller was empty and the baby was gone.

Frantically, Laib searched everywhere, but to no avail. He notified the police. He and Rachel placed advertisements in the newspapers, and a picture of the child was posted on lamp-poles and in numerous public places. Days passed without any success. Then, a psychic approached them, suggesting that she might be able to conjure up a vision of where the baby was being hidden. Rachel had already found some solace from her tarot cards, which, she said, indicated to her that the child was safe and would soon be found, but she welcomed the additional support which the psychic, whom they agreed to pay for, provided. Next, Rachel and Laib hired a private detective. After about three weeks of searching, the detective suggested that they offer a reward for any information regarding the whereabouts of the child. One thousand pesos (then about five hundred dollars) was the amount finally announced. Soon afterwards, a Mexican Indian from a nearby village (Tuxpan, across the Panuco River) came forward to claim the reward. It turned out that his common-law wife, an Indian woman unable to bear children of her own, had noticed the baby sitting alone in his carriage. Charmed by his golden hair (which, by early adolescence, would turn jet black, but which now shimmered in golden curls) and his large brown eyes set off by arched dark eyebrows, the woman had taken advantage of the moment when the child had been alone to snatch him up and carry him off. She then claimed to her friends

and neighbors that José was her own baby. It was only the offer of a reward which finally convinced her man to come forward, and this was what led to the eventual return of the child, completely unharmed, to Rachel and Laib. As José laughingly tells it, from that time on, as he was growing up, whenever he severely misbehaved, Rachel would throw up her arms in disgust and jokingly claim that this was not her own child but rather another one who had been substituted and returned to her after the kidnapping. No real child of hers, she declared, would ever have behaved in such a way as he did now. This remained a family joke for years to come.

Life gradually returned to normal. The business grew, and the family began to prosper. Then, when José was about three years of age, he became

Rachel and José in Tampico around 1927.

severely ill. When his condition continued to worsen, Rachel finally took him to the United States for medical diagnosis and treatment. In Philadelphia she and the youngster stayed at the home of Esther, Laib's older sister. (Esther's daughter Rose later recalled how, shortly after their arrival, she had seen the three-year old José, then being toilet-trained, position himself on the second-floor landing of her house and, to the amazement of everyone, urinate down the steps onto the first-floor landing.)

José was taken to the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania. There, he was diagnosed as having spinal meningitis. Part of the treatment in those days consisted of immersing the patient in extremely hot water, about 104 degrees. This was done in José's case, and he eventually recovered fully. Only then did Rachel take him back to Mexico.

José did not begin to talk until he was about four years old. A specialist claimed that the child was confused by the multiple languages he constantly heard around him: the Yiddish and Russian spoken by his parents, the Spanish that he listened to outside of his home in Mexico, and the English which he had encountered in the United States while there for medical treatment. When José did start to talk, the first word that ever he said was in English. It was the word *chalk*. This puzzled everyone enormously. Then Rachel recalled that, at the University of Pennsylvania Hospital, the doctors had distracted the child by giving him a small blackboard with a piece of chalk so that he could draw while they examined him to diagnose and treat his illness. After this first word in English, José's speech soon developed rapidly, and before long he spoke both Spanish and Yiddish fluently, but no further English at that time.

Life for the family then returned to normal for a while. Laib expanded his business so that he now also imported tobacco and other products from the United States. The store prospered, and it grew to be well-known in the city.

Then Rachel became ill with malaria. José remembers her taking massive doses of quinine. The illness left her slightly deaf, and for a long period she lost both her memory and her speech. Rachel later claimed that she had to relearn all of her Spanish and her Yiddish after this. Doing so, she added, proved to be an exceedingly slow and painful procedure, but she eventually overcame her language difficulties. However, long afterwards, during the last twenty or so years of her life, after she had already been living in the United States for a few decades, Rachel's Spanish once more grew weak. José claims that, once again, she lost much of her Spanish vocabulary, as well some of the ability to express herself in

that language. However, fluency in her own two native languages (Russian and Ukrainian) never left her.

