

Michael Rothstein Interview

October 18, 1999

What was your name at birth?

At birth, my name was Maier Benzia Rothstein.

And where were you born?

In Taurage, Lithuania. [also known as Tavrig]

What did you know about the circumstances of your birth? Were you born at home?

Yeah, we were... that way... There was no hospitals there, but every child was born at home. Had a, what you call it, a...

A midwife?

... a midwife, you know.

What were your parents' names?

My mother's name was Chana Shlomovitz and my father was, was Shlomo Nissan Rothstein.

What were your parents' occupations?

They were buying some stuff and selling, like, cattle and some grain. They used to bring in and sell it to other, to other business people.

Did they have a farm?

No, they didn't have a farm. We had, we had two houses, you know, and one was rented, the other we lived in.

Where did the cattle come from?

The cattle ... we used to go to East Germany and we used to buy them and bring them, bring them to Taurage and sell them to the, to the butchers, you know.

Describe the members of your families, their names, ages and relationships to you.

The ages I wouldn't know, exactly, because I'm the youngest in the family. We, we were 10 in our family. My oldest brother was Schumel. My oldest sister was Mina Dale. Of course, when she came to America, she really called herself Dale. And then was Maurice, Binyamin, Josef, and one is still alive. He lives in Rehovot, Israel. His name is Zvi Rothstein. My sister's name was Nina, and Dvorah, and Mina, and one is still alive in South Africa. Her name is Leah. [List of siblings as provided by Michael's family are: Dahlia (Dale), Schumel, Maurice, Dvorah, Binyamin, Josef, Leah, Zvi, Pearl, and Michael.]

What kind of a neighborhood did you live in? Describe the streets where you lived, and...

The neighborhood in Lithuania, is most of it in the bigger cities, there was all Jews. Very few ... we had a neighbor, a Gentile neighbor across the street but most of the street was all, all Jews lived there.

Is it considered like a ghetto, too? I mean...

No, no, not a ghetto but it was business people. They had a big market there, and they used to come in there, the Gentiles used to come in from the farms bringing in some all kind of merchandise, you know. We used to buy from them geese and something like that and then we sell them, take them to, to the German border and sell them there.

Was that a big city that you lived in, or...?

It was, it was pretty nice city. It's not really ... we had, I think it was 2,003 Jews in there. I mean, there was a lot of ... it was... the Gentile didn't live in the middle ground. They always lived around there, you know. I mean, but they weren't too nice.

Tell me a little bit about your home, what it looked like, you know, the inside of ...

Well, the home ... ten kids had two bedrooms, living room, kitchen and outhouse. That's all we had there, you know. My mother was really a hard-working and she, she took care of the kids, and she was a very religious woman. Used to go every *Shabbas* in *shul*. Of course, during the week she didn't go but every *Shabbat* she went to *shul*. My father used to go three times in *shul* - in the morning, in the afternoon and in evening. Most of the Jews in, in Lithuania ... there was 99 percent, 99 1/2 percent religious Jews. No stores was open on *Shabbat*. If there was one open on *Shabbat*, they put a *chayrem* by it. Do you know what a *chayrem* is?

No. Huh-uh.

They, they told ... they said nobody should go in and buy there anything. You know, so, they really put a ... whatever it is, you know?

So it was run by so many Jewish people that they were told the way they lived there ...

Most of them, during those years, what I remember, there was all Jewish business people. After the last few years, they're called [unclear]. They took over a lot of business and they advertise and they was against the Jews. They didn't want the people to go to the Jewish people, and they made like a, like a organization. They put people together to build, to make up a business and, that what, they lost ... the Jewish people lost out to business a lot because of that.

Is that sort of the first taste you had of antisemitism?

Antisemitism was there constantly. I mean, we used to come before *Pesach*, they used to make *blut rekiles* [blood libel], you know. They used to say the Jews killed somebody and make a big issue of it because there was not, not such a thing. But if a brother hit his sister, they said, "Well, there was, was something – somebody, they killed somebody," you know. It was ... you had to cope with all those things, you know, before the war, you know.

Okay. This goes back to the family questions about, did you have servants at your home?

No, we didn't have servants. We had the, we had the brothers and sisters. They've done, they've done the work.

Did you ever take vacations?

Vacation? No. No vacation.

What kind of food did you eat? Tell us about ...

