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MEXICO CITY: HIGH SCHOOL YEARS
1936 to 1937

FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS

When Laib first came to Mexico City, he went to work in the store of Señor Mendel Monastersky. He worked for five pesos a day. Here, they would serve freshly squeezed fruit juices and soft drinks to customers who would drop in for a bit of quick refreshment. Occasionally, José would also come to work there for a few hours. Once in a while, he would see the two young daughters of Señor Monastersky, Eugenia and Esther, playing in a corner of the store. (The younger of the two, Esther, would eventually, when she grew up, marry an American

pharmacist named Malvin Aaronson and move to the United States with him. José would later meet this couple in Philadelphia, in the 1950's, at which time they would all become good friends.)

The store of Señor Monastersky was located in the neighborhood of San Juan de Letran. This was a shopping area, rather elegant at that time; the residential neighborhood surrounding it, next to the avenue called "16 de Septiembre," was then upper middle class. The Monastersky shop was located next door to Prendes, one of the fanciest restaurants in Mexico City. Here, the President of Mexico, as well as some of the biggest politicians in the country, would come in to eat. One could always see guards standing by there on duty outside. In front of Monastersky's shop, an Indian used to sell soft tacos from a small stand. Eventually, Monastersky decided to rent three or four feet of space on the side of his store to the Indian. In this way, both businesses were now located under one roof, which lent an air of greater respectability to the street.

Laib worked for Señor Monastersky for only a short time. Before long, he and Rachel bought two candy shops of their own. These were located in different parts of the city. After a while, however, they found it too difficult to manage two businesses located so far apart. They finally closed the store at the entrance to La Lagunilla (the poor neighborhood and big market area of the city), and instead concentrated all their efforts on the place at 16 de Septiembre, in the affluent San Juan de Letran area.

One street away from the store of Señor Monastersky lived his wife's brother, a poet by the name of Señor Jacobo Glantz. This man published a newspaper, and he was also the head of the Allied Jewish Appeal of Mexico. A block away from their home, Señor Glantz's wife operated a millinery shop where she both made and sold her own hats. During the time that Laib was still employed by Señor Monastersky, he also did some work for Señor Glantz. Laib would collect pledges for the Jewish agency, and sometimes José, too, would also go out collecting pledges. José was allowed to keep one percent of whatever money he took in. In this way, he finally saved enough to buy himself his first typewriter, of which he was extremely proud.

Señor Glantz would eventually become the godfather of Mario, José's brother. One of his responsibilities in this role would be for him to hold the baby during the ritual of circumcision. Although Señor Glantz, far from being a religious person, was indifferent to this honor, he nevertheless agreed to participate

[1] At that time, this amounted to about thirty cents in American money.

in the ritual. Señor Glantz was an eccentric man who sometimes behaved peculiarly, He spoke Spanish with a heavy Jewish accent, and he would unintentionally spit as he talked. His appearance, too, was startling. He wore Old World clothing (a floor-length coat), he sported a long, bright red goatee, and he always carried a cane with him. (Years later, when Señor Glantz would eventually open a coffee house where he would present readings of his own poetry, his appearance would lend a somewhat exotic tone to the place and, there, he would be a great success.)

In the 1930's, it was typical in Mexico for some stores to openly fly the Nazi flag. Nazi thugs (they called themselves "Los Camisas Doradas" or golden shirts) walked freely everywhere. Usually they carried big sticks of wood with them so that they could attach banners to these, displaying the swastika, and then they would carry these as flags or use them as clubs. Once, late in the 1930's, during the early days of World War II, a group of these Nazi rioters, who had been paid by the German Embassy of Mexico, captured Señor Glantz and decided to hang him outside of his wife's millinery shop. Laib, José, and some other people in the area very quickly got the police to come, and they rescued him. Later that day, these same rioters appeared at Laib's store, and smashed all the windows there.

When Laib and Rachel first came to Mexico City, they moved into an apartment building on a street called Pino Suares. The building was occupied by about fifty tenants. Here lived a Jewish family named Sulkes. The man worked as a newspaper correspondent for a Jewish agency. He was single, over thirty-five, and lived there with his two sisters, one married, the other single. He always wore a hair-net on his head. In those days, only women wore hair-nets, and José remembers thinking, at the time, how extremely bizarre this looked on a man in that neighborhood, particularly one of Sulkes' age. Nobody else, however, openly paid any attention nor showed much concern for Sulkes' strange appearance, but Sulkes, to José's way of thinking, lent a somewhat exotic air to the place.

Before long, José and his parents moved to another apartment building located on a street called San Miguel. (This was near the Politiama Theater, a few blocks away.) In the apartment building, among the tenants, lived an older man who smoked incessantly. He used to seek José out, attempting to get the twelve-year-old youngster to smoke with him. The man insisted continuously that smoking was very good for one's health, and he did, indeed, get José to smoke with him a few times.

The family then moved to San Jeronimo 134. It was while they were living

here that José's brother, Mario, was born. José, only two weeks short of his thirteenth birthday, was overjoyed to have a sibling at last. (Rachel had had a miscarriage some years earlier, losing a girl, so Mario's arrival was doubly welcomed by the entire family.) José always regarded Mario as his bar mitzvah present from his parents, even though they never made a bar mitzvah for him.

Instead, it was his Uncle Mottie, now married to Bertha Korogodsky and living close by, who insisted that José have a bar mitzvah, and it was Mottie who made all the arrangements for the event. This took place two weeks after Mario's birth, but both of his parents remained absent from the affair.

