No Common Sense

By Alvin Rabushka

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Table of Contents

Preace 3
Chapter 1  No Common Sense  5
Chapter 2  What Do You Need It For?  12
Chapter 3  You Spend $2.98 — You Get $2.98  20
Chapter 4  It Doesn’t Matter How Much Anything Costs as
            As Long as You can Afford It  25
Chapter 5  Their Stupidity Is Stupendous  29
Chapter 6  Surface Lovely —Underneath Filthy  36
Chapter 7  Nobody Works Around Here. Only I Work  38
Chapter 8  Puta — Pulling  43
God Willing  48
Preface

Over 200 years ago, Thomas Paine wrote *Common Sense*. It was a bible of the American Revolution.

The title of this brief book is *No Common Sense*. It is a indictment of our political, economic, social, educational, artistic, and religious leaders. The past several decades of political nonsense, euphemistically called “political correctness,” have produced an elite as well as too many people who have no common sense.

A day in the life of the average American is sufficient to see that common sense has given way to a fundamental inability to use reason and evidence. Just listen to politicians pontificate and academics asserting nonsense as truth. Or, try listening to Dr. Laura’s callers for one afternoon.

All is not lost. We can restore common sense, the rules of life that permit each of us to lead full and productive lives.

The source of common sense today comes from a handful of modern philosophers. All of them, luckily, are my relatives and friends. The title of this book, *No Common Sense*, reflects the wisdom of the greatest of them all, my late uncle Sender (his Yiddish name) or Uncle Sam. During the formative years of my life, from junior high through graduate school, he was my next door neighbor. He was constantly in our house, and I was constantly in his house. He minced no words. He spoke his mind openly, often in colorful language.

I turned 60 in 2000. Age begets a certain degree of wisdom and appreciation for others. The older I get, the more appreciation
I have for Confucius and other obsolete thinkers. As a teenager in the 1950s, with no responsibility to pay my way in life, I took Sender to be selfish, a loudmouth, a bigot, a man replete with bad habits. He smoked. He drank. He swore. He gambled. He insulted everyone. What I have come to appreciate is that he was a man of penetrating insight. He, and the others whose great ideas are set forth in this little book, truly understood the human condition.

I had my Sender, whom you will get to know in Chapter 1. Luckily, there is a Sender is everyone’s family, if each of us is willing to look, listen, and learn. Sender is a man to whom all of us can relate, for our time and for all time. The reason is that he had common sense.

I want to thank my older brother Sol for his help with historical details and insights on the personalities and insights of the chapters in this book. I also want to thank my daughter Nyree for her helpful comments on the differences between creative writing and academic style. If you find this book interesting and informative, she gets a large chuck of the credit.
Chapter 1

No Common Sense

To understand Common Sense you need to understand Sender.

Sender, or Uncle Sam as he was known to us in English, died at the ripe old age of 94. Sender was the second son of five brothers and one sister in the Silverman family (the sister was the baby of the family, my mother Anna, or Peshke as she was affectionately known in Yiddish).

Sender was the most independent of his brothers. His mother, Yudes (my grandmother), packed him off as a teenager to America in 1905 to get settled and bring over the rest of the family. He traveled from his small town, Stolin, in what is today Belarus, or White Russia, to St. Louis, Missouri. After an incredible journey by train, ship, and then train again, he arrived in St. Louis with a few cents in his pocket. Without speaking a word of English, he got off the train in St. Louis, took a bus to an address he was given in East St. Louis, walked into a small shop, and began working as a tailor at $6 a week. After World War I, he brought over Yudes (my grandfather Israel died in the old country at the relatively young age of 49), his four brothers and Peshke. All but one made their homes in St. Louis.

Sender lived with his wife, Dora, and four children in a modest apartment in University City, a suburb of St. Louis, on North Drive, a few blocks away from our apartment on Leland Avenue. As a young boy, I recall Sender frequently visiting our
home. He was a dutiful son. He stopped in to visit Yudes, who lived with us, to see how she was and pay his respects. Nothing of importance was ever discussed, but every visit led to an argument. The shouting matches were simply a clash between two strong personalities, each seeking to score points in the never-ending struggle between mother and son for self-righteousness. Yudes was difficult, actually impossible is a better word, but Sender stood his ground, never yielding an inch, giving as good as he got.

Sender was a small man of slender build. He was generally unpleasant, a sourpuss who rarely smiled or laughed. His face was craggy, a cigarette always dangling from the corner of his mouth. He swore with conviction, equally colorful in Yiddish and English. He was a man of strong opinions, and let everybody know it.

Sender earned his living as a “schneider,” which means cutter in Yiddish, at Scisor and Kling, a manufacturer of women’s clothing on Washington Avenue in the St. Louis downtown garment district. He was extremely skilled in his trade, a real craftsman, excelling in every aspect of tailoring. Sender did two jobs at work, his and correcting the mistakes of his older brother, Eli, who worked alongside him on the same shop floor. In this respect, Sender had a big heart. Were it not for Sender doing two jobs at once, Eli would have joined the ranks of the unemployed. Many of the Eastern European Jewish immigrants to St. Louis in the early decades of the twentieth century found their way into the “schmatte” (rag trade in Yiddish) business, in all its aspects. But Sender was not making rags in the literal sense; rather, he was making high-quality apparel.

Sender was only one of many aunts and uncles who were part of an extended family of Silvermans and Rabushkas (my
father’s four brothers and sisters and cousins in the dozens); Grandma Yudes herself was one of 11 sisters, or mumes to us (great aunts), one of whom lived next door and several others in the immediate neighborhood. I guess Yudes’s father gave up trying for a son after eleven daughters.

My adventures with Sender began when he bought the house next door. You see, my father, Joseph, dreamt of a ranch house on a corner lot in the suburbs. That dream came true in 1952, when I was twelve years old and we moved to Richmond Heights. (I must tell you that Joe was the nicest man I ever knew. After all, when Joe married Peshke, he also, to all intents and purposes, married his mother-in-law Yudes, an affliction that befell many Jewish men of his day. They didn’t know any better. They fit perfectly the stereotype of the passive Jewish male.)

The house in Richmond Heights next door to Sender was not my father’s initial dream location. When I was eight years old, Joe wanted to move the whole family to Coral Gables, an upscale suburb of Miami. Indeed, he bought a house there during a winter vacation in 1948. On his return, Yudes would have none of it. As a religious Jewish woman, she had to be in walking distance of a synagogue. Nor could Joe move from our apartment in University City to a ritzy home in upscale Clayton for want of a nearby synagogue. Indeed, it was her custom to walk by the Rabbi’s house on the way to synagogue to make sure that he did not violate the Sabbath by turning on any lights in his house. If Judaism had a mother superior, as found in Catholic convents, Yudes would have been the chosen one, by her own self-assignment.

With Peshke’s dutiful compliance, Yudes was the ultimate authority in the Rabushka household, except when Sender came to
Yudes died on a Saturday morning in 1950, right after Sabbath service, from a ruptured appendix. Actually, she might have survived surgery, but the doctors were unable to sew her up after removing her appendix, because her intestines had rotted away. It turns out that she had used Ex-Lax, a laxative, for many years and her bowel muscles had atrophied.

Joe had the freedom for the first time in his life to look for his dream home. Yudes had denied him his first choice in Coral Gables. He found what he wanted, even if his second choice, in the newly-built Sheridan Hills Subdivision of Richmond Heights. Good man that he was (as evidenced by his not throwing Yudes out of his house and our lives), when he learned that Sender was about to buy a house in a less desirable neighborhood, he directed Sender to Sheridan Hills. As fate would have it, Sender bought the house next door.

