

# MICHAEL ROTHSTEIN



In Taurage, Lithuania, if a Jewish merchant dared to open his shop on *Shabbat*, the predominantly Jewish community would boycott it. Ten synagogues, all Orthodox, served the community's approximately 2,000 Jews. Among those were Shlomo and Hannah Rothstein and their 10 children. Shlomo prayed at synagogue three times a day. Hannah went on the Sabbath.

Like most Jews in Taurage, Shlomo Rothstein was a businessman. He bought livestock and grain from non-Jewish farmers at the Taurage market and transported it to the German border for resale.

Of Hannah's and Shlomo's large family – squeezed into a house with two bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen and an outhouse – the youngest was Michael.

“Everything my mother put on the table,” he recalls, “we ate.” He was active in a Zionist youth organization that taught teenagers skills that could help them as pioneers in Israel. He enjoyed the Jewish theater, which came to town twice a month.

Few youths from Taurage continued their formal education beyond high school. “There was no future for Jews in Lithuania,” he recalls. Antisemitism was a constant threat, particularly around Easter, when Jews were accused of using the blood of Christian children for the ritual Passover meal.

Most of Michael's brothers and sisters went to South Africa. When the war started, he tried to join them but could not obtain a visa.

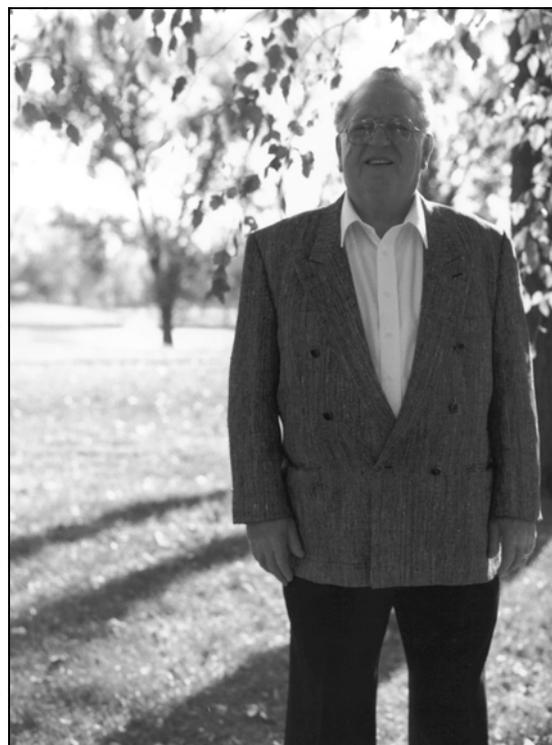
His parents were taken from the ghetto by the Nazis and forced to dig their own graves. Then they were shot to death. Sent to Dachau, Michael met the woman who would become his wife, Olga.

After liberation, Michael and Olga were reacquainted in Munich and were married in Italy. With help from friends, Sam and Elizabeth Nussbaum, they came to Kansas City.

When Michael Rothstein arrived in America and saw policemen on the street, he was frightened. At his first job in a restaurant, he was promised \$1.35 an hour. After 40 hours, he received only \$15 and he promptly quit.

Despite early trials, he began a career in construction that consumed him. “My hobby,” he says “was working. I had to support my family.”

He retired in 1982. And looking back, he says that America “gave me the opportunity to make for myself a life, to bring up two kids, to send them to the best universities. I think a lot of people take their freedom for granted.”



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

© 2001 Midwest Center for  
Holocaust Education