In the synagogue, José recited his *drusha* (speech), and then they served an all-dairy menu consisting of herring, slabs of challah with butter, chick peas, and a type of candy made from milk. Among those present were the Chisikovskys (distant cousins of Rachel's), and the Korogodskys (all of Bertha's family). After the ceremony, Abram Chisikovsky, a boy of about José's own age (he was later to become one of Mexico City's most respected dental surgeons), presented José with a beautiful onyx pen and pencil set. Then Myron Korogodsky, Bertha's brother (about fourteen or fifteen years old at the time) got up and made a speech that lasted a full ten minutes. Finally, with a flourish, he turned to José and handed him a gift, which José later found consisted of a broken fountain pen. (Knowing Myron's actions in the past, José suspected that the pen had, most likely, been purchased at a reduced price because it was defective.)

José realized that, without Mottie's efforts, he would probably never have had a bar mitzvah at all. José never forgot the many kindnesses and ways in which his Uncle Mottie helped him throughout the years, nor how instrumental Mottie was in his upbringing. Every Sunday morning, for example, Mottie would give José a *domingo*. This was an allowance, something that Rachel and Laib did not believe in since, in their opinion, money was too scarce to be placed in the hands of children. Mottie, however, strongly felt that an allowance should be part of every child's upbringing, and that it was essential to his training. Each Sunday, then, José would go to Mottie's house, where Mottie would give him one peso.[1] This was, ostensibly, in repayment for the many small errands that José had run for Mottie during the week. José would collect money that customers owed to Mottie, he would carry large sums of cash from Mottie's printing shop to the bank, and he would also deliver certificates from one bank to another for his uncle. Mottie trusted no one else to run these errands. Although he never paid José directly for these jobs, it was tacitly understood that the *domingo* covered

them all. José's memories of and love for his uncle always remained very strong, so much so that eventually, when José would have a son of his own, he would name the child Marty after the Uncle Mottie whom he loved so much.

There was a custom which was popular among Jewish families in Mexico, and one which they often followed at bar mitzvahs and other celebratory gatherings. Someone would rise and make an announcement that money should be collected for a worthwhile civic or religious cause. Usually, this money would be designated for Istandrut, a labor society that sent people to work in Palestine (later to become Israel). Sometimes, the money was to be donated instead to Kerem Kayenes, an organization that purchased land from the Arabs so that Jews could be brought there to work as farmers. At José's bar mitzvah, such a collection was taken up without incident. But José remembers another occasion the following year (1937) when he and his father attended the showing of a play entitled *Yiddle with the Fiddle* starring Molly Picon. There, things did not proceed quite so smoothly.

In the audience was a prominent woman named Gita Madem. Gita was an active proponent for establishing a Jewish colony named Birobidzhan in Siberia, near the Manchurian border. It was hoped that Jews from all over the world would migrate to this cold and forbidding settlement in Asia to make it their homeland. When the film was over, the usual procedure followed, and a collection was suggested. Gita Madem jumped up and shouted that this time the money should be sent, not to the usual causes of Istandrut or Kerem Kayenes but, instead, to the Soviet Union for Birobidzhan. Upon hearing this, Laib rose from his seat and began to argue. He pointed out that, since the Spanish Civil War was currently raging, this money could be better spent by sending it to the Spanish Loyalists, who had a more immediate and pressing need. A big screaming match broke out. The friends and bodyguards of Gita Madem descended upon Laib, chasing him out of the hall. José remembers with humiliation how painfully embarrassed he was by the entire incident.

The house where the family lived at that time, San Jeronimo 134, was near the street called Correo Mayor, two blocks away from the Hospital Juarez. All of the buildings in Mexico City where they had ever lived were located within ten blocks of one another. San Jeronimo, however, was where they remained for the longest part of their life in Mexico City.

Of the several families who were living in the building at San Jeronimo, two were Jewish, and both came from Poland. The first was named Dorochinsky.

These people were in the business of selling needles and embroidery thread. The other Jewish family, the Zabludovskys, had a fabric business involving remnants. Trucks full of remnants and second-hand fabrics (factory discards cut into strips, some of them of questionable origin) would pull up in front of the business at night. Drivers would quickly unload piles and piles of material somewhere nearby and, then, immediately disappear. The Zabludovskys would then haul the material to their store, where they would package strips of fabric into small bundles (each would contain a variety of different remnants – silks, cottons, denims, patches, underwear material – all rolled together into one packet.) These packets they would then sell to the Indians who, in turn, later either resold them or used them to make dresses or shirts for themselves.

The Zabludovskys had three children: a daughter Helena (who was a couple of years older than José) and two sons, Abram (one year younger than José) and Jacobo (about five or six years old at the time.) The two families quickly became friends, and José and Abram usually spent their days after school together. It was the younger boy, Jacobo, however, who often marred the pleasure of those days. He would constantly poke, kick, and suddenly, with no apparent reason, punch somebody. Often, José was the recipient.

There seemed to be no end to the variety of pranks that Jacobo played. One of his favorite tricks was to secretly insert flour and small rocks into the piñatas that were so popular in the children's games of Mexico. The object of the piñata

José, Laib, Mario, and Rachel during a stroll in the park (note that José is wearing the high-school student's cap that entitled him to discounts in transportation, entertainment, etc.).

game was for a youngster, blindfolded and swinging a large stick, to break open the piñata, a small, decorated clay figurine suspended somewhere in the air above. Whenever the blow was successful, a barrage of candies, cookies, and other sweets packed inside the piñata, would fall to the ground, and everyone would then scramble to grab as many of the goodies as they could. When the children finally succeeded in smashing open Jacobo's piñatas, however, they would be deluged, in place of the expected candy, with flour and rocks pouring down upon them instead.