Davey, two years older than me, was the youngest of Sender’s four children. We were good friends for the next few years, attending the local high school together. We spent many hours in each other’s homes. As a result, I got to know Sender better. My education about the man had begun in earnest.

Sender was an autocrat at the breakfast table as well. Among other phrases for which he became known was “Dora, fix me a shisl (bowl) cereal.” This entailed Dora pouring cereal into a bowl, pouring milk over the cereal, and then bringing the bowl with cereal and milk to Sender. My wife has yet to emulate Dora.

Above all, however, Sender loved smoking. Cigaretts kept him alive until 94. Years after Dora died, he was placed in a nursing home. It allowed him one cigarette every 20 minutes. So
long as he could stay alive another 20 minutes, he got to smoke another cigarette. Sender was the ideal poster boy for Lucky Strike or Chesterfield.

That was Sender as I saw him then, almost 50 years ago. Not a pleasant man by any stretch of the imagination, abusive to his mother, wife, sister, and almost everyone else he came in contact with. But that was then and this is now. Time not only heals wounds, it also brings wisdom. Sender was, as I was only able to learn much later in life, one of America’s greatest philosophers. Perhaps great philosophy and difficult personality go hand-in-hand.

Sender was a highly literate man, which would not be apparent unless you read and spoke Yiddish. He read *The Forward*, America’s leading Jewish daily, every day. He watched and listened to the local news. He had an instinctual feel for politics. He summed up politicians in one phrase that rings true to the ears of every American: “Zay huben nit ken seykhl.” Literally translated, it means “They have no sense.” But the literal translation fails to capture the full flavor of the Yiddish. A better rendition is “They have no common sense,” with an emphasis on “common.” Sender was the ultimate common man, a man of the people.

That all too many people, especially those in high position or office, lack common sense is Sender’s brilliant insight. Sure, book learning is fine. But it can never be a substitute for common sense. Indeed, book learning without common sense is worse than no book learning at all. Based on book learning, people deceive themselves into doing and saying all kinds of things that make no sense. “Zay huben nit ken seykhl” applies to a good part of the
world population in all its endeavors. How many of your well-educated friends are all screwed up because they have no common sense. “Zay huben nit ken seykh!” is especially apt for politicians, who rarely tell the truth or do the right thing.

At times, Sender was prone to more descriptive language. Several years after we moved to Richmond Heights, our subdivision was split by Highway 170, the Inner Belt. Sender could often be found at the fence with his brothers, cousins, and neighbors commenting on world affairs. In more colorful terms, “zay huben nit ken seykh!” came out as “The dumb shit-asses: What do they know?”

As an impressionable upright teenager, growing up in the staid Eisenhower era, I was critical of Sender’s choice of language in describing our nation’s leaders as dumb shit-asses. At 60 years of age, I see wisdom in his words. Were he alive today, Confucius would be proud to include “zay huben nit ken seykhl” in The Analects. The same holds for Aristotle, who would make the phrase the centerpiece of his Politics and Nicomachean Ethics. “Political writers,” Aristotle stated with directness, “although they may have great ideas, are often impractical.” The Founding Fathers anticipated Sender’s wisdom when they drew up the U.S. Constitution with checks and balances between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, and separation of powers between the federal government and the states to protect us from politicians who have no common sense. Sender was the greatest modern philosopher of the 20th century. He was able to capture a great deal of human existence and thought in five short words.

Case after case of human folly confirms Sender’s law. His wisdom is applicable to your daily affairs dozens of times a day,
whether at work, at play, or at home in front of the television listening to politicians, pundits, and journalists interviewing each other as supposed experts on all manner of things.

In his later years Sender gave an interview to the local newspaper in which he proclaimed his proudest day was the day he became an American citizen. More than any other people, Yankee ingenuity represents the common sense that Sender personified. I agree with him that it’s too bad so many people have abandoned common sense in favor of nonsense and political dogma.

Most of all, I’m sorry I didn’t take the time to appreciate Sender during the 1950s and 1960s, when he was part of my daily world. As a young child I understood Yiddish since Grandma Yudes, who raised me, could not, or refused to, speak a word of English. And yet I never took the time to explore in depth Sender’s philosophy while he was alive, left only to tell you now that he’s gone. May “zay huben nit ken seykhl” serve you well.
Chapter 2

What Do You Need It For?

Cousin Louie was Sender and Peshke’s first cousin. This made him my second cousin, one generation removed. His formal name was Lou Deutsch. He lived, with his slender wife Mollie, on Heman Avenue, two blocks from our apartment building on Leland Avenue. Cousin Louie was portly and as outspoken as Sender.

Louie exemplified the small Jewish businessman of his day, at least in St. Louis. He earned his living as a traveling salesman, a polite term for the more commonly-used “pedlar.” Louie had accounts with the big department stores in St. Louis. He bought all kinds of goods, from clothes to appliances, and sold them on credit to poor, inner-city residents. He kept long ledger cards, on which he detailed his clients’ purchases and recorded their weekly payments, about two dollars a week. Each day was roughly the same. Louie awoke, ate breakfast, started his car, drove door to door, collected $2, and inquired if his clients wanted something new they had seen in the stores. In the 1940s and 1950s, low-income residents in inner-city neighborhoods rarely got credit from department stores. Louie filled the gap. He was retailer, lender, and delivery man, all rolled into one.

If girth was any measure of success, Cousin Louie was successful. Mollie fought a never-ending, but losing, battle with Louie’s appetite. It was not uncommon for him to sit down at a meal and wolf down five hot dogs.

Louie always had a new car. This made a great impression on me. Since Louie was on the road all day, a new car was a
business necessity. My father, as a furrier, had no need for new car every year and was happy to drive the same car for many years. Still, I was jealous and wished that Joe had bought a new car every year. In those days, new cars were a status symbol. It was the age of 409s, 413s, dual carbs, dual exhausts, Chevy V-8s, and Rocket 88s.

Measured by any other standards, Louie lived a modest life-style. His apartment was smaller than ours. When we moved to the suburbs in 1952, Louie and Mollie remained in their small, first-floor apartment in the old neighborhood. (Years later, when his neighborhood became dangerous, he moved to an apartment on West Delmar.) I never saw the inside of his apartment, so I can’t describe his possessions. The closest I ever got was the back door leading into the kitchen. My cousin Jerry and I occasionally stopped by his apartment on our way home from elementary school in the afternoon to ask Mollie for bubble gum. I don’t recall how she came to be the bubble-gum lady, but it left a very warm impression in my heart.

As with Sender, I got to know Louie after we moved to the suburbs in 1952. Peshke, at least from what I could tell, idolized Cousin Louie, to the point of irrational hero worship. Sol and I believe to this day that the reason Peshke idolized Louie was because he brought schmattes (dresses) by on Sunday evenings for her to try on. Mom loved attention, and nothing got her attention more than dresses, shoes, and handbags. Louie’s Sunday evening visits grew into a regular occurrence. Unfortunately, they became a defining moment in my life.

You see, the best show on television in the mid-1950s was a half-hour series, “The Vikings,” broadcast on Sunday night. It
No Common Sense

was a wonderful show. It was so bad that it was good. It was about Leif, son of Firebeard, King of Norstad, and his half-witted brother, Finn, who couldn’t do anything right. I waited all weekend for this show. It put me in the right frame of mind to begin another week of school. So what was the problem?