In 1928, when José was about four and a half years old, a letter arrived from the Ukraine. One of Rachel's brothers, Bouzzie (the second oldest of the five boys) wanted to come to settle in Mexico. By the time Rachel and Laib received the letter, they were told, Bouzzie would already be preparing for the trip. Rachel's delight was boundless. Bouzzie, who had traveled with her to their grandparents' home in the Crimea when they had been sent there as children, had always been her favorite brother. She was ecstatic at the prospect of finally having a member of her family living in Mexico close to her. Letters passed back and forth, money and papers were sent, and at last everything was official.

Finally, the great day arrived when Bouzzie's ship was due to sail into Tampico. José still remembers that, in honor of the occasion, he was dressed in a fancy white sailor's suit to go to the port with his parents and meet his uncle for the first time. He recalls their anticipation and excitement as the three of them climbed to the roof of the town's highest building in order to get a better view of the harbor. They picked their way among a mass of dirty, oily cables that were lying on the roof of the building. From here they watched as the great ship sailed in from Europe. In his excitement, José suddenly accidentally brushed against one of the cables. Now his once clean, white sailor suit was smeared with grease. His mother, nervous and upset, spanked him roundly, displeased not only that he had ruined his fine white suit, but also that the first view his uncle would ever get of the nephew he had never seen before would now be of a boy in dirty clothing.

The mood of expectation and excitement continued to mount. The ship finally reached the pier, and the passengers began to disembark. Then, to Rachel's utter astonishment and disbelief, who should get off the boat but Mottie, the nineteen-year-old brother of Bouzzie who was younger than he and next to him in age. Rachel could scarcely contain her shock and disappointment. During the time when money and papers had been sent in preparation for her brother's journey, nothing had ever been mentioned about the possibility of anyone but Bouzzie coming to Mexico. Rachel continued to remain in a state of disbelief for some time after Mottie's arrival, although she eventually consoled herself with the fact that now, at least, she had somebody from her own family living nearby in Tampico.

José took to his uncle immediately. As time passed, the bond between the two grew ever stronger. Mottie, who was very much younger than Rachel (herself

quite young when José had been born), became more like a big brother than an uncle to José, helping to guide him in many aspects of his training, and acting as his friend and confidant.

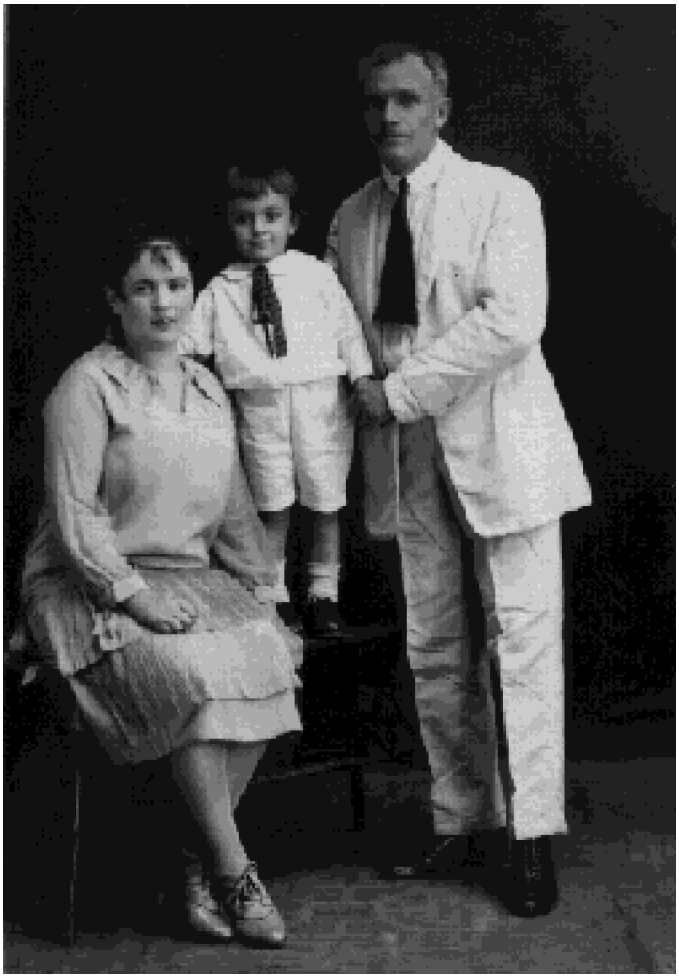
When Mottie first arrived from Europe, Rachel and Laib took him into their home, and he continued to live there with them for several months. Finally, unwilling to impose any longer upon their hospitality, Mottie moved into a small boarding house close by. He came by to see the family regularly, and he would sometimes even bring José back to his boarding house with him at mealtimes. On these occasions, Mottie would instruct the small boy, "Eat as much as you want! It's all paid for already!"