After enduring Jacobo's pranks without protest for many months, José finally lost patience. One day, when Jacobo gave him a particularly hard jab in the ribs, José reached over and returned a punch of his own. This utterly astounded Jacobo. Never before had anyone reacted to his antics with anything but a tolerant smile. Jacobo had always been treated by his parents, who never denied him anything, and by everyone else, as well, with amused indulgence. After this incident, Jacobo avoided José completely, never bothering him again. (For this José was extremely grateful.) However, relations between the two boys grew, and remained, cool ever afterwards. Despite this, Jacobo's brother Abram and José always continued to be good friends, even into adulthood.

Abram was as spoiled by his parents as was Jacobo. José recalls one episode in particular. He was walking with Mrs. Zabludovsky and her two sons in the center of town when Abram suddenly mentioned that he wanted a bicycle for his birthday. This bicycle, he explained to his mother, had to be of a specific type, an extremely elaborate model. Mrs. Zabludovsky responded that what Abram wanted would cost more than the family could then afford, but that they would give him, instead, another less expensive model. Upon hearing this, Abram, then already about thirteen or fourteen, flew into a rage. He began to scream, kick, and flail his arms about wildly. Then, suddenly, and completely without warning, he dashed out into the middle of the Zocalo (Mexico City's busiest downtown square), where he threw himself down onto the ground, planting himself squarely in the middle of the rush-hour traffic, and continued to scream and kick his feet in the air. While the cars swirled madly around him, horns honking and drivers shouting wildly, Abram remained planted to the spot, deaf to the entreaties and shrieks of his mother. In despair, she finally swore to him that, indeed, Abram would receive the bicycle of his choice if only he would move himself back immediately to safer ground. Upon hearing this, Abram calmly got up, stepped out of the street and onto the pavement and, oblivious to the

turmoil and panic that he had created, resumed the preceding conversation as if the incident had never occurred.

This permissive upbringing notwithstanding, both boys eventually grew up to be prominent, respected, and influential men, each famous in his own profession. Abram became one of Mexico's foremost architects. He was the one who designed many famous buildings of great originality, among these the National Library (La Ciudadela), the School of Social Work in Mexico City, and the Tamayo Museum, located a stone's throw from the world-renowned Museum of Anthropology. Abram's work was extremely innovative, and he received several international prizes for architecture, as well as Mexico's coveted President Echevarria Award. One of the homes that Abram designed and built for himself still stands inside the grounds of Lomas de Chapultepec, Mexico City's large park, although Abram no longer lives there. He planned the structure so that it would completely encircle a tall tree. That tree, which rises imposingly in the middle of an enormous living room, constitutes the center of interest on the ground floor, and it remains the focal point around which all of the rooms on the three floors above are built.

Jacobo also became widely known and prominent as an influential newscaster and commentator who traveled both nationally and internationally with the entourage of the President of Mexico. In addition, for many years he would broadcast and comment on the evening news nightly over the primary television channel of the nation.

When the Zabludovskys finally moved out of the building, a succession of other families moved in. The first was a young couple who were related to the Shenkers (the people from Ukraine whom Rachel and Laib had known while they were still living in Tampico). The husband of this new couple had a singular obsession. He would corner the young boys of the neighborhood whenever he could, and then proceed to explain the facts of life to them. He would go into great detail about the process of male ejaculation, explaining minutely that, in order to avoid both the problems of venereal disease and pregnancy, it was most important to ejaculate externally. The boys quickly tired of these repetitious lectures, but they couldn't get him to stop. They tried to avoid him whenever they saw him coming, but he usually managed to corner one or two of them and, again, urgently launch repetitively into his theories. He had married an American wife through a prearranged marriage. She was a shrieker who always had a problem with hot water. She had to have hot water at all times. She could be heard screaming con-

tinuously about this. Her voice was extremely shrill, and it carried throughout the entire building. She would come running out the door into the yard, screaming at any of the boys who happened to be congregated there. The hot water was always running out, she yelled, just when she had to give the baby a bath! They should do something to get her hot water! Immediately! Her outbursts were ear-splitting. When, at last, it became evident to her that the situation was never going to change, she and her husband moved away.

After this came a Catholic family. The night before they moved into the apartment, their eldest son, who had gone to visit a house of prostitution, had gotten into an argument there and was shot and killed by one of the guards. The family had the body brought over to the new apartment the same day that they moved in. The coffin was carried in, the funeral took place in the living room, and then the coffin was taken out. The sister of the dead boy, a voluptuous young woman with a dusky complexion, was constantly pursued by a string of men. She always wore clothes that were much too tight for her, and there were always men around trying to pick her up. After a few months, these people also moved out.

The apartment that José and his family occupied at San Jeronimo had three bedrooms. One was José's, the second was used by his parents and the baby Mario, and the third room, they rented to a succession of boarders. The first boarder was the brother of the elder Zabludovsky. This man was a dentist who had just arrived in Mexico City. Later, his wife came to join him there. She was a woman who rarely spoke to anyone and, most of the time, the couple kept largely to themselves. Much later (in the 1990's), a *New Yorker* article made mention of a man named Zobludosky who had been a confederate of Alger Hiss during the years of World War II. Although it was never confirmed, and although the spelling of the name varied slightly, José nevertheless suspected, from the rest of the description, that this might well have been the same man to whom his mother had rented a room back in the 1930's in Mexico City.

The next boarder turned out to be a very, very old lady who could hardly walk. She was the former secretary of an extremely high-ranking politician in Mexico City. It was this man who made all the arrangements and paid for her to rent the room. His son would come to deliver the rent money for her each month, and José was paid something extra to take her to the San Miguel Movie Theater every Saturday. After she had roomed there for a few months, the politician died. His son then refused to pay any more rent for the old lady, and she soon moved out.