Louie wanted to see the Ed Sullivan Show and What’s My Line. Peshke, grateful for whatever schmattes Louie brought with him that evening, turned control of our television over to Louie. After Louie had seen his favorite shows, the grown-ups wanted to talk (they always spoke in Yiddish thinking that Sol and I couldn’t understand what they were saying, which we did, which angered us even more—rubbing salt in our wounds). Their conversations almost always went past nine o’clock, past Leif, Finn, and Firebeard. We only had one television, a big, black-and-white Zenith, filled with tubes that routinely burned out. There was no second television in the basement or bedroom. I didn’t know anyone who had two televisions back then. I missed many episodes of my favorite show because of Louie and his dresses (and cursed him out under my breath in colorful Yiddish). Peshke sold out her children for a mess of schmattes.

Louie and I never had a meaningful conversation. The only words we exchanged were around the dinner table, in which I encouraged him to eat another hot dog, secretly hoping he would get sick and go home, or just go pop.

I was sixteen years old at the time that I first encountered Louie’s contribution to modern philosophy. Sender’s old car, a 1950 grossly-underpowered Nash Ambassador, had fallen apart. Sender went out and bought a new car, a blue-and-white 1956 Plymouth, known as the “St. Louis Blues” model. It was a
handsome car. I was jealous that we still chugged along in our six-year old Oldsmobile. I was doubly jealous because my two cousins, Bernie and Sandy, also got to drive around in a brand-new 1956 Chevrolet Bel Air with dual tailpipes, also in blue and white. Their father, Uncle Elia, also traded in his underpowered Nash Ambassador for a hot car of the mid-fifties.

During one of those miserable Sunday evenings when Louie came by with his schmattes for dinner and Ed Sullivan (perhaps Mollie wasn’t much of a cook?), Sender proudly showed Louie his new car. I was outside and saw Sender beaming from ear to ear. He also told Louie about Elia’s new car. Did Louie compliment Sender or Elia? Did Louie praise Sender’s and Elia’s taste in cars and colors? (Remember, Louie traded in his car for a new model every year.)

No. At that exact moment, Louie uttered the magic words that earn him a place among the greatest modern philosophers: “Whaddya need it for?”

These printed words cannot possibly convey the arrogance of the moment. To grasp the full import of these words of wisdom, it’s necessary to dissect the sentence for meaning, and add some tone.

What Louie meant to say was that someone like “you,” namely Sender, a mere workman, a man of lesser intellect and of a lower station in life than Louie, does not need (really, deserve) a new car. (Louie failed to grasp that Sender was the philosophical giant of his day.) The same applied to Sender’s younger brother, Elia. While in sharp contrast, someone as smart and important as me, Louie, definitely needs and deserves a new car every year.
Just as important is the tone in which Louie enunciated the word “need.” Emphasis should be placed on “need” so that the correction enunciation of the phrase would be “Whaddya NEED it for?” Even better would be “Whaddya NEEEEED it for?” This proclamation of NEEEEED, together with the “you” as described above, is the essence of Lou Deutsch.

Louie reveled in his obnoxiousness, but Sender could never admit being bested in any exchange. He reckoned himself far smarter than Louie. As the war of words ended, Sender proclaimed “bei mir, du ken nit gevinnen” (by me, you can’t win), declaring himself the winner by assertion. But in truth Louie had struck a knockout blow, precisely at Sender’s moment of triumph, when Sender’s 1956 Plymouth outshone Louie’s one-year-old car.

I think of Louie every time I go to the grocery store. My admiration for Louie does not extend to his size or appearance, only to his cocksure, know-it-all outlook on life’s needs. Whenever I pick up a bag of potato chips, tortilla chips, or chocolate chips, my loyal wife instantly reminds me that an ounce of chips wipes out an hour on the treadmill. “Whaddya NEEEEED it for?” she says, and the chips go right back on the shelf. Faithfully followed, Louie’s philosophy would put every dietician and weight-loss program out of business.

The same applies to our Saturday afternoon visits to the mall. My darling wife is irresistibly attracted to every storefront window with shoes and every sales rack in Macy’s, Bloomingdales, Nordstrom, Talbots—you name it, she checks it out. Each time she’s ready to make a purchase, I trot out Louie’s great maxim. “Whaddya NEEEEEd it for?” I ask. You already
have, I say, closets full of shoes, blouses, skirts, dresses, sweaters, scarves, hats, coats.

Her reply? The next time you’re feeling amorous, she says, I’ll be sure to ask “Whaddya NEEEEEd it for?” The implication being that you don’t need it, and so you’re not going to get it. So, we add more shelves and closet space. Louie’s doctrine cuts both ways. Shoes are a small price to pay for love.

Sender was the greater philosopher of the two, but only by a slender margin. Sender never lost an argument—certainly not in his mind. But Louie could stand his ground, and his philosophical principle carried a self-proclaimed tone of moral superiority.

Using the great philosophy of Lou Deutsch, every one can always easily justify his material acquisitions, by stating that he needs them, while simultaneously admonishing relatives, friends, and strangers who acquire identical things, by telling them “Whaddya need it for?”

When I turned 50 years of age, I truly bonded with Uncle Sender for the first time when I became a victim of Louie’s philosophy at the hands of an equally portly, arrogant neighbor.

In 1990, I bought my first semi-luxury car, an Acura Legend Coupe. It cost $30,000. The price overwhelmed me. I couldn’t imagine writing a check for $30,000. So, I wrote two checks for $15,000 each, from two separate accounts. I had crossed a threshold.

Just when I bought my new car, my neighbor, let’s call him Mr. Smith, bought a new BMW for $30,000. This seemed
reasonable to me. He was an accomplished scholar. He lived in a nice house. He received all kinds of awards and prizes. To my way of thinking, if he could afford to buy a BMW, and if he wanted to buy a BMW, then by all means he should buy a BMW. He needed a BMW. He deserved a BMW.

I foolishly thought the same about me and my Acura Legend Coupe. It was beautiful, my first real luxury car. It handled like a dream. Ask my wife. It’s her car now and she loves it. I wanted the Acura Legend Coupe. I could afford it. I needed it. I deserved it.

Or so I thought.

One day, as I was washing my beautiful new car, Smith happened by. I commented on his new BMW and wished him well. I asked him what he thought of my new Acura Legend Coupe. I expected a similar response out of politeness, if not from conviction.

Boy, did I learn a lesson that day. Smith made clear, in no uncertain terms, that I was mistaken. Brimming with arrogance, he looked at me, and haughtily declared: “I need my BMW. I deserve my BMW. After all, as a physician, I can make more money in the private sector. My BMW is a reward for the financial sacrifice I made going into academic life, sharing my knowledge with students and other doctors, giving up the chance to get rich in private practice. Because of my great sacrifice to serve humanity, I need and deserve my BMW.” Here was Louie’s disciple. For Smith, a BMW was not decadent.

But what about me? Didn’t I also need and deserve my
Acura Legend Coupe?

The answer was NO. Smith had made a personal sacrifice to a life of public service in the university, and thus deserved his BMW. Not Alvin. No sirree. Alvin had not made a sacrifice. There wasn’t anything else he could do. He was making the best of his life as a social scientist. Alvin belonged to a world of lesser souls whose residents fit the dictionary definition of academic as “irrelevant.” Alvin didn’t need a new Legend. Alvin didn’t deserve a new Legend. car. For Alvin, a new Legend was decadent. Try as I might, there was nothing I could say to achieve moral, needing, deserving equivalence with Louie’s protégée.