We used to ... I mean, my mother was a good cook and a good, she used to bake very good. All the bread and everything, we used to bake at home. And it was all kind of different food we had.

Did you have a favorite?

Favorite? What favorite? Everything you put on the table they ate. We don't have ... we weren't in America, we were in Lithuania, and that was not a easy, easy life, you know.

It sounds to me that it was more of a middle-class living?

Well, most of it was a middle-class people, you know. You could find in a city, maybe one or two rich people, you know. That's all. I mean, really what we had there, you know, but

everybody was working and making a living. That's all. There was ... and that's also the reason people traveled ...

[Phone ringing] Let's stop.

[Tape pauses and then interview resumes.]

Describe the schools you attended. About your teachers, favorite subjects.

Well, we were, we were very religious and we used to go to a *cheder*.

Is that like a *yeshiva* school?

A Hebrew school.

A Hebrew school?

Yeah. We learned everything, Lithuanian and all kind of history. I mean everything. I mean all the subjects what the kids are here in America same, alright.

Mrs. Rothstein: Like a day school probably.

Like the day school. That's right.

Do you have a favorite subject?

A favorite subject was not to learn, not to go to school. [laughing]

Did you get in trouble a lot?

Mrs. Rothstein: Oh, sure. Oh, sure.

Well, we ... it was not so easy for the parents, you know. They had the same problems there that they got here. Here is a little bit worse but in Lithuania we, we were okay. I mean, when we were 10 years old we were already a man, you see? When we were 12, we had to go, we went to work.

So how many years of school did you have? I mean, did you graduate?

We had ... we went to high school and that's it.

So you went to high school, but what you're saying is you had to work and go to high school at the same time?

That's right. That's right.

So you graduated high school. Did you go to college?

No. College was a very difficult thing there. It was just a few people from the town that went to college, you know.

So what did you do for fun as a little kid?

For fun we used to go out with friends, and we used to go sometime dancing, you know, and visit maybe a bar and drink a beer there, you know.

Well, how old were you when you did that? At the high school years?

Well, I was 15, 16 years old.

Oh, so they drank early?

Yeah ... we had to drink, I guess [laughing].

Or were you supposed to drink early? [laughing]

I mean, we weren't no drunks but we had a beer. That was enough, you know?

And you started telling me a little bit about your organization that you belonged to?

The organization I belonged to is *HaShomer HaTzair*. That was a ... it wasn't a religious organization. It was just a ...

Social? Social organization?

Yes, yes. It was ... everything was going for to learn to go to Israel, you know.

So it's almost like a boy scout sort of?

We had *hatzaira*, if you know what *hatzaira* is. Like a *kibbutz*, you know, put together and people used to go there and learn how to work, how to be, how to be a farmer, how to be social work, and everything else. And then, from there, they used to try go to Israel.

So they were preparing themselves?

They were preparing themselves very, very much.

So Israel was a very, very important part of your ...

Right. And we talked ...

They didn't call it Israel back then. They called it ...

Mrs. Rothstein: Palestine.

Palestine.

Palestine, right, right.

Yeah, Palestine.

So they were teaching you to be a Palestinian...

Right.

... ahead so that you would be prepared when you would be there? So you probably had dreams of going to Israel?

Well, I was a young kid, you know, I mean we had dreams. Sure we had dreams to go to Israel because there was no future in Lithuania for, for people, for youngsters, you see, because my brothers and sisters went to South Africa because there was no future.

So they left ... did they leave you when they got older and go to South Africa? You know, when did they leave to go?

Oh, they left ... I was ... my older sister, when she left, I was an infant.

And why did they go to South Africa?

Because most of the Lithuanian Jews went to South Africa.

Mrs. Rothstein: She went to Israel.

She went to... Well, she went to Israel. A uncle came from America, I think was it, and he took them to Israel, my sister and my, my oldest brother. And she got married in years, I don't know when, with South African guy. He was uh, he had a factory, chemist factory in Israel, and the situation was very bad and they left, they left back to South Africa. And all of them ... that's the strange they ... she started and she brought the brothers and sisters over to America [sic - means to South Africa].

Why did they want to leave? Because of, you know, there was nothing to do in Lithuania?

I mean there was something to do but there was no actually future for, for, for people to grow, you know. They could stay in the, in the business ... one was an electrical engineer but there was nothing, nothing to do, you know. I mean, he was working really hard and,

and two brothers was actually electrical engineer. They went to South Africa, and they opened their own business.