Next came a tall girl with a baby. Rachel, who was trying to improve her own mastery of Spanish, asked the girl for help in increasing her vocabulary. When it came to the names of the body parts, the girl supplied terms of the greatest vulgarity. Rachel, innocent of their implication, continued to use them repeatedly, completely unaware of the effect that she was creating. A few months later, the father of the baby (a man married to somebody else) arrived. He brought with him a stack of paper money (José estimates that it amounted to about five or six thousand pesos, then the equivalent of about five hundred American dollars.) With this money, the father offered to buy the baby. He insisted that José, Laib, and Rachel all be present as witnesses to the transaction. Without much hesitation, the girl accepted his offer. He paid the money, she handed him the baby, and he left with the child. Not long after this, another young man arrived, and the girl left with him and moved out.

Rachel and Laib were often too poor to afford a maid, as was customary in most middle-class and upper-class Mexican families. It was so common to have a maid in the cities of Mexico that lodging for this purpose was often built in (usually located on the roof of the family dwelling.) At one point, Rachel and Laib did have a maid for a short time. This Indian lady helped cook, clean, and do some of the laundry. One day, when it was already noon and the maid still had not come downstairs, Rachel became worried. Apprehensively, she insisted that José, then a young teenager, come upstairs with her to see if everything was all right in the maid's room. When they reached the roof and knocked on the door, they received no answer. Hesitantly, they pushed the door ajar and peered into the room. There they found the maid in bed with a man whom Rachel had never seen until then. Before either Rachel or José could utter a word, the maid propped herself up on one elbow and politely announced, "Señora, I would like you to meet my brother!"

Years after José and his family had moved away from the neighborhood, the street of San Jeronimo and, indeed, the whole area was struck by an earthquake. When José returned in 1976, on one of the numerous trips that he made back to Mexico (this time with both Josy and their daughter Malva accompanying him), the three of them went to visit his old neighborhood of San Jeronimo. They found seats on a bench in the small park at the corner of the street near the Hospital Juarez. There, they sat for a while, marveling at how the pavement from the park all the way to the area in front of José's former home, rose and fell sharply, in several places, from the earthquake. Then, they got up and walked

over to the apartment building itself. As they entered the courtyard, José was greeted by an old Indian who was seated in the doorway. This was the porter, the concierge of the place. He had been the caretaker of the building from the time José's family had lived there in the 1930's, and the old man apparently still resided there, in a small room on the ground floor.

"Buenos dias, Suñeleh." The old Indian spoke calmly, hardly looking up over his glasses as they approached. "¿Y como está Muñeleh?" (using a diminutive Russian name, little Mario, which referred to José's younger brother, who was by that time already almost forty years old.) It was as if he had never been away, and José was deeply touched that the old man recognized him and remembered him from so long ago.

TEACHERS AND CLASSMATES

When the family had first arrived in Mexico City early in 1936, José had entered a public high school there, Secundaria Numero Uno. At that time, it was considered one of the best schools in the city. Secundaria Numero Uno was located at Regina 111, near the corner of Correo Mayor, a major street. About twenty percent of the subjects taught there were dedicated to "oficios" (vocational training and professional manual activities). In addition to a program which included the academic subjects, José also spent many hours in the shops at the school. He became especially proficient in bookbinding and art. The shops themselves were most impressive. On display in the bookbinding center, stood a collection of bottles, filled with alcohol and containing parts of fingers. These had belonged to former students who had, earlier, cut them off accidentally while working at their printing tasks, and the fingers had been left there, preserved as an unspoken warning for the present novices.

There was a very large carpentry shop, too, where students could construct doll houses. The electric shop, also, was excellent. Here, students were trained to do some of the electric wiring for the school and, also, to make telephone connections.

Perhaps the most outstanding department of all was the art department. The school, which had been the very first public high school to be established in Mexico City, was housed in an old convent. Many of the components of the original convent were still there. When it was decided, one day, to destroy a particu-

lar wing of the building, they found, to their awe and amazement, that vast spaces existed inside the walls and in the ceilings. These had, apparently, been included at the time of construction in order to provide resonance to the singing that must have gone on there in earlier times. Here, in these empty spaces, all they now found were thousands upon thousands of clay pots which had been stored away and hidden there for many years. Several wings in the building were also discovered to contain graffiti, much of it from earlier times, a great deal of it pornographic.

One of the areas in which the students worked was clay modeling. Among the articles they modeled were busts of people. The better ones were then baked and glazed. Although José never had his own models finished in this way, he did excel in charcoal drawing and water coloring. Along with the paintings of several of his classmates, some of his own watercolors, mainly on zoological and botanical themes, were placed on exhibit at the Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City's famous theater.

The art teacher was Professor M. Iturbide. Sometimes he would leave the classroom for a few minutes and, on his way back, a few steps before reaching the entrance to the room, he would cough loudly to signal his imminent arrival. Students inside the room, none of them in their assigned seats, and all involved in a war of throwing clay missiles at one another, quickly scampered back into their places before the teacher would actually step back into the room. Professor Iturbide, himself, made charcoal sketches of each student who did well in class. José still has, hanging on a wall in his home, a portrait which Iturbide sketched of him. Interspersed with the art instruction that he provided, Iturbide would also give the students lectures on keeping themselves free of "women's diseases." Occasionally, several of the students would report that they had seen him on the street with different women in suspected pick-up areas. Whenever this happened, they said, he would look away, and so, out of consideration, would they. He eventually died, it was rumored, of syphilis.

Classes at Secundaria Numero Uno ran from the seventh through the ninth grade. For the first two years that José was there, no girls were enrolled. Then, in his third year, one girl was admitted. They had to protect her at all times, and she was constantly accompanied by an escort. On one occasion, a group of boys discovered a small window in the bathroom from which they could see the girls' school not far away. They took turns peering out from this window, straining especially to catch a glimpse of the locker room after gym activities. One day, José

was caught at the window by one of his teachers. After that, the window was boarded up, and José was given sweeping duty for an entire week as punishment.