If you have mastered the philosophy of Lou Deutsch, you will be able to grasp the second greatest philosophical truth of the modern era: Some people need and deserve what they get, while others don’t. The key to life is to be on the needing and deserving end of things and to be able, with a straight face, to tell everyone else they don’t. Practice saying “Whaddya NEEEEED it for?” in front of the mirror several times a day. As you gain skill with this phrase, you will experience more and more success in relations with your fellow man.
Cousin Saul is another in the tradition of great modern philosophers. His full name is Saul Rozen, and he is my cousin by marriage. The connection is through my father’s younger sister Rose, the youngest of the five Rabushka siblings, who married Oscar Burstein. Oscar and Rose had three children, Shirley, Ruthie, and Alvin (my namesake). All three were older than me, the two girls substantially so.

Saul is a holocaust survivor. He lost all his family in the concentration camps. He was resettled in the United States after the war. Apart from those few facts, I know very little about Saul’s background or upbringing. As a young boy of about nine, all that I can recall is that one day my cousin Shirley, born in 1930, was going to marry a nice young man named Saul Rozen. I knew Alvin somewhat, since he was just a few years older than me. But I only recall Shirley from old photos. She was a beautiful girl. Sadly, she died from diabetes within a year of her marriage to Saul.

Oscar and Rose had taken warmly to Saul. Given that he had no family, they treated him as a son and he remained a frequent visitor to their home after Shirley’s death. The next thing I knew of Saul Rozen was that he going to marry Ruthie, Shirley’s younger sister. I didn’t know what to make of this at the time. It was the first time I had ever heard of the same man marrying two sisters in succession. It turns out Saul and Ruthie were a match made in heaven, having celebrated their golden wedding anniversary. They have three successful children, and four grandchildren.
Saul and Ruthie began their life together running a small grocery store not far from where they lived. Saul would awake early in the morning and head off to the farmer’s market to stock up on produce for the day. Unfortunately this experiment in entrepreneurship was short-lived when their store burned down.

This event was a catalyst for what was going to be an extremely successful career. Saul got a job in the men’s department at the Southtown branch of the Famous-Barr Department Store in South St. Louis. From there he moved to the upscale Clayton Branch, where he worked his way up to department manager, selling to well-to-do clients. When I was a teenager, I encountered Saul from time to time in the Clayton store. He was always impeccably dressed. He had an engaging personality. It was easy to see why successful men would enjoy buying their clothes from him. My occasional meetings with him consisted of a brief hello, and each of us went on about our business, him selling clothes and me looking at electronics and other consumer goods. As a teenager, I had no interest whatsoever in dress clothes (as a look at any family photo during my teenage years will confirm).

Saul left Famous-Barr for a position at Sam Cavato in Frontenac, an exclusive store for the very rich. It was not unusual for customers of Sam Cavato to spend $30,000 a time selecting their annual wardrobe. With a successful career behind him, Saul retired, but carried on a private consulting business with a few select clients, who fly in on their private jets from around the country to have him advise them on their annual wardrobe. I have never met anyone with comparable knowledge of, and exquisite taste in, men’s attire.
With all the weddings, birthdays, and anniversaries I had to attend as a teenager, I needed a suit or two. When I began to buy some dress clothes was the first time I heard Saul’s great philosophy of life, even though I was much too young to understand and appreciate it at the time. His practical philosophy consists of two short sentences. “You spend $2.98. You get $2.98.”

My first reaction to his philosophy of life was one of stunned disbelief. I ridiculed it in my own mind. My entire upbringing rebelled against it. Saul Rozen represented a departure from a lifetime of Jewish uncles and relatives promising that they could get anything wholesale or cheaper than anyone else. Saul betrayed centuries of Jewish tradition, in which every purchase had to be a bargain, paying less than the goyim, who paid full price. At the age of 23 I spent a year in Hong Kong studying Chinese. As any shopper in Hong Kong will attest, every sales person is prone to say “I make it cheaper.” “I give you discount.” Jews and Chinese have much in common.

To me, Saul Rozen had become a gentile, a goy, worrying about manners and appearance, abandoning his heritage. He had dared to proclaim that you get what you pay for, that there are no bargains, that paying less is an illusion. “You spend $2.98. You get $2.98.” Plain and simple.

I moved away from St. Louis for good at the age of 28 to begin work in my first job in academia. Thereafter, for the next twenty-five years, I saw Saul no more than once or twice, and never really had a conversation with him during annual visits to see my parents.
Most Jewish families in St. Louis developed extensive cousins clubs. I belonged to a family of eleven great-aunts, numerous immediate aunts and uncles, and dozens of cousins. This meant innumerable picnics, bar mitzvahs, weddings, birthdays, and other family gatherings. Things changed as I grew up. My generation of American-born relatives had smaller families. As they moved around the country to better jobs, the local cousins diminished in numbers and contacts. As our parents began to die, we became, in cousin Davey’s words, “the family elders.”

A few years ago, the remaining cousins in St. Louis, some seven couples, began to meet on a regular basis. They thought it important to re-establish contact and share what was important to all of them. When I learned about these dinners and brunches from my brother, I asked him to organize a dinner or brunch whenever I came to St. Louis to see my mother.

It was at these dinners and brunches that I spoke with Saul Rozen for the first time in my life. By now I had reached 55 years of age. Both of my kids were out of college. My house was paid off. I could finally afford to buy good clothing (and other things) for the first time in my life.

My first expensive purchase was a casual shirt, made of 140 point Egyptian sea island cotton. It was priced at $100. This seemed steep. But with my wife’s encouragement—in invoking Cousin Louie’s philosophy that I needed and deserved it—I bought it. I took it home, put it on, and, for the first time, grasped the great practical philosophy of Saul Rozen. “You spend $100. You get $100.”
That did it. I discovered Hickey-Freeman at Nordstrom and Neiman Marcus. I bought suits, sport coats, and slacks. I progressed from the rack to custom-tailored clothing, selecting fabrics from the annual swatch sample box with the department manager—the local equivalent of Saul Rozen. I became a registered member of the Hickey-Freeman Executive Club. I sought out 110 and 120 point silk-wool blends and fine, top grade Italian and Australian wools. I went upscale with Bally and Ferragamo shoes to match. I bought expensive Egyptian cotton dress shirts, cotton that feels like silk. I bought Nicole Miller ties. For casual attire, I looked for Egyptian cotton Reyn-Spooner, Kahala, and Tommy Bahama shirts. I became contemptuous of cheaper fabrics and brands, and of shoppers looking for bargains. I wanted to warn other shoppers at random of Rozen’s philosophy. “You spend $2.98. You get $2.98.”

During the brunches and dinners I was able to attend, I queried Saul on every detail of fabric and men’s clothing that time permitted. I wanted to know about Brioni, 150-point wool fabric, his thoughts on silk-wool blends, and so on. He answered every question precisely, clearly, and to the point. I got an incredible education in men’s attire, and I regretted the years of missed opportunities to have learned from him.

My brother Sol points out that casual clothing looks better on Saul Rozen than the finest suits look on other people. And it’s all because he lives by his own philosophy. “You spend $2.98. You get $2.98.” He never spent $2.98. And he looks like a million.
Chapter 4

It Doesn’t Matter How Much Anything Costs
As Long As You Can Afford It

Uncle Yankel was my favorite uncle by far, and probably everyone else’s favorite, too, even though Sender was the greater philosopher. Known as Jacob, or Jack, outside his circle of family and Yiddish-speaking friends, Yankel was above all a mentsch, a man or human being for all seasons. He was every child’s dream uncle.