Where did they get their education for the electrical engineering?

In, in Lithuania.

Okay. So there was ... was it like an industry school or was it like a college?

Was private, private firms. You know, you work for a firm and you learn, learn the trade.

The trade. Hmm. That's always ... that was the way they got their education.

And the same thing ... they ... When my sister wrote one time and said, "You have to go and learn a trade." So first I start as a auto mechanic, and it didn't worked out. So later on I went to a cabinetmaker, built furniture. I worked there about for eight months and learned the trade and started a business of my own.

So this is how people like you got their background, training? It wasn't through a college. It was through a trade.

A trade.

Right.

Most of it was trade.

It was like an apprenticeship?

Yeah, but... Yeah, but after eight months I knew what to do. When I came in to work in that place, I didn't know how to ... the tools, the name of the tools even, you know? But, we learned ... and learned quick.

So you had a hands-on, is what it is. It's a hands-on learning.

Yeah, we learned quick. I supposed to work there four years without pay. So after eight, seven months they start paying me...

Because you were able to do the work?

I don't know what it was.

It wasn't an antisemitism situation, was it?

No, no, it was ... they were Gentile people. They came to Jonava. It was a big company and that's where they learn the trade.

I know we kind of skipped around a little it. We'll go back a little bit to our teenage years. Did you have friends of the opposite sex?

Uh, yes.

And how was your relationship with these women?

Well, it was fine. We used to go out, like how we were in the same organization.

Oh, the women were in these organizations also?

Oh, yeah, yes. That wasn't... that wasn't Mizrahi or Agudath Israel. That was a more non-religious organization, you know?

Mrs. Rothstein: That's why I wasn't in it. [Mr. Rothstein laughs]

So, let's see, how did you get along with your parents? Were they strict?

Very much. Very much. We, we were a very close family, very close family. And the brother, the mother, and father, and the sisters and brothers, they were all, all close and helped each other as much as they could.

Did you feel... Did you notice, like, your dad being more attentive to the boys than the girls?

There was no, no different.

Is that because no one really went to college or anything, it just ...

No. They went to high school but no, no college. It's ... They, they were the same thing to the boys and to the girls.

Yeah, because some areas, like your wife was talking about in Hungary, you know, she understood why it was more important for her brother to be, to get his education. And that happened in many places.

The reason because of her brothers, he went to *yeshiva*. He went away from home. So the parents didn't see him for the whole year. They maybe see him for *Pesach* or for holidays but that's the reason. But we were together all the time. And that was, that was a different story, you know. You couldn't make no different the boys would get more privilege than the girls.

Okay. What ... Talk about the values or standards that were most important to your parents. I know you talked a lot about family relationship. Family values were high.

It was important to them was to be religious, to go to *shul*. And important was to them, the father was to work and bring in some money to, to make a living and my mother had her hands full with 10 kids, you know. She worked pretty hard. No help.

How ... Tell me a little bit more about the Judaism that was practiced in your home. You know, I know you said your father went to services three times a day...

Yes.

...and did you have *Shabbat* and Jewish holidays?

Every holiday. We never, we never missed a holiday or, or ride on holiday, so something like that. We always ...

And did you have a favorite holiday or anything?

Hanukkah and Purim was a favorite holiday, you know [laughing].

And did you celebrate any secular holidays like Christmas?

No, no. There was [unclear, but referring to a Lithuanian or non-Jewish holiday] but we never celebrate those, those holidays.

Were you jealous? So you didn't have a jealousy if you saw friends?

No, no way.

Mrs. Rothstein: I did.

No, we didn't.

And ... well, I think you described ...

We never went to a church. We never walked in a church until I got here in America, walked in on time to a church. We done some work there. [laughing]

That, because I think, is because you were around a lot of Jewish ...

Mrs. Rothstein: People.

And also the Jewish life.

Synagogues. There was, it was a lot of synagogues.

How many in a community of, like yours?

Well, like I said, we were about 2,000 people in that, and we had maybe about 10 synagogues there, you know.

Interesting. Was any of them like ... was all of them orthodox or was some conservative? How did they do it back then?

All orthodox, every one of them.

Mrs. Rothstein: Well, Hungary's famous for [unclear as interviewer speaks over her comment].

And did they also have like the schools in each synagogues too for your education?

No.

No, it was separate?

