

REFLECTIONS

JOSEPH LABOVSKY

The Story of an Immigrant



By Hon. Charles K. Keil

A Nation of Immigrants was the title of John F. Kennedy's short but excellent story of the American heritage. It tells a fine story, but we have on the local scene, one of our own as well. Joseph Labovsky's history is one that typifies the Jewish American experience in many ways, but with unique aspects not experienced by others.

Like many of our forefathers, it starts in Eastern Europe — Russia. Joe was born in Kiev, Ukraine in 1912. These were troubled times and Joe's father could see the writing on the wall. He would be drafted into the Army; it was only a question of time. He was a skilled tailor and if drafted he would be in the Army as long as the government wanted him, without leave to return to his home. So in 1914, he bribed the right official, bought a steamship ticket and left for America. His plan was to seek out his uncle in Philadelphia, but he hit a snag — his uncle had changed his name to "LaBove" and had moved to New York. With some luck, he finally located his uncle. Now that was the "good news." The "bad news" was that "The War to End All Wars" broke out. For nine very long years, Joe's father could not get his wife and three children to America — let alone know if they had survived the war and the subsequent pogroms that followed the disintegration of the Russian monarchy.

Having found his uncle, he decided that Philadelphia was the place to settle. He stayed a while in Philadelphia, but he heard that there was a need for a good tailor in some small city called Wilmington, Delaware. So, he went. For a while, he worked making "big money" (about three dollars a week). He finally decided to start his own shop in a building that still stands — Govatos, at 8th and Market Streets. Over time, the word got out. This guy was a good tailor, and before long, he had company executives as customers. The war was over in 1918 and the tailor shop was doing well. By 1923 he had sufficient funds so he could arrange for agents to seek out his family in the Ukraine. He wanted to see if they survived, and if so, he needed to get them to America.

Survive they did. Joe's mother was a wise and skillful person as was his father. She, too, could sew dresses for women and tailored clothing for men. Through a series of agents, with some connections, his wife and three children made it to America.

It is often said that one needs three things to succeed: ability, willingness, and luck — *mazel*. Ability, you have it or you don't. Willingness is your mindset. Luck — more on this later. Joe Labovsky had been blessed for the most part with all three.

Having last seen his father when he was two years old and with speaking only Ukrainian, some Russian and Yiddish, a little Polish, and being illiterate, save for some knowledge of Hebrew, at age 12, his intelligence put him on a fast track. He was what we would now call "a quick learner." His ability placed him in good stead. Moreover, he had motivation, a willingness to excel, and excel he did, especially in high school math, chemistry, and physics.

He graduated Wilmington High School in 1930 (behind his photo appearing in this article, is Wilmington High School's "Wall of Fame," where his photo is likewise placed). It was the Depression — no jobs, and no money for further education. *Mazel* appears once again (the first time involved his escape from Europe). Joe's father spoke with a DuPont company executive, a customer of his, about the prospects of a job for his son. Lo and behold, Joe lands a summer job as a chemist's helper. Whose helper is he? Dr. Wallace H. Carothers, the person to soon discover Nylon.

Carothers takes a liking to young Labovsky as both had interests in Russian literature and music. Dr. Carothers asked Joe if he planned to go to college, to which Joe replied that he would like to but he couldn't afford it. Carothers suggested that Joe write a letter to Lammot duPont, then president of DuPont, to be considered as an applicant for scholarship funds. He gets \$1,000. Because of his aptitude in electricity his high school instructor asks him to consider a trade and he applied to Bliss Electrical College in Takoma Park, Md. He was accepted but during that first year, he realizes that he should have gone for an engineering education. Joe writes to Mr. duPont, explains the situation and his hope to attend Pratt Institute and become a chemical engineer. With another \$1,000 (this time as a loan), he applies and is accepted at Pratt.