Yankel was the third among the five Silverman brothers, just after Sender. But he was different from the other four in many respects. He was the scholar in the family. He was an artist and I’m proud to have one his magnificent charcoal sketches that he had given to Peshke. He was a great poet. He had an incredible knack of putting the daily lives of his relatives into superb Yiddish rhymes. I was fortunate to be the subject in some of his poetry. He painted my growth from rambunctious child, the only student in my sixth-grade class to receive an unsatisfactory for deportment—I couldn’t keep my mouth shut in class—to young adult.

Yankel differed in one very important respect from the other Silvermans. He came to St. Louis with the other Silvermans shortly after World War I. However, as chance would have it, he met a young girl from Chicago at a local dance. One thing led to another. Uncle Yankel married Aunt Gitil (Gertrude), and moved to Chicago where her family lived.

Though he lived in Chicago, I spent lots of time with him.
We visited him and his family in Chicago quite often. He came to St. Louis to visit his relatives many times, often staying with us. I spent hours with him at breakfast, lunch, and dinner, one-on-one, mano-a-mano, discussing all kinds of subjects of interest to a budding adolescent.

To say that my table manners were lacking in my early years would be an understatement. I was known to wolf down a whole box of cereal at breakfast without taking time to breathe. My eating proclivities were also a subject of Yankel’s early poetry. Somehow toilets also intruded into our morning discussions. I threatened to flush him downstairs, and he replied that he would flush me upstairs.

Yankel was the ultimate pragmatist in the tradition of modern consumer philosophy. As he would say, “It doesn’t matter how much anything costs as long as you can afford it.”

This profound insight is readily apparent in several well-known aphorisms. “If you have to ask the price of something, you can’t afford it.” But Yankel’s version is far more profound in its implication, because it embodies the American dream: Get Rich. If you have enough money, you can buy whatever you want.

There are other commonplace sayings that trace their roots to Uncle Yankel’s wisdom. “Rich or poor, it’s better to have Money.” “It’s just as easy to fall in love with a rich man as a poor man.” While I’m sure there may be many others, no one put it quite so well as Yankel.

Yankel was the true scholar in the Silverman family. He could look at a situation, size it up, and summarize it in simple
terms. Yankel loved work. This is not to say that he loved to work, but loved to look at other people work. His love of work led him to a second great contribution to contemporary philosophy. “Nothing is too much work as long as someone else does it.”

So, combining his two principles of philosophy, if you have a lot of money, you can buy what you want. And, you can hire other people to work for you.

These two principles are the essence of a two-year MBA program in any great American university. Why does anyone spend two years and tens of thousands of dollars getting an MBA degree? Easy. To earn more money. And to be able to manage other people at work. The first permits you to buy what you want, and the second empowers you to get other people to do your work for you.

Why do business schools wrap up Yankel’s practical philosophy in two years of rigorous study? Easy, again. What else would these people do for a living? The faculty and staff of the country’s business schools would have to work, which would violate Yankel’s second principle of life.

I loved my Uncle Yankel. Someday I hope to publish an English translation of his poetry so that everyone will know that he loved me. I only regret that I have been unable to live my life along his principles. My father repeatedly reminded Sol and me that the best thing he did for us was not getting rich because we would both have become bums. Consequently, we had to work all our lives, because Joe deprived us of the opportunity to follow Yankel’s philosophy on consumption and work.
The good news is that the current generation of young adults is smarter than my generation. My son’s dream, and that of all his contemporaries, is to retire at 40 with $10 million or more and play golf every day with his wife and children. (My colleague’s son did exactly that at the age of 38, when he left Microsoft with $10 million in stock.) My daughter retired shortly after her marriage to an engineer at the age of 25, despite her attempted indoctrination by feminists at Stanford’s politically correct university. But she outsmarted the lot of them. As she told her mother and me on the way to a leisurely midday lunch, “Why work if you don’t have to?”

When I was 34 years old, my wife and I purchased our first home in Rochester, New York, for the modest sum of $38,000. For the prior six years, we lived in a small apartment with Salvation Army furniture. In their mid- to late-twenties, each of my kids own lovely houses (my daughter already has two), two cars, rooms full of nice new furniture, and routinely vacation in Hawaii and Europe.

I’m sure that Yankel would have been proud of his great-nephew and great-niece, who live his philosophy!
Chapter 5

Their Stupidity Is Stupendous

Joseph, or “Oh Joe” as my mother would call when the phone was for him, is my father. He was an all-around good guy, tolerant of an impossible mother-in-law, Bubbe Yudes, tolerant of a difficult wife, Peshke, and tolerant of the idiocy that confronted him each and every day of his life. How he managed to cope serves as inspiration to everyone, and puts him in the ranks of great modern philosophers.

His full name was Joseph Rabushka. He was born and raised in the little town of Kremenetz in Western Ukraine. He arrived in St. Louis in 1923, after four years in Israel, then under the British Mandate. Four years of fending off mosquitoes, converting swamps into orange groves, would be enough for any sane individual. America made a whole lot more sense to him, for which I am extremely grateful.

Joe met Peshke in St. Louis and married her in 1928 (along with Yudes, to all intents and purposes). My brother Sol was born in 1936, and I followed in 1940. This happened to be the year of the dragon, in which the greatest of Chinese emperors was born. Too bad I wasn’t Chinese.

Joseph tried his hand at construction in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Along with millions of others, he went bust in the Great Depression. Not to be kept down, he acquired the skills of a furrier. At that time, St. Louis was the center of the fur trade. He opened his own small store, the Reliable Fur Company. Shortly thereafter, he received a contract from the U.S. Army for
assembling fur boots and gloves for ski troops.

The 1940s was a good time for the fur business. As men went off to war, women became active members of the labor force. They earned income of their own, but had little to spend it on. Commonplace household appliances of today had not yet been developed. Automobiles and gasoline were rationed. As a result, many women indulged themselves in fur.

The fur business remained healthy until the 1960s. By then, fur had fallen out of fashion and women preferred labor-saving home appliances to fur coats. Joseph shut the doors of the Reliable Fur Company for the last time in 1970. He took home a few of his machines and set up a small, home-based operation to accommodate his favorite customers. Partial retirement was a godsend. It’s hard to put into words what it was like dealing with most of his customers. The Yiddish word “mishegossim,” or idiosyncracies, barely scratches the surface. His female customers rolled into one the worst features of yachnes (busybodies), yentas (gossiping women of vulgar manners) and balabustas (managers). It’s a wonder he didn’t take to drink.

Where did the name Oh Joe come from? Peshke worked, so she claimed, alongside Joseph in the business. I say so she claimed because my brother and I believe that she used work as an excuse to get away from her mother, the neighborhood tyrant Yudes, on whom she dumped her children and on whom we were dumped. Peshke took upon herself the tasks of receptionist and, so she says, bookkeeper. As receptionist, she answered the phone. When a customer asked to speak to the furrier, she would call out loudly “Oh Joe.” She was also always first to grab the telephone at home, eager to gossip with relatives, ready to malign one to the
other. (Sol and I always thought this was a strange way to treat family, but what did we know?) On the rare occasion that someone asked to speak with Joseph, she would call out loudly downstairs or outside “Oh Joe.” For some time, Sol and I thought that his real name was Oh Joe.

When Oh Joe and his family fled Eastern Europe, during the Red-White Civil War in 1919, he was a young man of 17 years. He was learned for his day, speaking Russian, Ukrainian, and Yiddish. He grew up in a religious household and read Hebrew with lightning speed. Upon arriving in St. Louis, he mastered English in short order. He was a voracious reader, especially of health magazines. For years the house stunk of garlic.