No, separate. Separate. It wasn't involved with the... Actually, the rabbi was paid by the government.

Mrs. Rothstein: Yeah.

The rabbi ... and then was, they called the [unclear] what he used to give out is, is birth certificate. He was paid by the government, you see? So the rabbi was paid by the government. There was one rabbi in the whole city.

So I don't think secular culture really played, played too big of a role. I mean, what about the arts and the music and philosophy? Did that come from the other, you know, from the secular culture or was it Jewish culture?

It was Jewish.

It was?

All, all the theatre or something like that, they're all Jewish. I mean, uh... Movies is a different story, you know, but theatres was all Jewish and Jewish states. It was really ...

Mrs. Rothstein: All around Lithuania, not in Hungary.

Yeah, yeah. We had, we had, we had practically, I would say ... once in two weeks we used to have a theatre come in.

Live theatre?

Live theatre stage.

Where did these people come from that do these performances?

They, they used to come from Kovno. Yeah, I mean, we had our own people there what they perform, you know.

The local ...

Another thing, we used to go to meetings. Every week we used to go to, to meetings in our, in our organization. You know?

So that was an important part of your life then?

It was.

Theater.

It was. It was very nice ... we really enjoyed ...

What about art and museums, did they have anything like that?

Uh, not in this town, I... There was no, no art or museums, you know. If you go to Kovno or the bigger, bigger city, you had art. You had museums. You had everything there.

Did they have Jewish arts in those places?

We used to bring ... people used to come with art to sell, you know. I'm sure we had ... who remembers all those things?

Okay. So before the war you were doing cabinet making. Is that correct?

Yes. I ... maybe, what, about two years before the war and then I think that saved me, my life, in the, in the concentration camp.

Kind of remind me to ask you how that did it in a minute but did you enjoy doing that work, the cabinetry?

Yes, we had a lot of fun. We used to play around with young kids. We had four, four workers and we used to play around working and playing. It was, it was really, I mean ... if you don't enjoy, you can't do the right work.

That's right.

You got to enjoy what you're doing.

So you were working mostly with Jewish people?

Oh yes, yes.

Okay. So the question is how successful were you with this? But I have a feeling ...

Very much.

Okay.

Very much.

Where did you build these cabinets? In offices or buildings or ...

Well, it was furniture, house furniture.

Furniture? Okay.

Furniture, buffets, tables. And there, you didn't have no closets there but you build a scuff. What you call a scuff or whatever, a cabinet and, and it's set up ...

Yeah, it's just like it's coming back now, they're having more and more ...

And it was really ... and you could take that apart, the whole thing, in a little package, you know.

You mean take it apart? Just like now we can build it? They tell you "A" and "B" ...

Well, I mean, you took it to the place and set them up.

Set them up?

Set them up, you know. And every piece was separately built.

Did you sell to Jewish people or ...

Yes, most ... more ... every one of them was Jewish customer.

Was it expensive to make and buy these things?

Expensive? It was, it was, it was pretty in line with the people, what they made, I mean, you know.

Oh, okay. It was comparable.

It wasn't, I mean, they had to pay cash for it, you know. There was no loans on it. Actually, there was no, no credit cards then. There was not. ... They had to go cash, you know?

Mrs. Rothstein: [inaudible]

Did you, like when you accepted the cash, you obviously gave it back to the business. Is that how it worked? You know, you paid for each work?

We paid for the people. We had to pay every week for the people.

You had a, like a timecard or ...

Yeah, a timecard ... we used to work eight hours or whatever, ten hours sometime, and we had to pay for the people.

You got paid once a week? Did they take out taxes from your...?

What taxes? [Laughing]

That's it. No social security, right? No federal taxes?

There was no social ... there was, there was workmen's comp.

Oh, really?

We had workmen's comp which ... better than any place in the world. You could have gone, even when you don't need to go to a doctor, three times a month, you could have gone to the doctor. The doctor prescribed you some medicine. You went to get the medicine. It was, it was from the government and you paid it.

This is what the government provided for you?

Like two dollars a month you paid for the whole thing.

Incredible. That's what they ... that's what you took out of your earnings?

It was not a poor country. It was, it was very, very ... in, in other culture, it was very rich. There was a time that you had to buy some tickets to buy the product because ... or you buy the ticket or you buy the product, you know? So it's, actually it was so much we used to send to Germany ... we used to send to different countries, we used to send horses and we used to send poultry and something like that. And pork, they used to send it, you know,

to Gentiles, you know. We didn't ... non-Jewish was even trading with those, those things, with non-kosher things.