He remembers fondly several of his teachers at the school. Raymundo Sanchez was professor of Spanish. This man regarded his students as belonging to either one of two groups: those whom he loved, and those whom he hated. Fortunately, José fell into the category of those whom Sanchez he loved. (Even years later, when Sanchez would happen to meet him on the street, the teacher would throw his arms around José and hug him to his heart.) Sanchez was a tiny man, fully Mexican Indian. His students (at least those whom Sanchez loved) were permitted to address him as "Sanchitos" (Little Sancho). At the beginning of the school year, Sanchez was extremely strict with his students, never permitting them even to turn around in their seats. But then, he became very liberal with those students who got good grades. He let them communicate with each other while he looked the other way. He encouraged all students, good or bad, always to do extra reading and writing. He had a sense of pride and, later, he was the only teacher in the school to display, mounted on the wall outside his classroom door, a large brass plaque stating "Aquí está la aula del Profesor Raymundo Sanchez" (This is the classroom of Professor Raymundo Sanchez).

Sanchez was a wonderful teacher. One day, he assigned individual projects to each of the students in the class. Everyone was to select a topic of his choice, research it, and then produce at least forty written pages on it. Another boy in the class decided that this was too much work for him. He confided to José that he had chosen the topic of "Life" to write about. In this way, he explained, he would be able to save time. By submitting only a collection of quotations, he could avoid the tedious process of having to do his own creative writing.

The efficiency of this plan appealed enormously to José. At that point in his schooling, he was heavily involved in grading test papers for his chemistry teacher, and he had little time to spare. Inspired by his classmate's selection, and by what he perceived would involve a very limited amount of writing, José chose "The Definitions of Love" as his topic. Examining world literature for appealing definitions, José found a huge variety of quotations by such authors as Seneca, Cervantes, Madame Pompadour, etc. There were many others, too, but he selected only those definitions which appealed to him.

When José finally completed his paper, his Uncle Mottie, who now owned a print shop, printed an elaborate cover for him. Although most of José's paper was typewritten, handwritten quotations still appeared here and there, undoubt-

edly added hurriedly in the last moment. From about fifth grade on, José would only print, rather than use cursive lettering. The reason was that, from early on, he was often unable to decipher his own handwriting. He signed his project as "José Feldman Rabinovitz." (It was not until his entry into the United States, at age seventeen, that his documents became labeled and spelled as "Joseph L. Rabinowitz"). Sanchez gave José an A for his project. But it did not end there. The problem of defining what love was continued to intrigue José, and he kept on collecting quotation after quotation about it throughout the years, long past his high school days.

One book which Sanchez recommended was *Gog*, by Giovanni Pappini. This was sold only by overnight book sellers from stands in the street and, for this reason, it gained an aura of the forbidden or pornographic, which it was not. All the students, however, hastened out to buy it because of its taboo reputation. At age fourteen, José thought it was the best book that he had ever read, and he still remains enormously impressed by it, especially by its lesson that we should never settle into a sedentary situation but, rather, try to adapt everything to a faster clip and always remain open to change.

José's physics teacher was a man named Señor Efren Fierro. This professor was an extremely thin gentleman who always looked badly in need of a shave. He was incessantly doing several things at one time. As he lectured, he would, at the same time, be reading a book on an entirely different subject to himself while, with his right hand, he would simultaneously flip through and rearrange cards in a file box. The students never were sure if Fierro was talking to them or to his cards. At the end of every lecture, José's friend, Jorge Niesvisky, would come out of the classroom, wiping his brow and exclaiming, "I need a cigarette!" Niesvisky carried an elegant metal cigarette case with its own built-in lighter. The other students were tremendously impressed by this and, also, by the fact that Jorge was the only one of them who dressed up every day in a suit with a jacket to come to class. About Fierro's lectures, Jorge would repeatedly sigh, "Oof, that's hard to take!"

José once happened to overhear a conversation which shocked him between Fierro and one of his older students. The student was asking Fierro if it would be possible to rig up a mechanical alarm clock so that it could operate other objects as well, such as also turning on a radio. This was before the days of electrical clocks in Mexico, and Fierro nonchalantly volunteered the following response, "Well, you could rig it up to blow up a bomb, but that would work bet-

ter if the clock was electric!"

José's botany teacher was a woman named Señora Villarino. She would sit on the platform in front of the class with her legs wide apart, while the students, one by one, kept dropping their pencils to see if they could peek under her skirt. The boys would make bets among themselves as to what color underwear she was wearing. Señora Villarino was not a particularly good teacher, and her class was soon taken over by a young man whose brother would later become a friend of José's at the Polytecnico.

His humanities teacher was also a woman. One day, during an exam, she caught a student using a pony (crib notes). She immediately dismissed class and rescheduled the exam for the following day. When the students entered the next morning for the test, she had them line up and then, methodically going down the line, she inserted her hand into the pockets of each one to check for ponies. There were about fifty-five students in the class but, after about ten of these, she suddenly gave up the search, deciding to try a different approach. The students, all in collusion with one another, had previously snipped open the bottom seams of their trouser pockets, so that when the teacher put her hand inside, she received a surprise if she dug too deeply. Fortunately for José, he was one of the last in line, and he still recalls his relief at having been being spared from this overly personal physical encounter.

It was his chemistry teacher, however, who remained José's personal favorite. This was Maximo Morales, a black man originally from Peru with an American wife. Morales was a gifted pedagogue, with a warm and outgoing spirit. The students soon found out that his main job was in the town of Chipingo, where the famous artist Diego Rivera was then involved in painting murals at the School for Boys. Morales managed to get José an apprenticeship to work for Rivera. The experience was something of a revelation for José. Rivera scowled most of the time, but he would posture and pose for the tourists as they came along. When someone would signal to him that tourists were arriving, Rivera would grab his pet monkey, sling it onto his shoulder, and resume his stance in front of the easel as if this were his usual working position.