Young and untrained, Mottie found it difficult, at first, to support himself in Mexico. He began to work as a peddler, walking through the streets of small villages near Tampico, selling neckties on the installment plan. Eventually he realized that Mexico City, the nation's capital, probably held more promise and opportunity for him, and he decided to move there. He tried to convince Rachel and Laib to come with him but, at that time, their business was doing exceedingly well, and they decided to remain in Tampico, at least for the time being. Mottie continued to remain in close contact with Rachel and Laib and, to José's great pleasure, he visited them regularly and often.

Upon arriving in Mexico City, Mottie contacted some distant cousins, the Chisikovskys, who were living there. Elias Chisikovsky owned a small factory named *Estilo Paris*, which manufactured shirts. Soon after arriving from Tampico Mottie went to work for the Chisikovskys, but for a short time only. Before long he was able to purchase a small printing shop of his own, and he went into business for himself. Soon after that, however, unionization and expropriation came to the area, bringing problems that led to difficult times for Mottie and other owners of small businesses in Mexico. Frequently, those who took over lacked managerial skills and the training needed to run these businesses and, before long, many of the enterprises fell into bankruptcy. It was true that the Mexican Revolution had promised that all industrial concerns would be managed by the labor force but, unfortunately, many of these people were untrained and unprepared to take over such responsibilities.

The Korogodskys were another Jewish family from Europe with whom the Chisikovskys were acquainted. These people also owned a factory but, instead of shirts, they turned out the fabric needed for producing men's and women's underwear. The Korogodskys hoped to expand their business by buying an addi-

tional factory where their fabrics would be cut and manufactured into clothing. When Mottie became interested in their daughter, Bertha, the Korogodskys offered him the ownership of their sewing factory as a dowry. Bertha was only fourteen years old but, at that time in Mexico, it was quite common for men to marry women far younger than themselves. The Korogodskys were eager to see Bertha married early. Her older brother, Myron, it was said, had gotten into difficulties with the female servants and, also, some of the other young women in the neighborhood, and they wanted to avoid similar problems with Bertha. (Myron later became an MD, married an American nurse, and moved away to Indiana, where he eventually died of brain cancer in the 1970's.)



The family in Tampico.

The Korogodskys falsified Bertha's age on all of her papers and, before long she and Mottie were married. Shortly afterwards, her mother, the elder Korogodsky's wife, died of myelagenous leukemia. Years later, the old man would marry again, this time to a notorious Jewish lady who had just come out of prison. This woman had been convicted of killing her first husband after she caught him eating in a fancy restaurant with another woman.

Mottie now owned the factory which the Korogodskys had promised him, and he ran it successfully. He was luckier in this than many others who also owned factories at a time when unionization and expropriation were occurring all over Mexico. When the workers in his factory became unionized, his friend Elias Chisikovsky soon found it impossible to maintain his business. Any profit that the factory produced soon became dissipated through the decisions enforced by the unions. Elias finally turned his factory entirely over to the workers and left the business. Mottie, on the other hand, was somehow able to manage successfully, and his factory continued to thrive under his guidance. In the mid 1930's, he and Bertha eventually had two sons. Jacobo was born when José was about fifteen years old, and Ruben about two years later.

In 1929, when José was about five years old, a hurricane and cyclone, bringing with it a huge tidal wave, struck the area of Tampico. Parts of the city were entirely destroyed. The home where José and his parents lived was completely flooded and demolished. Along with many other people, the family was evacuated by the Mexican Red Cross to an area high on a hill, where tents were erected as temporary living quarters. Here, everyone had to remain for several weeks. Laib was able to buy some old wooden crates, along with nails and screws, and from these, he constructed what served the family as both furniture and storage facilities in which to keep the few supplies that they had been able to salvage before leaving their home. José remembers playing with some of the screws as his father worked, lining them up as toy soldiers before Laib had to use them to construct the furniture. José also remembers how he, along with some of the children of other evacuees, formed their own little theatrical group. They modified children's plays, made costumes, and put on performances, all of which gave him great pleasure.

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