So you said two years you were doing this cabinetry in your city in Lithuania. So did the war break out right around then or start ...

Well, the war broke up in 1941.

So were you doing ... what did you do? You were talking about the cabinet trade in your city and your life and I was trying to figure out ...

Well, first of all, in 1940 the Russian came in.

Okay.

When the Russian came in, they made *kolkhozes* and *sovkhozes*, putting together all the workers together in one, in one place. And we had, we had to give up everything, the tools and everything. So two weeks before that, the Russian army came into my house and they've seen what we doing and they ordered up a whole bunch of stuff for their army.

You mean furniture?

Furniture.

Right. They ordered furniture?

Yeah, like field, field furniture, you know. The army used field furniture. So they, so the *kolkhoz*, the *sovkhov* came over and want to take me into *sovkhov*. I said, "I'm sorry. I'm working for the, for the, for the Russian army." And that was the end of the thing. And they made so much money at that time, which is unbelievable.

So the Russian army was really running ...

They paid me ahead of time. They came in and made the order and they put up the pile of money just like that.

Mrs. Rothstein: Probably they stole it somewhere.

No, they didn't stole it. It was government.

How long were they doing that?

They were doing for a year.

A year?

From 1920 ... in 1940 to '41.

Okay. So the Russians were really supporting you?

They were really nice even when the war started, we were running from home and out-of-town were staying some trucks to pick us up and taken away from the front.

Is that ...

Just for Jewish and Russian.

Was that your first awareness of Jewish ... uh, Nazi presence?

The what?

The Nazis being present around there? That's the first sign?

Yeah, we knew that. We knew that the Nazis is, is on the go, you know. When they came into Lithuania, the Gentile was not too, too friendly either. They used to ... they shot the Russians right away through the window so something like that when the Russians was coming out, you know. And they didn't like the Jews at all. And then from there we went about 100 kilometer, they took us out of going to another city. You know away from the ... we lived right close by the border.

Right.

So they took us to other ... Shavl [Yiddish name for the city Šiauliai] , they called Shavl, Shavl. And then we went from there we met our friend there. What was name? Bermans?

Mrs. Rothstein: [unclear]

Whatever. They had a cotton factory and I got acquainted with their daughter and with their boys and they took us out from there. They got, they had some things so we took one thing, they took another thing and we droved out all the way to the Latvian border and there we were surround ... the German got us in the middle.

So what happ... what was your emotions at that time?

Very bad. It was, it was so strange, you know, and we had to, we had to go back to Shavl and they put us in a ghetto and we used to ... They used to walk... We used to walk on the street, not on the sidewalk, with a star. Go to work in factories and airport and all kind of, all kind of...

Supporting their trade? What did you do?

And they was no pay. Was no pay for it.

What did you do, though? What kind of trade did you do at that time? What kind of ...

Anything, anything they give you. Digging ditches or something like that.

Like they just didn't ... You couldn't use your cabinetry experiences right then, you know, your trade at that point.

Which, later on, when we went to, to Germany, you know, and we were in a concentration camp, I really used a lot of the trade, you know, even when we went to the farm worker and they used it. They had some friends, German friends, and he, the German, used to take us over to the, to the farmers to do some work. We do their, their cabinetwork and something like that.

So you were able to keep it up somewhat? Not totally, but a little bit?

Yeah, and we worked in the, in the ... limestone. We used to do ...

Caves? Those were caves?

... limestone ... the stones. We used to pick it up and used to take the, break the stones and take them up steps up and carry them up because there was no, no mechanical instrument to take them up there, you know.

Equipment, right.

Equipment.

So here you are in the camps here, what happened to everybody else that was still left at home?

Uh, home?

I know some people had left already.

There was no one ... we're talking, we're talking about my parents were there.

Uh-huh.

We talking about my sister and my brother was there.

Okay. That was all that was left? Everybody else had left already?

My brother, the other one brother left for Russia. He died in Russia during the war. My parents was taken out from ghetto because they say it was overcrowded, and they took my

parents out from the ghetto. Take them to a synagogue. From the synagogue, they took them 11 kilometers from town and they put them up. They had to dig their own graves and they, they...with a machine gun, they cut them down.