Instead of doing all of the work himself, Rivera would assign dozens of apprentices to apply some of the details on his murals and paintings. José got the job of filling in (in a shade of blue) the dress of a little girl. After entering a few strokes of blue, it suddenly occurred to José that yellow would be a far more suitable color in that spot. He reasoned that, because the painting was so huge, Rivera

would never notice the difference. But when the artist came by, he spotted the change immediately. Rivera flew into a rage and, at once, he dismissed José from the project, shouting, "You'll probably make a very fine chemist, but stay away from my art!"

Maximo Morales did a great deal of moonlighting by teaching chemistry throughout the city. Pressed for time, he hired José to be his exam grader. At hours that had been prearranged, Morales would drive to the entrance of José's house, where José stood waiting for him, and drop off bundles containing hundreds of exam papers. A few days later, after José had marked them, Morales would return to collect the papers. He paid José well: twenty-five cents per exam. José earned quite a bit of money in this way but, as his mother usually did with money and possessions that José brought into the house, she took all of the money he got from Morales, assuming that it belonged to the family.

In the last year that José was at Secundaria Numero Uno, a lunch-room was opened in the building, and a large fronton court was set up in the schoolyard. The kind of fronton played there did not involve basket-paddles but, rather, the players used their hands to swat the ball around. During the final games for the championship, the girls from an all-girls high-school half a block away were brought over to watch the games. Among these was the daughter of Maximo Morales, José's chemistry teacher. José remembers noticing her, a shy, light-skinned black girl, rather frail, and he was told that she was related to his favorite teacher. He later heard that, unfortunately, she had died shortly thereafter.

José had the same math teacher for all three of the years that he attended Secundaria Numero Uno. This was Professor F. Schultz, a man with some unusual ideas. Schultz insisted that his students purchase their small compasses and plastic triangles only from a store named Calpini's. Walking around the room, Schultz would examine each piece of equipment and, if it wasn't the right brand, he would break it into pieces right in front of the student and throw it away. Once, in the middle of an exam, a rumor came to Schultz that someone had seen the exam beforehand. He immediately stopped the test, took back all the exam papers and answer sheets, and threw them into the waste basket. Right then and there, he wrote a new exam. He accepted no nonsense from anybody. Once, he got into a dispute with one of his students, Gaudencio Parra, a friend of José's who later became a well-known psychiatrist in the city of Acapulco. The dispute almost grew into a fist fight, and Schultz not only kicked Parra out of his classroom, but he also got him expelled from the school.

Schultz's students had to sit in preassigned seats. It was an unusual arrangement, involving the marks that they had received. The good students were usually placed near the back of the room but, here and there, Schultz would distribute one or two of the excellent pupils among the poorer ones. Seats were reassigned after every exam, and in a special scheme that only the teacher clearly understood. Although the school went only to the ninth grade, Schultz taught his students analytical geometry and calculus, subjects usually reserved for late high school and early college years.

Perhaps, however, the most colorful members of the faculty at Secundaria Numero Uno were the geography teacher, Señor Hernandez, and the history teacher, Señor Olivares. For one thing, they each carried a gun at all times, and they each told their classes that they, personally, had participated in the Mexican Revolution of 1910. One day, these two teachers organized several students into a large body of militants and instigated them into taking over the high school. This happened to be on the day when José, completely unaware of these ongoing events, chose to arrive at school very early in the morning to complete a physics experiment before classes started. José had let himself into the building and was working quietly there in the laboratory, when the police suddenly arrived with rifles. They shot off several tear gas bombs, smashed open the doors and went from room to room, checking the entire school for infiltrators and bombs. Of course, they found José there, and he had a great deal of explaining to do in order to account for his presence in the building at such an early hour.

After this, the school principal, a man named A. Fuentes, who had been fighting with the rebel teachers for a long time, saw this episode as an opportunity to get rid of the two teachers. At this point, both men, taking with them many of the students and some of the faculty who were leftists, departed and opened a new high school of their own, Secundario Numero 20, in another part of the city. From then on, Secundario Numero Uno's principal, and the vice principal as well, a man named Alcazar, ran constant raids on the students to prevent further trouble and to check for guns and knives. Invariably, when they searched, they always found one or two weapons. As in José's school at Pachuca, groups of students here at Secundaria Numero Uno captured the toilets and charged other students admission to get in. José remembers how shocked he was when, as a boy from a somewhat sheltered European-Jewish family, he first encountered the signs hanging at the entrances to all toilets in the school. These signs read, "Avoid blenoragia" (another name for gonorrhea) and "Wear a condom! Speak to your teacher!"

As in most schools throughout Mexico City, initiations were held for incoming freshmen. All new students had their heads shaved to display their freshmen identity, and many wore a woman's stocking as a sort of cap to cover their baldness until their hair grew back in. With horse shears, the upper-classmen would cut parts of the freshmen's clothing and, then, pour ink over the garments. At Secundario Numero Uno, they held initiation by water, a ritual regulated by the "match law." An upper-classman would light a match and, while the match burned, the freshman would rush to take off his shoes and as much of his own clothing as he was able to shed. At the exact moment that the match went out, someone pushed the freshman into the swimming pool in whatever clothing he was still wearing. Unknown to him, another person would be hiding below the

José, Mottie, Rachel, and Laib.

surface of the water. This person would then grab onto the freshman's feet, contriving to keep him from coming up for air while he struggled, weighted down, as well, by some of his own clothing and, often, by one or both of his shoes. All high schools in Mexico City at that time had their own swimming pools and, every year, in some schools, one or two freshman would be seriously hurt from this treatment.

