

## RACHEL'S REQUIREMENTS

It was in mid-1952, when José and Josy were living on Seventy-sixth Street in Philadelphia and their daughter Malva was just four months old, that a collect call came from Washington State. It was Rachel, José's mother. She announced that, at last, she was planning to come for a visit. Both José and Josy were delighted that she would stay with them, finally getting to see her first and (at that time) her only grandchild.

Rachel arrived a week later, exhausted from the train trip across the country. It had taken four days and three nights, with several changes of trains and stations, but she refused to fly. Instead, she preferred to travel on her own terms, with bags of sandwiches, fruit, and juices to tide her over.

A few days later, after she had recovered somewhat from the trip, Rachel made an announcement. She had recently been diagnosed with a thyroid disease that would require surgery. Proudly she explained that she had a Mutual Health Insurance policy which would pay for part of any costs involved. As a good son, she insisted, José should be the one to make arrangements for this surgery.

It was obvious to José that Rachel had Hashimoto's Disease, an autoimmune condition that causes thyroid inflammation and disrupts hormonal levels through the body. At that time, feedback inhibition of the thyroid was still unknown. Partial and/or total thyroidectomies were the standard modus operandi.

José called Dr. Isadore Ravdin, the man who had been his commanding officer in the army in China, Burma, and India. By now, Dr. Ravdin was a major-general in the Reserves. He was also Vice President of the University of Pennsylvania. His specialty was thoracic and abdominal surgery (a few years later, Ravdin would be the one to operate on President Dwight D. Eisenhower for ileitis).

Dr. Ravdin, much to his credit, told José to bring Rachel in to see him the following day. He thanked José for having allowed Robert Ravdin, Isadore's son, to train for a year in José's lab at the Medical School Biochemistry Department. Briefly, Ravdin reminisced about their army days in Burma and India, reminding José that, back in 1943, he had submitted José's name to receive a field commission in the U. S. Army. José had actually been called in for an interview at that time. During the interview, they had asked him where he was from. Since the army, in those days, was segregated and José feared that his Mexican background might count against him, he replied, "From the South". To this the interviewer responded, "South America or South Philadelphia?" causing the entire team to break up in

laughter. They had approved him, but the application had to be sent to Washington, D.C. for final clearance, and there somebody refused to grant the commission because of José's age (he was twenty at the time).

Now Dr. Ravdin asked José to bring Rachel in so that he could examine her neck and see what needed to be done. He reminded José that neck operations sometimes left ugly scars if they were not handled carefully. He assured José, in passing, that of course there would be no charge for any surgery that might be needed.

The next day José took Rachel directly to Dr. Ravdin's office at University of Pennsylvania Hospital, as he had been advised to do. Dr. Ravdin was still in surgery when they arrived, but he appeared direct from the operating room just ten minutes later. Still wearing his hospital greens, somewhat soiled with fresh bloodstains from the recent surgery he had performed, he rushed in and greeted José effusively. Upon Dr. Ravdin's approach, though, Rachel began to scream first in Yiddish, then in English, "Bist iyn kutzef! Mein zeen nemt meer tzu iyn kutzef!... You're a butcher! My son takes me to a butcher!"

Dr. Ravdin understood every word.

"And he has no beard!" she continued, pointing at the surgeon. "And his hair isn't even gray! What kind of surgeon has no beard or gray hair?"

Embarrassed, José left with his mother. All the way back home, she continued to upbraid him, insisting that she hadn't traveled three thousand miles to have just any doctor operate on her. She expected her son to find her a mature, competent, experienced thoracic surgeon, one with gray hair and a beard that she could respect.

José spent the next few days making inquiries with the State Board of Surgical Examiners. His requirements, he told them, were that the surgeon be mature, specialize in thoracic surgery, and sport gray hair and a beard. After several days, he received a call. Such a person had been found, they told him. This surgeon operated at Episcopal Hospital, at Front and Lehigh Avenue in the Kensington section of Philadelphia. Even in those days, this hospital was nowhere on par with the University of Pennsylvania Hospital, where Dr. Ravdin was the Chief of Surgery.

One week later, José brought his mother to Episcopal Hospital to meet the doctor. They were ushered into the office of a gray-haired man with a short Van Dyke beard, wearing a three-piece business suit. After interviewing Rachel, this physician examined her and accepted her as his patient, admitting her to the hospital immediately. The surgery was scheduled for the following day. José was told that he could be present in the operating room.

As Rachel was being anaesthetized, the surgeon, all scrubbed and wearing his surgical mask, arrived. As he approached her, she began to cry out, again both in Yiddish and English, “Me nart meer oop!” she cried. “Ehr hot nit kine berd! ...They’re fooling me! He has no beard!”

Patiently, the doctor removed his surgical mask. He bent over the patient, taking her hand and placing it on his beard. “Pull it! It’s all right!” he directed. “Pull it!”

Sighing with relief, she lapsed into unconsciousness as the anesthesia took effect. Hereupon, the surgeon left the room to scrub once more and replace his surgical mask. After this, he returned and performed the thyroidectomy.

When it was all over, José helped wheel his mother into the recovery room. Here, she proceeded to vomit all over him.

Days later, a letter arrived from the Mutual Health Insurance Company. In Rachel’s case, they declared, that a precondition had existed. Therefore, they would pay nothing for any of her expenses, either from the hospital or from the surgeon, who later sent José received a large bill for his services.