What about ... I'm more concerned about where your brothers and sisters went out that didn't get ...

They were before the war. They went a long time...

Right. That's what I'm saying. So they were all gone already?

The three brothers and ...

But some of them did get trapped in to this also?

Right. My brother that... I got a brother in Israel and he was, went to the partisan, you know. He run away from the, for the workman's *lager* and went to, in the forest. And he lived through ...

So was he in the concentration camp? No, he got away.

He was not in concentration camp. He was in the forest and after the war he got liberated and he lived in Vilna.

Okay.

Mrs. Rothstein: But he had a nice story about him, about the child that came back to [unclear].

Well, what happened, he put a two kids in a house and then he had to come back to be counted, you know. He came back in the camp to be counted so God forbid nobody's going to get hurt. Then he went out and tried to, to pick up the kids. The oldest child walked out from that house and the German caught him. A little baby about maybe about five years old and the little one, he took it and took with him to the, to the forest and they run away after the *appell*, after the counting. He run away.

But he's the one that survived, though?

He survived. He is in...

Mrs. Rothstein: He lives in Israel.

Israel. Okay. Now the ones that were in South Africa, did they get affected by the war? Or they were ...

They were not affected.

Right. That's what I'm trying to figure out.

I mean, they were years before ...

So they were safe there?

... my ...

So those were the ones that were left? One in Israel and then how many in South Africa?

There was six - three brothers and three sister in South Africa.

Okay.

But today we got one left because the rest of them died from their own natural ...

Right. Okay. But they didn't get affected. That's what I wanted to be sure they didn't get affected by this war here.

No.

Okay. Could you have ever gone to ... Was there any time in your life that you could have maybe gone to South Africa to be with them?

Yes, we want to go but the government, the South African government didn't let in brothers to brothers or... I mean, the only thing they would let them in is parents to children or children to parents.

It's very similar to what happened in Hungary then too? You know, is that what we were talking about that they would only let you ... no. You were mentioning it.

Mrs. Rothstein: You were, yeah.

That you had to be a parent ...

A parent or, or a child.

They didn't think it was a close enough relationship?

No.

You did mention that earlier. Right.

Dr. Malone ... I went, when we were in Italy, I went to Dr. Malone. I mean to the ...

Mrs. Rothstein: Immigration.

... immigration and I have papers to show them. He said, "You know, you're not close enough relatives."

So that happened again?

I told him very, very plain I told him that the council, I said, "You can have your country and you'll be sorry for that."

And when you went to this council about this, were you trying to get to South Africa at that time?

That's right, because my brothers sent me some papers and they guaranteed for my, for my coming there, you know. So I was really ...

Mrs. Rothstein: They paid for this trip also to come here because they knew that Jewish Agency that the [unclear], you know, very big time get money to bring somebody.

That's right. That they wanted you to be out of there.

Mrs. Rothstein: That's right.

Okay. So while you were in the concentration camp, you met your wife at one of the camps?

Yes. When we went to that was in Dachau. It was one of the camps, Camp 11. Camp 11, or ... Camp 2 we were there. And they, the women came there, the Hungarian women and Hungarian men came and I used to come in in the kitchen after, after they served and I used to get the leftovers. I used to take by my barrack, by my cabinet shop and there was a line, my friends, and I give it to them, the food. I kept them alive.

So you said a cabinet. You had another cabinet shop that you were able to work at?

That was at camp.

At that camp?

At camp, and I even sleep, I was sleeping there in the, in the, in that uh ...

Mrs. Rothstein: Cabinet shop.

... cabinet shop because I didn't want to sleep with the ... with all of them with all kind ...

Right. Okay. And then so I'm to figure out where we are now. You've met each other. How much longer are you going to be there and then we can start the rest of it?

Well, we got the ... Actually, when we ... I knew her when she was working the kitchen. But she wouldn't, she wouldn't share with me anything because she knew that I didn't have ...

Mrs. Rothstein: You didn't look bad, you know?

I give them out from everything.

Mrs. Rothstein: There were people who came and stayed after I pour in the food and they are staying. So I wanted it to go faster. I poured in another one, you know? Then somebody else didn't like that but it was ... not that it's a favorite because you didn't know nobody there. One face was the same as the other one.

So how did you guys get attracted to each other?

Mrs. Rothstein: After we were free.

After we got liberated.