Another part of the ritual involved capturing a freshman, blindfolding him and, then, leading him to a toilet bowl in which a partly squashed banana had been placed. With his hands bound behind him, the freshman was made to kneel. His head was then pushed down into the toilet bowl, and he was told to eat the contents. Many freshmen, especially the more impressionable and imaginative ones, would vomit, and several would actually faint.

Throughout the city, freshmen, all covered with mud and, sometimes, excrement, would be forced to march, while pots of human urine (and occasionally stools) were flung at them. José's worst initiation would take place later, after he had graduated from high school and entered the Polytecnico. During this initiation, he and a few other freshmen, seeing some upper classmen approaching from a distance, escaped into a nearby boarding house where, at that moment, food was being served. Hastily seating themselves like diners at a table there and pretending to eat, they soon heard the upper classmen entering the building. Immediately, the initiates dropped everything and ran to hide. When the upper classmen entered the dining room, they demanded that the owner tell them exactly where the "dogs" were. She led them straight to the hiding place of each cowering freshman. The upper classmen then dragged José and all the others to the entrance of the building. Here lay a huge puddle of muddy water, some twenty or thirty feet wide and three feet deep. Each victim, José included, was pushed unceremoniously into the puddle. Then, commanding each one to emerge from the dirty water, the upper classmen flung more mud and various dyes, mostly red and blue, over them all. In this condition, with the mud and dyes now caked onto their clothing, the freshmen all had to make their way back home. They boarded a trolley car where, as soon as they dropped their tokens into the box, the conductor, holding his nose, urgently signaled them to get as far back in the vehicle, and as far away from him, as possible. Most passengers, squirming to distance themselves as much as they could from the new arrivals, smiled, understanding that these were victims of the initiation rites so common throughout the city in the spring.

After girls were finally admitted to the school, several of the punishments meted out during initiations were somewhat modified, but the tearing of clothing continued. The hazing of freshmen, though at times rather extreme, usually left most of its victims none the worse for the experience. In the military schools of Mexico, however, where hazing also occurred, a few who had been forced into the swimming pools actually drowned, and some got pneumonia from having been thrown into pools brimming with ice that had been added to the water.

Having been skipped twice (once in Monterrey and then again in Pachuca) José was a full two or three years younger than most of his classmates by the time he entered high school in Mexico City. This made him the protected favorite of the older students, but it also had a disadvantage. It placed him on a different social and developmental level from the others in his class, a situation that was to continue all through his high school and into his early preparatory school years. It occasionally made him a bit uncomfortable but, for the most part, he refused to let it bother him. He usually managed to fit in well with his classmates, and he made it a point to join in many of their varied activities.

Now, for the first time, José was no longer the "foreigner," but only one of several Jewish boys in the class. His closest friend in high school was Saul Lokier. Saul was an extremely intelligent boy who came from an orthodox Jewish family. He and José enjoyed many wonderful discussions together, and they debated frequently on topics of philosophy and religion. Although José was extremely fond of Saul, he would often become exasperated with him. Saul had several theories and beliefs with which José failed to agree, but Saul clung stubbornly to these and, despite all reasoning and arguments to the contrary, he refused to be dissuaded. One such theory was that, of all Jews, only those who looked Semitic were the true descendants of the Israelites. All others, Saul claimed, were converts whose ancestors had previously been assimilated, mainly from serfs in the Ukraine who had escaped from large estates in earlier centuries, accepting, first, the protection offered by the Jews of the area and, then, the Jewish religion as well. José, Saul insisted, must have descended from this group of converted Ukrainian serfs. Saul based this notion entirely upon the fact that José's appearance was not as highly Semitic as his own. They often argued heatedly about this, but Saul refused to be convinced otherwise. When José pointed out that Saul had no other evidence to support his contention and that, indeed, he had no real basis in fact for his assumption, Saul had no rebuttal, but he still firmly refused to budge from his original conviction.

Saul could be unreasonably stubborn about many things. Once, he and José got into an argument about whether or not it would be possible, within a lifetime, to count by "ones" up to the number "one billion," as it is calculated in Mexico. In the American and British system, one billion signifies one thousand units of a million each, or ten to the ninth power. But in the system practiced in Mexico (and in Spain, France, and Italy, as well), one billion means one million units of a million each (ten to the twelfth power.) This involves three extra zeroes. José calculated for Saul that, even if he were to do nothing but count one hundred digits per second, there could not remain enough time in a human life to reach that number one billion, Mexican style. Saul refused to believe this. "All you have to do," he rationalized, "is to count every night after dinner for a while and never miss a night." José argued and reasoned with him for a long time but, calculate and elucidate as he might, he was unable to get Saul to change his mind.

Saul's interests were highly intellectual and literary. He and José continued, in friendly competition, for the highest grades in the high school. Saul usually won the best marks for literature, while José earned them for chemistry. Saul eventually grew up to become the principal of a Hebrew school. As an adult, he would travel extensively through Central and South America, promoting his idea of publishing a comic book series on themes of Jewish history and religion. He never became wealthy, although he managed to remain financially stable. A while after his mother died, Saul's father remarried, but Saul never got along with his stepmother. He and his father became estranged, and it was not until quite late in life that they resumed a relationship of sorts, where they finally spoke to each other, but in a strained and uneasy way.

When Saul eventually married, he was in his late twenties. His wife, a woman who was slightly plump, turned out to be the last type of person that José would have expected Saul to choose. Although reasonably good-natured and well-meaning, Sofia had a shrill voice and an aggressive style without much polish, one that differed intensely from Saul's own gentle and polite ways. Bookish matters failed to interest her at all, and since these had always been of such importance to the soft-spoken, scholarly, and refined Saul, José often wondered how two such different people could get along.

