8

LEAVING MEXICO
1940

During those years in the mid and late 1930's, José's parents worked for long hours in their store near La Lagunilla. As he was growing up, José would occasionally help wait on the customers and do odd jobs around the store. They were so busy that they rarely, if ever, could sit down to meals together as a family, although Rachel would always manage to be present in the kitchen so she could serve both José and Mario their food.

Although Laib and Rachel continued to run the store, they eventually decided to start an additional sideline from their house. This consisted of buying cloth and, from this, fashioning women's suits. It began as a small business, but soon it began to thrive. Before long, the house became too small to accommodate the large amount of material and activity that the business generated. The family

had to move, and they found a larger home at 134 San Salvador. Eventually, they sold the candy store. The suit business was conducted entirely from the house, and it became their entire source of livelihood. Sometimes José would be the one to deliver the finished suits to the customers' homes. Occasionally, there would be a customer who would renege, claiming not to have gotten a good deal, and José would have to take the suit back to the house unsold. Most of the time, however, the suits were popular and remained in great demand.

It was around this time that José's first cousin, Rose Steckle, came for a visit to Mexico. She was the daughter of Laib's oldest sister, Esther. Rose always claimed that she had fond memories of her Uncle Laib as a young man, how they used to have wonderful discussions about life and its problems, how he taught her to ride a bicycle when she was only five years old. She maintained that she felt a special affinity for her Uncle Laib, that he was not only her favorite uncle but, also, a kindred spirit to whom she felt a special attachment. At the time of her visit to Mexico, Rose was a beautiful young woman in her mid-twenties. She had trained as a nurse, and she dressed well. A friend of Laib and Rachel, a widowed engineer of considerable financial means, took a fancy to Rose, and he came to their house regularly to pay court to her. Rose, however, displayed little interest in him, despite the enormous amount of attention that he lavished on her. Meanwhile, José would take Rose to see many of the sights of Mexico City, and the two cousins gradually became good friends. Before long, though, Rose took sick with a severe intestinal disorder, and she soon left Mexico to return to the United States.

Around the year 1939, Jennie Rubin Garber, the younger of Laib's two sisters, wrote a letter in which she advised Laib that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had just enacted a law "forgiving all *shirkers* from earlier wars," as she put it. Jenny had always worried that Laib might be in danger of being labeled a draft dodger. This concern stemmed from the circumstances under which he had left the United States. (At the time when the country had been on the brink of entering World War I, and just as he was at the age that would have rendered him eligible for military service, Laib had departed for the Ukraine, seeking his father.) When Laib received the letter from Jenny, it enforced a decision that he had long been considering: to return to the United States before José turned eighteen. To do this would permanently establish José's American citizenship as the son of an American father.

Laib and Rachel now, at last, decided to make this move. As their destina-

tion, they chose Philadelphia. This was where both of Laib's sisters (Esther and Jennie) and their families were still living. By this time, Laib's brother David had already moved to El Paso, Texas for reasons of health. (A few years earlier, he had developed a severe skin problem which was further aggravated by allergies. The doctors had told him that he must live in a warmer, dryer climate, and David had moved, first to New Mexico, then to Arizona, and finally to Texas, where he had settled down permanently. Although he had tried several new climates, each for about a year, whenever he returned to Philadelphia, the results to his health had been disasterous.) His wife Mary, however, had remained in Philadelphia to continue running their store which, by the 1940's, had developed into a successful small business. Mary had kept their two children, Gilbert and Sarah (Sis) with her. Thus Laib had many members of his family still living in Philadelphia, and he looked forward to returning to them.

Rachel and Laib now began to prepare for their relocation to the United States. This took considerable time, with complicated paper work repeatedly holding up the proceedings. When the first group of officially required papers began to arrive, a large number of women's suits still remained to be sold. Unless this could be done before leaving for the United States, the family would suffer a large financial loss. After much discussion, they decided that Laib should set out immediately for Philadelphia, while Rachel and the boys would remain behind in Mexico until they could sell most of the merchandise. José still remembers those suits. They were made from dark blue material, and designed to resemble sailor outfits. The jackets each had marine patches with two anchors, a non-matching one on each shoulder. Every skirt had two pleats, one in front, the other in the back. These pleats, unlike slits, only opened partially. At that time, nobody had been wearing pleats, and the style proved to be a real novelty. Women kept coming to the house to try on these suits and, slowly, the sales began to increase.