You met again is what you're saying?

That was in Wolfratshausen. We got liberated in Wolfratshausen and we used... I used to come in, we used to live in villas there after, you know, in German villas, you know, we were there. So we used to come in and visit. Then we got acquainted very, very much and later on we went to the Flak-Kaserne from there. That was in Munich. The Flak-Kaserne was Munich. And, we, we tried to be together, you know. My cousin was there, she was there, and Elizabeth Nussbaum, and Yutka was there, too. Yeah, Yutka was there too. Then from there, from there we went to ... Let me think about it.

Mrs. Rothstein: With the *chayals* [Jewish Brigade soldiers].

Oh, with the *chayal* we went over to Italy. We went over the ...

And is that when you guys got married?

We were in Modena. We used to ... We came first in Modena and what we laid there on the, on the, on the marble floor. Nothing on it except just laying there. It was like a camp, an army camp. And that was where we were staying.

What were you doing at that time?

Nothing.

Nothing at all? Just waiting?

Not a thing. Not a thing.

Mrs. Rothstein: We were waiting to go to Israel.

For a transport. And from there we went to Santa Maria Debania. And, there we got married in Santa Maria Katarina.

So tell me about ... do you want to tell me about that night, neat day. I know I've heard it from her.

What?

What happened that day when you got married? I know you talked about the rabbi ...

Well, the rabbi, the rabbi ... One rabbi was from South Africa. The other was from ... There was another rabbi there and they both gave us *chuppah kiddushin*, you know. He was the ... I asked him about my brothers and sisters. He said, "I know them very well," because he was a chaplain in the army also. So...

Mrs. Rothstein: I think so we were the first couple who got married after ...

Yeah, I think, yeah, we were the first couple that got married there, you know. And then, then Elizabeth met Nussbaum. He was manager in a kitchen.

So they didn't know each other before they got to Italy then?

No. They were with us together over there, Elizabeth.

So you had never seen each other, right?

Yeah.

So, again, how long were you there before you ...

Mrs. Rothstein: Came here?

Well, yeah. When you didn't get to go to Israel. When you realized that you were not going to be going to Israel.

We went, we went to Modena. Not Modena, Barletta. We were in another camp. They moved us from that one to go to Barletta and from there we supposed to go to Israel. But we find out we can't go because of the women got pregnant and we couldn't, we couldn't go. So later on Sam Nussbaum got papers from America from his cousin and he went, he went to America, and a year later his cousin sent us some papers to come because I couldn't go to South Africa. We came to America with our little child of two and a half

years old. We lived in a very nice apartment basement. The water used to run through the window and we used to go in a foot water in the morning going up and the rats was that size rats in there. And we ... from there we moved to, to 2525 Benton Boulevard. From 2525 Benton Boulevard, we went to we bought a house. We paid \$500, uh, \$500 down and the whole house was about was \$6,000, the whole house. It was a big house. It was three bedrooms, living room, dining room, kitchen, double garage.

Well, tell me about, you know, you came to the United States. And here you are, you have a family. What did you do? What kind of work did you get? You know, you had to make a living.

Well, when I was looking, looking for a job. I went to several places. I went to a company, what they done some, some for restaurant business.

Um, okay.

And I start working there. So at the end of the week, he brings out \$15 and give it to me. I said, "What is that?" I said, "That is money?" I know the color of money. I said, "You can have that \$15. I don't have nothing," I said, "but you can have the \$15." And I walked out from there.

What did he really give you? What was it?

That's what he paid me for a week work.

That's what he felt for a week that he could give you \$15 and you felt you were worth more, right?

No. I was worth what ... it was \$1.35 an hour.

Okay. And you multiplied that by 40, or whatever hours you worked ...

By eight. Eight hours a day.

Eight, okay?

Eight hours times five.

Right, I see what you mean.

Huh?

So it should have been 40, not 15.

Yeah.

Right. So here you were. You worked a week. He didn't pay you right so you walked out? What did you do next?

I walked out and went... I met Messina Brothers. I went in, you know, and I talked a little bit Italian and they were, he liked me and they, first of all, they give me a job.

[Tape cuts off. Interview resumes.]

... part about when you started your business in 1951?

