

ISAK FEDERMAN



Isak Federman comes from a legacy of strength. His father, Baruch Federman, suffering from pneumonia contracted as a soldier, died when Isak was an infant. His mother, Rachel Federman, raised three children alone and, out of the family's apartment, ran a shirt factory that employed three people. Isak was the youngest until Rachel remarried and gave him a younger brother.

The Federmans lived in Wolbrom, Poland, a small town that was nearly all Jewish. As was traditional, Isak began cheder, Hebrew School, at 3 years old and entered a Polish public school at 7. Wolbrom had no high school so, after seventh grade, Isak moved to Bedzin and a year later to Lodz. In Lodz, he worked in his uncle's fabric warehouse, joined a Zionist youth organization and considered leaving for Palestine. But, he said, "My parents didn't buy that program."

In summer 1939, Isak received letters from his mother, worried about the friction between Poland and Germany, asking him to come home. By August he was home. Nevertheless, most – including Isak's mother and stepfather – didn't believe the rumors of what was ahead. "The Germans are cultured people," they said.

On Sept. 1 the Nazis marched into Wolbrom and shot a woman accused of spying. Five days later, they rounded up the men, Isak among them. Isak's sister flirted with a soldier and won his release.

A Christian farmer named Yelnick helped the Federmans get by until December, when his mother sent Isak out for food.

"On the way, a bunch of Nazis with machine guns stopped me, beat the hell out of me and pushed me on a truck," Isak says. He never saw any members of his family again.

Isak endured 17 concentration camps.

"When things were rough, I tried to find the chance to volunteer to go someplace else," he says. "It didn't always work, but sometimes it helped."

After liberation, Isak returned to the displaced persons camp at Bergen-Belsen, where he met Ann Warszawski. He persuaded her and some others to move to the American zone, in the hope they could eventually immigrate to the United States. While waiting, with the help of Kansas Citian Sol Firestone, they refurbished the synagogue.

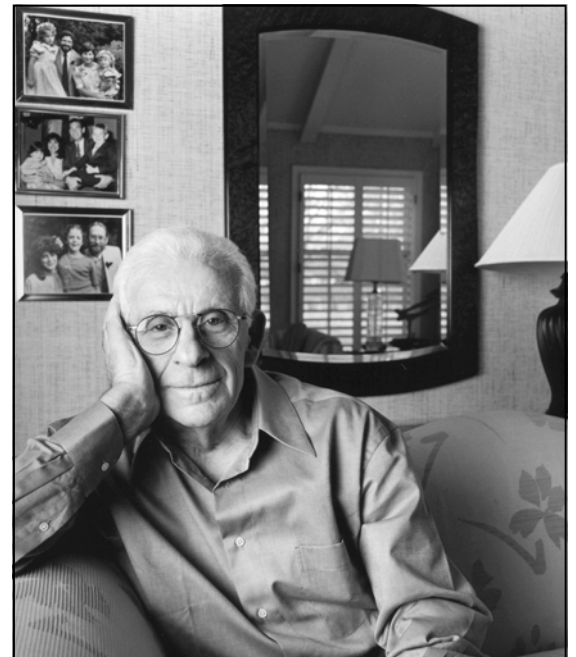
When they arrived in New York, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee sent Isak and Ann to Kansas City. There they were married on Sept. 22, 1946. They have three children: Rachel, Arthur, and Lorie.

In Kansas City, Isak made a small mistake on his first job and his boss yelled, "You should have stayed in Europe." Refusing to take abuse in America, Isak resigned and started Superior Upholstered Furniture Co. He sold it 26 years later, and started another business and today is semi-retired.

In 1993 he and Jack Mandelbaum founded the Midwest Center for Holocaust Education.

A past president of Kehilath Israel Synagogue, Isak believes in God.

"But," he says, "I have problems with him, or her, or whatever."



Portrait by Gloria Baker Feinstein

Excerpt from *From the Heart: Life Before and After the Holocaust ~ A Mosaic of Memories*

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