Laib left for the States in 1939. He traveled by bus all the way from Mexico City to Philadelphia. In Philadelphia, he stayed, at first, with his sister Jenny and her family. Then, he moved into a small apartment on Brandywine Street, not far from the Art Museum area. Here he waited for Rachel and the boys to join him. He got work close by as a cutter in the tailoring business. It was over six months before José would finally arrive to join him.

[1] One year later Laib was to be called in to the FBI to have the illegality of this action spelled out to him, and to be verbally reprimanded for not having had sufficient control of his son to have averted such an infraction of the law.

In 1940, when the semester at the Polytecnico ended, José got his belongings ready to leave for the United States. When he got ready to pack his typewriter, the one that he had bought with his own money (earned from collecting pledges for the Jewish agency for Sr. Glantz several years before), Rachel refused to let him take it.

"This belongs to the family," she announced. She also insisted on keeping José's dictionary, claiming the same reason. These two items, which he had struggled as a child to earn for himself, meant a great deal to José, and he long felt frustrated and personally deprived by the unfairness of her decision.

It would be about a year and a half before his mother and Mario would be able to follow him to Philadelphia. José had extremely mixed feelings about leaving Mexico. While he anticipated the adventure of traveling to a new country, his roots and emotional attachments remained in Mexico. This was the place where he had grown up, where he had gone to school, and where all of his friends lived. José was deeply unhappy about moving away permanently, and his attachment to Mexico was something that he would never lose.

It was about the middle of May when José said his farewells to everybody. His dear friend from high school, Saul Lokier, came to stay with him on his last night in Mexico, sleeping overnight on the couch in the living room so that he could be with José for an extra few hours. (José always remembered, with deep emotion, this gesture of Lokier's.) The next morning, they said their good-byes to each other and, then, Rachel and Mario accompanied José to the bus depot in Mexico City. José was carrying two pieces of luggage. One was a small cardboard suitcase containing a few personal belongings and his clothes (two shirts, one pair of pants, a few pairs of socks). The other was a green and black footlocker in which he carried an Oriental carpet that Rachel had instructed him to deliver to Laib. This was to be used, later, in their home in Philadelphia.

Rachel also insisted on giving José one hundred dollars. This was to last him until he got to Philadelphia. Knowing how short of money the family was at the time, José was deeply moved by this. He vowed to himself that he would arrive at the end of his journey with at least one dollar intact. With a heavy heart, he kissed Rachel and Mario good-bye, and climbed onto the bus. He was only seventeen years old and, apprehensively, he was now on his way, traveling completely alone to his new life in the United States.

The bus left Mexico City, making its way northward to the American bor-

[2] *Cagada* is a vulgar Spanish expression for fecal matter.

der. Here, it crossed the bridge from Nuevo Laredo, on the Mexican side, into Laredo, Texas, in the United States. As soon as it arrived across the Texas border, the bus stopped, and all the passengers were asked to get off. Each was questioned lengthily in English (the officials refused to speak any Spanish at all). All the passengers were asked to produce their official papers, which would permit them legal entry into the United States. When José's turn came, he had no birth certificate to show (none had ever been issued to him). He presented the only document that he *did* have. This was a photographed copy of his father's naturalization papers. The official in charge, a Mr. Manheim, was shocked. He told José that this was considered not only insufficient but, also, unacceptable. It was illegal, Mr. Manheim claimed, to photograph or copy any document of this type. This was something that José had been completely unaware of.[1] To make matters worse, José's school papers listed him as having, not one, but several middle names. This troubled the officials even further. Disturbed by so many complications, they now demanded written proof that José was, indeed, the legitimate son of Laib Rabinowitz. This, they told him, was the crucial point which would qualify him to be recognized as a United States citizen. At this particular moment, however, José was able to produce only the one paper he had already shown them. The officials conferred briefly and, then, decided that they were unwilling to permit José entry into the United States.

While the rest of the passengers were told to get back on the bus, José was instructed to walk back across the bridge into Mexico, and to remain there until he could produce records which would clear up all of these problems. His footlocker, with Rachel's Oriental carpet inside, was to remain stored at the Greyhound office in the bus terminal in Texas, while José was to carry only his small cardboard suitcase back with him into Mexico. As the bus departed, José watched it heading north. Then he turned, with a heavy heart, forlorn and alone, and trudged back over the bridge into Nuevo Laredo, the sleepy little village on the Mexican side of the border.