Saul and Sofia eventually had three children, two boys and a girl, all of whom seemed to share their mother's personality and interests. As time passed, Saul spent more and more time in philosophical and intellectual pursuits. He especially enjoyed showing off the vast collection of books that lined his walls

from floor to ceiling. José remembers how disappointed he once felt to discover, upon examining Saul's collection, hundreds upon hundreds of volumes on esoteric topics, all with their pages still uncut (and obviously unread). José assumed that Saul must have bought these and placed them on the shelves mainly for display, and to impress any chance onlooker who might happen by. José recalls how, when he suggested that Saul (whom he considered exceptionally bright and promising) should apply for advanced training at the university, Saul replied with a sniff, "What for? I already know a great deal more than most of the teachers there anyway!"

José got along extremely well with almost everybody he met. One exception, however, was a boy from high school, a fellow with the last name of Roschbaum. This fellow gave José no end of trouble. Roschbaum was exceedingly tall for his age. He took an immediate dislike to José and, jealously, almost vengefully, resented the good grades which José received. At home, Roschbaum's parents undoubtedly prodded him to excel academically but, somehow, he never achieved beyond the lowest level. Roschbaum would bristle every time José gave a correct answer when called upon by the teacher. Each time this happened, he would invariably seek José out after class, snarling, "You're too smart for me!" Then he would threaten to beat up José, although this was a threat that he never carried out. José remained constantly uneasy and on the alert for Roschbaum, and he went studiously out of his way to avoid this bully during the whole time that they were together in high school.

Roschbaum came from a rather well-to-do family His father was a physician. At that time in Mexico City, it was common to see signs prominently displayed on the streets just outside medical offices. Considered especially prestigious were those which advertised that the doctor had been trained in the United States. One would often encounter notices like "Dr. Azcarate, Physician and Surgeon" or "Dr. Silva, Dentista, estudio en los Estados Unidos." José vividly remembers the signs prominently displayed all over Mexico City which read "You have gonorrhea? See Roschbaum!" He later heard that his classmate (the younger Roschbaum) had never made much of a name for himself after reaching adulthood.

Others in José's high school, whom he was to meet again in later years, included Salomon Calderon, Enrique Muñuzuri-Clark, and Gaudencio Parra. Salomon Calderon trained to become a chemist. He later would marry a woman who, it was said, treated him miserably. Eventually, Salomon suffered a nervous

breakdown. At that point, his wife, a wealthy woman with powerful connections, had him placed in an institution. Immediately after that, she divorced him. Slowly, Salomon regained his health and, during his recuperation, he took classes in art therapy at the institution where he was convalescing. Here, they taught him how to make linoleum cuttings and prints, and he soon found that he had considerable talent working in this art form. When they released him from the hospital, completely cured, Salomon decided to seriously devote himself to art.

First, for a livelihood, he opened and operated a string of chemical laboratories in Mexico City, specializing in the treatment of various allergic ailments and acne. These treatments consisted in injecting patients with a small quantity of the material to which they were allergic. The clinics became financially successful and meanwhile, on the side, Salomon began to sell his artwork. Gradually, his etchings, paintings, and linoleum cuttings became sought after, and he grew so successful in the art world that his earnings from the sales of his paintings exceeded all of his other combined income. Salomon eventually had one-man exhibits of his work displayed, not only in Mexico City, but in the United States as well, particularly in Houston, Texas.

He married a Jewish Panamanian woman named Yael. She was a lively sort, vivacious, extremely spirited, and often boisterous in her mannerisms and speech. Yet she was pleasant and friendly. She and Salomon continued to remain quite happily married, despite the many differences in their natures and personalities. Eventually they had two sons. Salomon designed and built the home into which they later moved, a beautiful, museum-like residence in the Lomas de Tecamachalco section of Mexico City. Here, in the garden behind his home, Salomon erected a small, one-story building which was completely separated from the living quarters. He would use this one-room structure as his studio, and here he would retreat to do his painting. Frequently he would walk through the streets of Mexico City, taking impromptu snapshots of various scenes which he chanced upon and that piqued his interest. Later, these photographs often became the source of the subject matter in his paintings.

The second of José's high school friends, one whom he was to meet again under the most unusual of circumstances in later years, was Enrique Muñuzuri-Clark. Enrique, a couple of years older than the others in his class, came from Acapulco. His family, extremely wealthy people, felt that no decent high school existed in their own town. They decided to send Enrique to Mexico City for a proper education.

Although he was at least two years older than his other classmates, many of Enrique's interests remained other than scholastic. He was one of five boys who formed themselves into a study group to better assimilate the material and to help prepare for exams. Slowly, the others began to realize that the presence of Enrique in the group was distracting them. A couple of the fellows wanted him expelled from the group, and they assigned the youngest, José, to deliver this verdict personally to Enrique. Although José tried to be as tactful as possible, he found the situation uncomfortable. After having presented the message and, when Enrique withdrew from the study group, José couldn't help but feel that the two of them had parted on rather strained terms. Some thirty-three years later, when Enrique was already a well-known surgeon in Acapulco, José would meet him again under a strange set of coincidences. At this later time, they would renew what was to become a much warmer and rather interesting relationship. By then they would find that, not just one, but several strands of their lives, had intertwined.

A third friend that José would come across in the future was Gaudencio Parra. José remembered Parra from his later schooling at the Polytecnico, but he had completely forgotten that Parra had also been in high school with him. Parra was the one who had had trouble in Professor Schultz's class. He eventually went on to become a psychiatrist and, many years later, José would come across him living in Acapulco. At that time, the two would reminisce and talk at length about their college years at the Polytecnico. Suddenly, however, at the mention of Professor Schultz's name, they both realized that they had attended, not only college, but also the same high school together.

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