Oh Joe loved civics. He especially enjoyed reading newspapers and magazines, listening to the radio, and watching political discussions on television. His circle of discussants included the Silverman clan (his next-door neighbor Sender, Yankel, and Peshke’s other three brothers), the Rabushka clan (one brother and two sisters), and numerous cousins of whom there were dozens. And, most of all, Cousin Louie, the bane of Sunday nights.

Oh Joe understood politics as much as Sender. Perhaps Sender was more graphical in his choice of language: “The dumb shit-asses, what do they know?” Oh Joe was more civilized. He also had a larger vocabulary. His greatest philosophical contribution consists of four wonderfully alliterative words: “Their stupidity is stupendous.”

This gets at the heart of it, doesn’t it? It fits politicians, pundits, and talkers to a “T.” It fits all too many in the intellectual
classes, who “huben nit ken seykhl.” It aptly describes callers to Dr. Laura, who can’t tell up from down. It fits the irresponsible with self-destructive vices of drinking, smoking, overeating, indiscriminate sex, and gambling. Take Uncle Velvel (Willie in English), Peshke’s youngest brother. He smoked all his life, despite having bad lungs. When told by his doctor to quit smoking, Velvel replied that he would rather die with a cigarette in his hand than give up smoking. Velvel had one lung removed. But Velvel remained incorrigible. He kept smoking. As might be expected, he died from lung cancer at a relatively young age. Sadly, he was too sick to smoke when he breathed his last breath. He must have envied his older brother Sender, who got in one last cigarette before passing away.

I have to get one thing off my chest. As a little boy of five, I vividly recall a Silverman clan picnic at a suburban St. Louis park. It was such a moving experience that it’s my earliest memory. I was thirsty. I saw Uncle Velvel pour a glass of lemonade from a jug for himself. I asked him if I could have some. He said no. It wasn’t lemonade. It was pishasch (Yiddish slang for urine). I went crying to my mother, yelling that Uncle Velvel was drinking pishasch. She did her best to calm me that it wasn’t pishasch. She said that he was just being selfish because he had no children. But then, I wondered, how come we only brought water. Life wasn’t fair.

Back to Oh Joe. He was a man of many insights. As a small, successful businessman, until the fur trade went downhill, Oh Joe knew about money. But Oh Joe went beyond dollars and cents. He invented his own currency, capons, by which to live his life. What’s a capon, you ask? Capons are dried out, old, tough chickens. Sure, the dictionary defines a capon as a male chicken
castrated when young to improve its flesh for food. Peshke kept a kosher home. But her kosher butcher must have specially selected for her those capons that were castrated late in life to make its flesh tough and tasteless. It’s only when I got my first taste of Kentucky Fried Chicken that I grasped the concepts of tender, succulent, and tasty.

Oh Joe valued everything in terms of capons. Three capons for a shirt. One capon for five loaves of bread. Capons were the gold standard for Oh Joe. Any and every purchase was rendered in terms of capons. Maybe it was his way of coping with having to eat the terrible things. To this day, my lovely wife Louisa and I often reckon our supermarket purchases in numbers of capons.

During Oh Joe’s golden years, his hearing began to fail—or so he said. He was fitted for a hearing aid, with an adjustable volume. This change in his life took place after Grandma Yudes had passed away. But Peshke more than made up for her departure. Peshke was the ultimate commentator of her day. In the course of a television movie, her running commentary more than exceeded the actual number of words spoken by all the actors and actresses combined. She not only explained what was going on in the movie, but analyzed it at the same time, to the consternation of everyone else in the room. (My wife occasionally finds this an annoying trait in me.) Peshke’s running commentary took to encompassing the minute-by-minute existence of all those around her, including Oh Joe. She was the consummate balabusta, managing everyone’s life, or at least trying to.

For the first time Oh Joe had a weapon he could deploy in his own self-defense, indeed his mental survival. He could turn down his hearing aid. If things were bad enough, he could say the
aid was uncomfortable and he wanted to give his ears a rest. Funny thing, though. He never had any trouble hearing me when he wasn’t wearing his hearing aid. But the hearing aid, strategically turned down at vital moments, brought him tranquility and preserved his sanity during his last twenty years.

The insight here is that for all those who find themselves in their later lives surrounded by yachnes, yentas, and balabustas, who get more talkative as they get older, hearing aids are a source of salvation.

In this regard, I’m a lucky man. My wife is quiet, at times too quiet. But, as I said, I’m a lucky man. The rest of you might begin picking out your hearing aid well before retirement.

Oh Joe was also a great psychologist. He understood human nature and behavior far better than most psychiatrists, psychologists, and other mental healers. He had to in order to survive in business with the thousands of women who harangued him, and survive at home with Yudes and Peshke. The solution to every imaginable psychological problem that could inflict a man was simple. Get up in the morning, shower, shave, put on a tie, and go to work. That’s the long and the short of it. It worked for him. It works for most people. At a minimum, it got him out of the house.

Finally, a phrase that gets at the heart of life. “You’ve got to live nice.” Had Aristotle and Confucius been men of the people, rather than tutors to political and military leaders, their Golden Mean would have come out “You’ve got to live nice.” Don’t smoke. Eat right. Drink in moderation. Get plenty of exercise (and drink prune juice when exercise doesn’t accomplish its
morning objective). Educate your children. Pay your bills. Respect your fellow man. Where are men like Oh Joe when we need them today?
Chapter 6

Surface Lovely, Underneath Filthy

Mary Marshall was my first girlfriend. I was five years old at the time. Mary was closer to 50. She was also Negro, or Black, or African-American. She was the chief seamstress in Oh Joe’s small fur business. She supervised several other seamstresses, all of whom were Black.

Mary was single. She never married. She lived in a Black neighborhood in St. Louis. In the 1940s, those neighborhoods were as safe and well-maintained as White suburbs.

I was thin and scrawny as a small child. Indeed, Peshke worried if I would ever gain any weight. To say that I was hyperactive would be an understatement. Remember, I was the only one in my sixth grade class to receive a grade of unsatisfactory for deportment.

Every afternoon after school, I walked over to Oh Joe’s fur store. Peshke would give Mary a quarter and have her take me to the corner drug store, which had an old-fashioned soda counter. She would order a chocolate milk shake for me, and then walk me back to the store. This went on for several years.

Everyone knew each other along Delmar Boulevard, the main street in University City, the suburb immediately west of St. Louis. Delmar Boulevard had two movie theaters, the Tivoli and the Varsity, some small shops, a bank, a drug store, and a few restaurants. It was the business center of a Jewish community, still in transition from the city to the spacious suburbs. I always
introduced Mary to everyone as my girlfriend, and she always smiled.

Mary dressed well, at least on the outside. Her clothes were clean, well-tailored, and pressed. It was a great loss to me as Oh Joe’s business began to slow down in the 1950s. He had to gradually let his employees go. Last to go was Mary and I was heartbroken. I had yet to discover girls in primary school. That would come later.

It was through Mary that I came to learn of another important philosophical insight. Unbeknownst to me, Mary had one shortcoming. While Mary arrived at work in her finest attire, evidently, she was not terribly conscious about the cleanliness of her undergarments. To describe this situation, Peshke coined a Yiddish phrase, or rather a Yinglish phrase, “Uiber ooi, unten phooey,” which means “surface lovely, underneath filthy.”

I never completely forgave Peshke for maligning Mary, my first girlfriend, especially since Peshke pandered to Cousin Louie at the expense of Leif, son of Firebeard, King of Norstad, and his half-witted brother Finn. I was sure that Mary would have put Louie in his place.