He was frightened and very unhappy. From Nuevo Laredo, he sent a wire to Laib in Philadelphia, explaining the situation to him. In the eight or nine weeks that followed, Laib searched for and, finally, located an immigration lawyer, a Mr. Orloff in Philadelphia. This was the man whom Laib hired to help disentangle these numerous problems. Mr. Orloff required that Laib secure affidavids from four different people certifying that José was, indeed, a legitimate child, and that the witnesses knew both his father and his mother personally. All of this was to

take even more time. Meanwhile, José found a small, but reasonably priced hotel which was one of the nicest in Nuevo Laredo. Here, he settled in for the long wait that was to follow. Since he had no job, the hotel management required him to pay each day for his room there.

There was a radio station in the hotel, with many live programs intended for border people, as well as a live orchestra playing in the lobby every night. José got to meet some of the musicians. At that time, everyone's favorite song was "Amapola," and they played it several times each day. There was a female singer who usually vocalized it for the patrons. Her husband was the trumpet player in the orchestra and, often, after playing, they would come into the hotel to drink beer. José soon became acquainted with them. The husband constantly derided the song "Granada" by Augustin Lara. It was the worst song that he had ever heard, he said, and he was sick of it. Every time he heard it being played, he would yell loudly and crudely, "Granada! Cagada!"[2]

In many ways, the husband was a sleazy character and, from the suggestive manner in which the man hinted at the availability of his wife, José could not be sure whether or not the fellow was trying to peddle her services. This man several times suggested that José cross the border into Texas with him. He had a gig (a nightly job) performing there, he told José, and he stated that he could use some help in carrying and setting up his instruments. He mentioned that he would be willing to pay for this help, but José declined, refusing to cross the border illegally.

In Nuevo Laredo, José also met several young fellows who worked in curio stores that catered to tourists. These fellows would brag about how they would overcharge the tourists who, they sneered, would buy anything, and they told how they would often sell the tourists damaged merchandise and then laugh behind their backs.

There was also a Mr. Abrams in the neighborhood. The man was an extreme leftist. He owned a haberdashery store in town and, every evening, he would go to different factories, where he would try to stir up labor unrest. He sold a shirt to José for about five times its actual value and, after its first washing, the shirt shrank so much that José was never able to wear it again. Although Mr. Abrams had a wife and two children, a boy and a girl in their late teens, and it would have been pleasant for José to have had some company of his own age there, after the incident with the shirt, he studiously avoided Mr. Abrams and his family.

The main occupation of most young men in the town, as well as some of the married men, seemed to involve going to the Red Light District ("Sumbidos," or "Buzzing of the Flies"). There, you could see American soldiers and most of the businessmen of Nuevo Laredo, and you could watch the dances going on in the little kiosk, where couples would pair off.

José visited several of the elementary schools and, also, the high schools of the town. Here, they asked him to help a little by teaching science to some of the students. In this way, he was able to earn a bit of money. He was shocked at the lack of equipment, books, and facilities there. What was even more appalling to him, however, and what greatly angered him, was the continuous presence of agitators inciting students about leftist activities. José was disturbed by the fact that neither the school principals nor any of the teachers intervened. These agitators constantly interrupted classes, taking over what should have been instruction periods. They used this time to make their speeches, trying to line up students for the special training in defense that they could get if they would volunteer to join the leftist groups. José was too young and innocent to realize that these agitators were actually recruiting guerrillas, even then. He spoke to several of the teachers, who saw nothing wrong with this. José mentioned to them that most of the students spoke very poor Spanish, and that they knew next to nothing about math, science, or geography. When he pointed out that, by allowing the agitators to talk to their classes, the teachers were permitting a deep infringement into their own personal instructional time, they all shrugged their shoulders and appeared entirely unconcerned. On one occasion, José was particular incensed to see an agitator bring a photographer with him, deliver an extremely lengthy speech, have his picture taken with the class and then, finally, proclaim that all of the students had now been officially indoctrinated into socialism.

There was one movie house in the town. The films shown there were dreadfully poor. Residents were permitted to legally cross the border, and go into Texas to see the better films, and to shop. José, however, had been admonished not to do this and, for fear of jeopardizing his chances of ever entering the United States legally if he were caught even once, he scrupulously obeyed.

Every afternoon, there would appear a platoon of Mexican soldiers in uniform, with French steel helmets, most of them carrying heavy machine guns. There were three fellows to a gun, each lugging one of its components. Those not carrying machine guns would carry German mouser rifles instead. The platoon would parade through the streets in the center of town, and in front of the many

stores. On holidays, there would usually be a small band preceding the marching troops. Late at night, on holidays, one could watch pyrotechniques and firecracker displays of a most elaborate nature.