Time moves forward, four years have passed and Joe is an industrial chemical engineer but there are no jobs available because of the Depression and DuPont was not hiring. Nor was anybody else hiring for that matter. Nonetheless, for four or five weeks Joe, accompanied with his lunch bag, would hang out at DuPont's Experimental Station hop-

ing for a job that might open. Again, *mazel!* One day, a two-week job digging ditches on the site comes up as there was a "no show" that day. Joe willingly goes for it. Yes, it is not a job for a chemical engineer, but it is a job. *Mazel*, again. One day Carothers walks by and spots Joe in the ditch and asks why he is there. Joe explains why and Carothers continues to walk to his destination. The next day, Joe's supervisor tells him to get out of the ditch and follow him. Joe figures that he is going to get the ax. The supervisor takes him to Carothers' office and they talk. Joe is offered a job working in Carothers' unit. Joe says, "It is better to work inside than outside when it is cold!" And work he did, for the next 42 years.

Nylon helped make DuPont and Joe was an integral part of the Carothers' team. Today, he is the only surviving member of the team. From 1934 through WW II, he saw Nylon develop from a series of small lab experiments to a major industry. As a result of these efforts, Nylon was used in the manufacturing of multiple products including parachutes, tires, ropes, and clothing that were essential to the war effort. For his efforts he received a War Production Award. In a later decade, he wrote the first manual for Tyvek, a "wrap-around product" used to insulate buildings. As recently as April of this year, Joe, along with inventor Stephanie Kwolek, and former Governor Russell W. Peterson, were honored at a Delaware Academy of Chemical Sciences luncheon titled "The Delaware Legends."

For many years, he spoke at the Delaware Historical Society's "Dr. Carothers' Day" — a program that was attended by youngsters and adults alike. Joe is 96 years young, and although he has sight problems and resides in the Forwood Manor Retirement Community, he remains mentally alert. Because of his friendship with the Carothers family, upon the demise of Dr. Carothers, he was the person to whom the family turned to for the distribution of Carothers' artifacts and papers. Through the years, Joe arranged for the placement of articles, papers and Dr. Carothers' personal research notebooks with the Chemical Heritage Foundation of Philadelphia, The Delaware Academy of Chemical Sciences, the Delaware Historical Society, as well as other chemical and historical organizations.

From a summer chemist's helper, to ditch digger (mercifully, for a short time only), to laboratory technical assistant to Dr. Carothers, foreman, shift supervisor, process control supervisor for Nylon, Joe went on to become a training supervisor and consultant in Italy, Ireland, France and Israel.

In addition to all of the foregoing, he was active in a myriad of DuPont innovations beyond the mere listing of job services. He was practical and had a penchant to be a saver of various articles about his work. One example speaks legends. It is what I call "The Spinneret Story." Spinnerets are used for spinning Nylon and are critical to the manufacturing of the product. Stainless steel cylinders, screening and sand were items used. But it was the stainless steel spinnerets that were critical for speedy production. After World War II, Nylon was much in demand for peacetime uses. Production was great. The company would reject any spinneret that had even a little bit of damage. It would be replaced with a new one and the old ones were disposed. Joe was concerned about throwing out the slightly damaged spinnerets and showed the engineering personnel how these could be repaired. There was no interest in repairing them. Nylon was selling and money to buy new spinnerets was available. Joe, a saver and a practical person, asked if he might, on his own time, repair them as he thought that the time might come when they were needed. Permission was granted although his supervisors thought he was nuts. They called it "junk," and DuPont was not interested in dealing with junk. Nevertheless for two years each Sunday he collected the damaged spinnerets, saving thousands of the 3" diameter non-magnetic stainless steel ones. The clock never stops. It is 1950, the Korean War, and stainless steel was necessary for the war effort. Nylon no longer had the priority that it had in WW II. The rainy day had come and out came Joe's reconditioned spinnerets — for plants in Seaford, Martinsville, and Chattanooga. Because of his efforts, Joe received a promotion, a bonus, and a commendation.

With this incident, I close this story. JFK was right; we are *A Nation of Immigrants*. But what a nation of immigrants! America was built on them and Joseph Labovsky is one exemplary example of success. As the comedian Yakov Smirnoff would say, "AMERICA, WHAT A COUNTRY!"



Joe Labovsky