But there is a lesson to be learned from Mary. It is captured in everyday life in the cliche that appearances can be deceiving. Don’t judge a book by its cover. Beauty is only skin deep. Or maybe Peshke just made it up to malign Mary, who did the real work at the Reliable Fur Company. After all, Yankel was her older brother.
Chapter 7

Nobody Works Around Here. Only I Work

We have met six great modern philosophers. All but Mary Marshall were born in Central and Eastern Europe. The five Europeans found their way to America to lives of freedom and opportunity, where they formulated their great philosophies of life. The remaining two philosophers presented in this book were born and raised in Hong Kong, on the other side of the world. The most brilliant was Ma Huntley.

Ma Huntley was born in Hong Kong in 1918 as Angelina Margarida Joainilho, daughter of Antonio Joainilho and Irene Filomena Joainilho. In 1936, she married a Glaswegian, Stanton Huntley, then a non-commissioned officer in the British military, who subsequently became chief superintendent of the Hong Kong and Whampoa Dockyards.

What’s this got to do with me? I arrived in Hong Kong on March 1, 1963, to study Chinese at the University of Hong Kong. I quickly found accommodation as a resident tutor of Eliot Hall, an all-Chinese student dormitory on campus, which qualified me to share a small apartment with a young Chinese professor of mathematics who had recently returned from ten years in the Chinese countryside building socialism. After several months of intensive language study, I was looking for a Western night out on the town. A Canadian student at the language school told me that the Y.M.C.A. held an American-style square dance every Wednesday night. Attending that square dance in early May was the most important event in my life.
The dancers included British, Canadians, Australians, Americans, and some local Europeans. One lovely young girl, in particular, caught my attention. Her name was Louisa. I made it a point of getting her name and phone number. As you might guess, her last name was Huntley.

The reason for my efforts at learning Chinese was to prepare myself for an academic life as a China expert. I was eager to meet a professor at Hong Kong University named Henry James Lethbridge whose interests in modern China coincided with mine. I asked the Warden of Eliot Hall, a medical school professor named Robin Maneely, if he could arrange such a meeting. He graciously organized a dinner at Daimaru, an upscale Japanese department store in Causeway Bay that specialized in sukiyaki, and invited me to bring a date. I leapt at the opportunity, raced to the phone, called Louisa—and, as luck would have it, she agreed (later telling me that she broke a date to accept my invitation). It was a great evening, but I recall paying much more attention to my date than to Professor Lethbridge.

The next day I got a call from Louisa inviting me to join her family for a Chinese dinner at Paris Noodles on Haiphong Street in the Tsimshatsui District of Kowloon (just across the harbor from Hong Kong Island). It was there that I met Ma Huntley. It was also my first introduction to fried chili crab, Chinese broccoli with oyster sauce, and other Chinese delicacies. During dinner, my leg brushed Louisa’s under the table (I think this was called playing footsie), and I went back to my small Eliot Hall apartment madly in love.

I spent the better part of the next three months in her home. She lived with her parents, brothers, sisters, a dog, and two
servants in very large accommodations reserved for European expatriate staff. These magnificent old buildings were located inside the Hong Kong and Whampoa Dockyard, behind walls with guards at each entrance. To make a long story short, after a frantic courtship, we were married on August 17, 1963. On that day, Ma Huntley became my beloved mother-in-law.

From the time we met at that auspicious dinner, until I boarded the President Wilson for my return journey to the University of Hawaii in January 1964, I spent eight months getting to know her. We met many times after that, passing through Hong Kong in 1966, on several visits to Australia in 1971 and 1973 (Ma Huntley and family moved to Sydney in 1967), and she visited us in California on several occasions. She passed away peacefully in 2000.

Even though she was a Catholic, Ma Huntley was the ultimate balabusta (in addition to manager, this Yiddish word also means housewife and small business proprietor). She ran the house, the servants, the children, the family’s finances, and a small business on the side. She specialized in ordering people about, again, the servants, the children, and everyone else she came in contact with. She drove a black MG sedan; her self-defined nickname was “Speedy Gonzales.” As she remarked: “Everyone is speeding, so I have to speed.” It's a wonder that anyone in the family survived her years at the wheel.

Ma Huntley was the consummate cosmopolitan. Born in Hong Kong of Portuguese parents, she married a Scotsman and lived in a British colony. She spoke Cantonese, English, and Macanese (the pidgin mix of Portuguese and Chinese spoken in Macau). She ate Chinese food, English food, and Russian food.
She loved Mahjong.

All her children remember the infamous feather duster. It was never used to dust the house, but, instead, it represented the ultimate threat to keep the kids in line. Louisa’s two younger brothers, Andrew and Ronnie, spent their formative years hearing “Ronnie, Andrew, you get slaps.” This phrase was meant to keep Andrew and Ronnie on their best behavior, but Ronnie and Andrew were too fast for Ma Huntley.

Had Ma Huntley lived in America, she would have qualified as one of America’s great philosophers. No doubt she was among Asia’s great philosophers, surpassing Confucius, Mencius, Gautama, and all the others. She combined the best of Sender, Yankel, and Cousin Louie, but gave their principles a fresh slant.

The essence of Ma Huntley lies in one path-breaking insight. It is a doctrine that Sender, Yankel, and Louie, had they combined their respective genius, might have uncovered. But it took Ma Huntley to complete this task. The magic words were first pronounced one morning in my presence, after I complained that she had shirked her household duties. You see, she was interfering with my courtship. She insisted that the lovely Louisa, my fiancee, had to complete some household chores before she could go out with me. I thought it was Ma Huntley’s responsibility, not my fiancee’s. In a rather loud, emotional manner, she uttered those famous words, which only today have I come to appreciate. “Nobody works around here. Only I work.”

Here’s the truth. Ma Huntley, as I said before, kept one or more live-in servants. But it was her manner to fire them on a
regular basis. On those occasions, she conscripted Louisa to fill in on a temporary basis. Our courtship occurred during one of those periods. I resented any time lost to household chores. The morning in question was after Louisa had spent the night before preparing dinner, while Ma Huntley was out enjoying herself. When I exposed Ma Huntley, she launched into a tirade directed against me, enumerating everything she did for her children. I was intimidated, silenced, fearing for my life (would she use the feather duster on me?). Would she refuse my request to marry her daughter?

I proposed the next day, and we set the marriage date as soon as possible. My goal was not so much to liberate Louisa from Ma Huntley’s clutches as it was to spare me any more tirades. I’ve been accused of being thin-skinned, and on that fateful morning, I had almost been skinned.

There are echoes of Ma Huntley in the daily life of the Rabushka household, Whenever I ask the lovely Louisa what’s for lunch, why dinner isn’t ready, why the laundry hasn’t been put away, or why the yard hasn’t been clean up, she’s quick to respond with “Nobody works around here. Only I work.”

I even hear shades of Ma Huntley in my distinguished executive son, who constantly reminds me that “Nobody feels stress in their job. Only I feel stress.”

But great philosophy, not me, my wife or my children, is the subject of this book. Ma Huntley articulated a vision of life. Get someone else to do your work. But if caught shirking your responsibilities, insist that you indeed do all the work. This philosophy works great if you can get away with it.
Chapter 8

Puta - Pulling

We come, finally, to the last great philosopher, the late Ah Tu. He was a fascinating individual. His real first name was Arturo. Ah Tu was his Cantonese nickname. To Cantonese ears, Arturo sounds like Ah Tu. And, it includes the honorific, polite Chinese Ah.