There was also a very nice restaurant in the town, reasonably priced, and air conditioned. (This was José's first encounter with air conditioning and, in the intense heat of Nuevo Laredo, it was a luxury in which he delighted.) The specialty in this restaurant was mashed cow brains, which had been cooked with fried onions and served over tortillas. Tepache, a very mild fermented juice made from a mixture of pineapple and other fruits, was also sold here by the gallon.

In the hotel, José observed some unusual couples, among them, numerous extremely old men with very, very young girls. All kinds of fights could be heard breaking out constantly. Twice a week, in the main Zocalo (center square) of the city, there would be music, and José, with little else to do, would often go there to watch the proceedings. All of the men, dressed in short boots (paratrooper type with side straps), dark trousers, and white shirts, would walk in groups, clockwise, on the outer rim of the pavement around the square. Meanwhile, in the opposite direction, around the inner rim of the square, strolled the young women. Most of them were clad in one-piece, calf-length dresses of different colors They wore real flowers in their hair, and they were overly made up with heavy eye shadow, their cheeks darkly rouged. They also wore heavy face powder ending abruptly at their chins, so that a distinct line generally appeared, below which a rather tan neck could be discerned. The air was thick with various heavy perfumes which the girls wore.

In Nuevo Laredo, the Zocalo was the formal meeting place for young people. Parents and the maids of families all maintained an eye on their girls. Occasionally, a young man would approach the parents of a particular girl and request their permission to come visit at their home. "Piropos" could be heard everywhere. Piropos are the flowery compliments, quickly uttered and ornately phrased, that are so popular in Spain and Latin America. Some examples that José heard spoken in the square of Nuevo Laredo are cited here, freely translated:

"I wish I were like the wind that could go through you
and touch every part of your being!"

""Would that I had flowers so that I could shower you with them!"

"I must bring my brother to meet your family because,
if the rest are like you, then that's it!"

"I wish that I had carnations to throw at your feet,
because your face is too pretty and your hair is too beautiful to mess up!"

Contests were held to see who could not only create the best piropos, but who could also present them in the most winning fashion, so as to get a young girl interested.

Then, suddenly and almost imperceptibly around midnight, José would notice that the atmosphere of the Zocalo would change. The so-called "decent" people would depart, and the place would be completely taken over by the less respectable elements. While the two circles of promenaders continued their walk around the block, both still strolling in opposite directions, neither parents nor chaperones were any longer present, nor could any more cars of the accompanying families now be seen in the area. Occasionally, fights and knifings would break out and shootings, over some dispute or other, would occur.

During all this time, José kept in regular correspondence with both Rachel in Mexico City, and Laib in Philadelphia. Neither of his parents had a telephone, so all of his communications with them had to be conducted by letter. He felt almost totally cut off from the world that he had once known. Finally, one day, he received, at the hotel, a long distance telephone call from his father. Laib told José that, at last, he had been able to get all of the required, signed affidavids that José needed. Four different people in Philadelphia had at last certified that they personally knew Laib, that he was an American citizen, and that José was his own legitimate son. The first of these four people was Jack Feldman, who had once been a boarder in the home of Laib's mother, long ago in South Philadelphia. The second, Louis Shapiro, was also a friend from Laib's youth; he, Laib, and Jack had

[3] In those early days of 1940, it was impossible to get a derivative citizenship certificate. José was to discover in 1954, however, that a law had finally passed enabling people in his situation to acquire an official document called a derivative citizenship certificate. This he applied for immediately, as soon as the law came out, and he eventually obtained such a document. Only once, in 1976, was he ever again challenged about his citizenship, this time at the Philadelphia International Airport upon returning home from a visit to Mexico. On that occasion, he argued back firmly, and with explicit authority, producing this derivative citizenship document. He was then allowed through the gates, and no further problems of this nature ever confronted him again.

all been pals and spent time together during those early days. The third to sign an affidavid was Jack Feldman's brother-in-law, and the fourth person was Louis Shapiro's wife, Laikeh Karp Shapiro.

Some time after having sent these affidavids to the authorities in Washington, Laib had finally gotten back a post card with a number on it. This card stated that José was now officially recognized as Laib's son and that, as an American citizen, he would be permitted to enter the country legally. Laib instructed José to immediately get in touch with the consul at the border.

José telephoned the consul directly. He was told to come at once, so that he could obtain a copy of the same postcard that his father had already received in Philadelphia. Carrying his small cardboard suitcase and holding, in his hand, the bus ticket which had been paid for earlier (and which he had been saving all this time), José trudged back across the bridge to the American side of the border. There, he entered the small building and asked for Mr. Manheim, the official who had handled his case two months earlier. By now, Mr. Manheim had finally received word of the latest developments regarding José's situation, including a letter on his behalf from a well-known Mexican anthropologist, Dr. Gamio. Despite this, Manheim still quizzed José in English for two full hours. Then, at last, he took a deep breath, smiled, and announced, "Well, I guess if Mexico thinks so highly of you, the United States would like to have you here!" This was how José finally received his official permission to legally enter the United States.

Elated, he went to collect his foot locker (containing the Oriental carpet) from the Greyhound Office. Here, they insisted that José owed a fine, because his baggage had been stored there for such a long time. José gladly paid the fine and, then, he went to inquire about the next bus heading north. It was to leave in a little over two hours, they told him. To while away these two hours, and to celebrate, José treated himself to his first American movie in the United States, a film called *Tom, Dick, and Harry* with Ginger Rogers and Burgess Meredith. Then, happy, and with a great sense of anticipation, he boarded the bus on a journey that would finally deliver him, a few days later, to Philadelphia. He was enormously relieved to find that his bus ticket, paid for months earlier in Mexico City, was still valid.

The bus headed first for San Antonio, Texas. As José entered, the bus driver took one look at him and said, "You sit in the back of the bus, with the Mexicans and the Negroes!" José made no objection and did as he was told. A black lady at the back of the bus, however, came up to José and said, "You're

white. You shouldn't have to take that stuff!" José moved his seat and sat down next to her.

About an hour into the journey, an American immigration patrol stopped the bus. Passengers at the back were asked to get off, and everybody was quizzed again, one by one. When they finally came to him, José showed them the only identifying paper that he had, namely, the post card which he had received from the consul, and which had been initialed by Mr. Manheim. The card stated simply that José was the son of an American citizen, Laib Rabinowitz, and, on the card, there was a number. Apparently, this proved enough to satisfy the patrol members. Everybody then got back on the bus. But an hour later, the same procedure occurred again, this time with still another border patrol. After this second interruption, fortunately, the journey finally proceeded without any more challenges for José. He never again had any further serious difficulty concerning his citizenship.[3]

On the bus trip from Texas to Philadelphia, numerous pit stops were made, buses in those days having no bathrooms on board. There were also regular stops, as well, so that the passengers and the driver could take their meals at various bus terminals along the way. José changed buses twice, once in Akron, Ohio, the other, in a city which he doesn't remember. The entire ride took three full days. Each night, during the journey, José slept on the bus while it rolled along the highway toward Philadelphia.

He had been delayed so long in Nuevo Laredo that neither Laib, nor anyone else in the family, knew exactly when to expect him. He finally arrived at the bus terminal in downtown Philadelphia on a hot afternoon in August. He had one dollar, out of the hundred that Rachel had originally given him, still left in his pocket. Unsure of his command of English, and determined to arrive at his father's place with that dollar still intact, José decided to make his way on foot to his Aunt Jenny's house. She lived, at the time, in a neighborhood called Strawberry Mansion. It turned out to be a walk of about four miles from Center City and the bus terminal. Carrying his suitcase (the footlocker would arrive a few days later) and, asking directions from several people, José slowly made his way through Fairmount Park, up the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. Then he wended his way through the small streets of Strawberry Mansion, until he finally arrived at the house of Jenny and Nathan Garber.

It was an extremely hot summer day, and the front door was open. José knocked and, when nobody answered, he walked in. Different family members

were wandering in and out of the living room, busy with their own concerns, and nobody paid any attention to him. José had seen none of these cousins since he had been three years old and, now, he recognized nobody. Quietly, he took a seat and waited in silence, watching all of them go about their business.

It so happened that Jenny's youngest son, Joe Garber, was about the same age as José, and resembled him strongly in height, build, and hair coloring. After José had been sitting there for about five minutes, Jenny happened to glance up at him. With a start, she suddenly realized that this was not her own son. Then, when her eyes fell upon the suitcase at his feet, she suddenly concluded who this stranger must be. Uttering a slight scream, she fainted.

When Laib was informed, soon afterwards, that his son from Mexico had finally arrived, he joyously rushed over to Jennie's house, bringing with him a bag of cherries as a welcoming treat for José. These were the first cherries that José had ever seen, and he never forgot them, nor the warmth of that reunion with Laib. He still remains deeply moved by this memory of his father's gesture of love for him. Such was the welcome and initiation into life in the United States that José received three months before his eighteenth birthday.

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