Ah Tu was born in the Portuguese Overseas Territory of Macao but lived in the British Crown Colony of Hong Kong during his adult life. He worked for a small hat company, which is all that was left of one of the original British trading houses that dominated Hong Kong’s economy from its inception in 1841 until the 1960s, when Chinese tycoons began to replace British taipans. Ah Tu pushed paper, sending invoices, paying bills, and exchanging correspondence.

I got to know Ah Tu in the early 1970s. Through a mutual friend, he kindly let me use an empty desk in his office during my research trips to Hong Kong to write up notes from interviews and eat lunch. He had a happy disposition. His colleagues, also of Portuguese or Macanese ancestry, were equally friendly.

I regard myself as very fortunate to have lived in several British colonies during my life. They are extremely interesting places, where one gets to see a different way of life. Most British colonies were given their independence after World War II. But Hong Kong was different. There was no possibility of its becoming independent. Once the British left, it would be reunited with mainland China. Hong Kong thus had all the trappings of a
British colony throughout the postwar years, until Britain gave it back to China on June 30, 1997.

Over the years, I’ve lived and traveled to a number of British territories, including Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Sri Lanka (formerly Ceylon), New Zealand, Australia, Gibraltar, Bermuda, The Bahamas, Cayman Islands, Jersey, Guernsey, Cyprus, and Malta. Life in a British colony is defined by one’s membership in a club (golf, military, sailing, soccer, racing) and spending Saturday afternoons at the local race track. In fact, I spent my first day in Hong Kong squeezed in among tens of thousands of frantic, screaming gamblers at the Royal Hong Kong Jockey Club race track in Happy Valley.

Wow! Gambling on horses was the real lifeblood of British colonies. People may have gone about their daily lives brushing their teeth, getting dressed, going to work, taking the kids to school, shopping, eating dinner, watching television, and going to bed. But all of this was prelude the main event—Saturday race meetings.

Racing sheets outsold daily newspapers. On Friday, and then later on Tuesday and Wednesday, when Wednesday evening race meetings were added after a second track was opened in the countryside, thousands of individuals used every spare moment to study the race sheets and compare recommendations of prominent tipsters. Race meetings were the most popular shows on television. Coffee and tea house conversation was dominated with talk of racing. Every adult in Hong Kong fancied himself a racing expert.

Ah Tu, his office mates, and all his friends lived for the races. Casinos are illegal in Hong Kong, but racing is legal. In
addition to betting booths at the race tracks, there are off-track betting booths and thousands of illegal bookies. The smell of gambling is everywhere. During the hot summer months, when racing is suspended, most of the population is depressed. Gamblers are driven to the stock market, noisy mahjong parlors, and casinos in neighboring Macao to satisfy their urges.

Ah Tu spoke several languages. He used English and Cantonese for business. But for gambling, he preferred Portuguese. Not really Portuguese, but rather the local patois, Macanese, a mixture of Portuguese and Cantonese. Macanese was the local pidgin that enabled Portuguese administrators and Chinese residents of Macao to talk with each other.

Every language has four letter words. Ah Tu preferred “puta,” the Macanese version. He rarely swore, much as the Captain of the Pinafore rarely used a “big, big D.” He was, in his own mind, smarter than other gamblers. He knew horses. He knew the jockeys. He watched horses go through their early morning paces at the track. He talked to the handlers. He ferreted out as much information as he could. Most important, he wanted to know if a race was likely to be fixed because big money, as much as $5 million, could be made betting on a long shot if the race was fixed. When Saturday rolled around, Ah Tu was ready to go with his bets.

I looked forward to Mondays. I typically showed up around noon to transcribe interview notes and join Ah Tu and his companions for lunch. They rarely made money. Invariably, they lost money. Sure, they won a race or two. But when the full eight races had been run, then went home broke. What went wrong?
It was at these Monday lunches that I heard, again and again, the following words: “Puta, Ah Tu, Pulling.” This was no time for good grammar. Chinglish (Chinese mixed with English) and Macanese filled the air. Whenever Ah Tu or one of his companions lost on a “sure thing,” it was because the race was fixed. The jockey pulled on the reins to slow his horse. A bad bet was never the result of bad judgment, bad analysis, or bad luck. It was pulling.

“Puta, Ah Tu, Pulling.” With a healthy dose of additional putas sprinkled in between.

Ah Tu was a great philosopher. He taught me, and everyone else around him, that gambling was a mug’s business. (In British usage, a mug is a victim or dupe.) No matter how smart one might be, how much research one might undertake, or how close one actually got to hear from the horse’s mouth, the gambler would be a victim of pulling. The jockeys pulled on Saturday and Wednesday. They pulled in autumn, winter, and spring. They pulled on dry turf and on wet turf. They pulled on local horses and overseas horses. They pulled for bribes. The Royal Hong Kong Jockey Club, where races were held, should have been named the Royal Hong Kong Pulling Club. Despite years of losing money, Ah Tu retained faith in his own judgment. He was never wrong. He was just the victim of pulling. He died a poor man.

“Puta, Ah Tu, Pulling.”

It’s fitting to wrap up this book with Sender. It turns out he and Ah Tu were kindred spirits. Sender also loved the ponies. He studied the racing form in *The Forward* religiously. He always bet “scientifically.” He always lost. In fact, his horses invariably ran
last or second to last. But like Ah Tu, he remained the optimist, convinced his day would come. Too bad he didn’t meet Ah Tu. He might have learned that he was also the victim of pulling.
God Willing

It is generally recognized that a well educated person should be familiar with the works of the great philosophers. A core list would include the following men:

# The Monotheists: Abraham, Moses, Jesus and his disciples, Mohammed, Luther
# The Greeks: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle
# The Asians: Confucius, Lao-tzu, Buddha, Mencius
# The Early Middle Ages: Saint Augustine
# The Late Middle Ages: Thomas of Aquinas, Maimonides
# Early Modern Era: Machiavelli, Francis Bacon
# The Italians: Galileo
# The French: Rene Descartes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Charles Montesquieu, Voltaire
# The British: Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Isaac Newton
# The Scots: David Hume, Adam Smith
# The American Founding Fathers: James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, John Jay
# The Germans: Immanuel Kant, George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel
# The Determinists: Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong
# The Anti-Determinists: John Dewey, Friedrich von Hayek, Ludwig von Mises

Supplementary lists could add dozens of other great philosophers. To be sure, professors will quarrel interminably about who belongs
on any list. Indeed, many of today’s professors in the leading universities would replace most in the above list with such socialist and third world luminaries as Fidel Castro, Robert Mugabe, and Julius Nyrere, to name a few.

Not everyone has time to read widely among the great classical philosophers of West and East. Most of us are too busy trying to earn a living, shop, pay bills, raise children, keep our car running, and looking forward to getting home to enjoy dinner, a glass of wine, and a few restful hours before starting out all over again early the next morning.

Hopefully, in the short time it took you to read this book, you have come away with a better understanding of the human condition, why the world is so screwed up, and how you can better cope with life. It all boils down to a bare handful of insights:

#  Sender: “They have no common sense.”
#  Cousin Louie: “Whaddya NEEEED it for?”
#  Cousin Saul: “You spend $2.98. You get 2.98.”
#  Yankel: “Nothing costs too much as long as you can afford it.”
#  Oh Joe: “Their Stupidity is Stupendous.”
#  Mary Marshall: “Above lovely, underneath disgusting.”
#  Ma Huntley: “Nobody works around here. Only I work.”
#  Ah Tu: “Puta, pulling.”

There they are. The great philosophers and their contributions to the 20th century, which will stand you in good stead as you live your life in the 21st century. As Sender would have remarked to this statement, as he did to almost every other, “God willing.”