In 1951, I started working with Home Savings Building in 20 West Ninth Street Building. I got acquainted with the, with managers there and they did like my work and I done every floor in Home Savings Building. I done ... and there where we used to work day and night. We used to have ... at night, I used to have laborers to tear out the walls and we used to have maybe 15 - 20 laborers to tear it out. We had one of the guys used to come with a big truck and he used to bring the laborers and he used to haul away everything. I used to pay him direct for the people. In the daytime, I used to have carpenters. And they used ... they done all the walls, partitions putting up, hanging doors, making cabinets. Everything was going on the job. For 13 years I worked about 16 hours a day with the men. Later on, I start, I built some houses. I built some houses on Cherry Street. In Kingwood, I built some houses. We built our own home on Cherry. I did 3rd and Cherry, we built a big house. And we build on Blue Hill Country Club, I built some houses there on Blue Hill Country Club. I build on Wornall we build some houses. So ... and now I'm retired.

Mrs. Rothstein: And this architect who hired you for to build these two homes.

Oh, yeah. We build, we build for Bruce Goff. Maybe you saw that houses? The one behind Kansas City University. The octagon house. I build that. I build one on 5020 West 69th Street, 5020 West 67th or 69th?

Mrs. Rothstein: I don't know.

That's over in Prairie Village?

It's a, it's a green house with green [unclear] and it was ... the house will stop the traffic. And then we build one on 79th and Fontana, a house. But those houses, it was registered houses because you couldn't copy that, you know? There was a company from Paris came and make pictures from the houses and of us. Of Bruce Goff and me and me walking but we couldn't face the camera. We had to go straight. [laughing]

So how many years did you, were you in the building business?

In building business, here in America, I'm from 1941 ... no, '51 to, to about 10 years ago.

So now you're retired?

Yeah. About 'til 1980-something, '82.

One of the areas that I have to go back on is ... some of it we did touch on it. This is going to be a little ... and I really enjoyed this part listening to what you've done in the United States. That's very important.

Well, when we came to the United States, my sister was waiting in Ellis Island for me. She was, came here from South Africa, my older sister. And, we landed there and I thought, I had the idea that she stayed there. Of course, I picked up my little girl. She started waving to me.

Oh, my goodness. So she met you from South Africa so she could see you again?

No. She came to America to stay in America, to live in America.

Oh, she is now ... okay. So she's living ... she lived in America?

She lived in America.

I see.

She died in Israel, in Jerusalem.

So many of these things you really touch in a different way that I don't have to ask you a question.

Go ahead.

I don't have to. Let's see. Okay, I've got your first job. About the American citizenship. I think we got that off hers [referring to interview with wife Olga]. You described your career. Oh, let's talk about some of the hobbies and recreational pleasures you've had since you've been in the United States. I know you worked hard.

I didn't have no hobbies. What the hobby was working because I had to support my family. I had a big accident when I just came to the United States. I fell off a scaffold and broke my back and I suffer since then. I get a backache and it was operated in 1968. I was operated on my back. Otherwise, I would have been paralyzed for all my life.

So all those years you worked with a bad back?

That's correct. They told me at that time that I should go and make operation. I said, "How long would I have to stay away?" They told me, "It is about six months." That time was kind of ... and I would have a graft, graft in back, you know? I said, "I don't want it. I'll suffer better that way." And I have plenty trouble since then with cramps in the legs, cramps up the legs, and I ...

So then your son was born in United States?

My son was born in 2525 Benton Boulevard. Of course, he was in the hospital when he was born. And ...

Were you at work when he was born...

No.

...or were you there at the hospital with your wife when he was born?

I came when he was already born.

Oh, okay. They got you from work and let you know?

And I went in to see her, you know, and I was really ... When I walked in, I say ... She said, "We got now a boy." I said, "Ah, you must be kidding." I said nothing. She said, "Yeah." So that what, what it was you know. It was a miracle because she had so much problems, you know.

So how did the Holocaust affect ... How has it affected for your future of your life in the United States? Now, obviously ...

It really affected very much. When we came here the first time in United States when I saw a policeman on the street, I was very frightened. I just was afraid, so afraid that it's unbelievable, you know. It was a lot of sleepless nights, you know. To lose parents, to lose family, and to see what the German done to all parents, to all friends, to our uncles and aunts and you had to stay and watch the way they kill them, you know. Like we were in a camp and there was a few older people and kids was left. So they took them out and everybody had to go out and see the way they, they, they killed those people, you know. So, memories like that it's, it's...you can't forget. It's always with you.

And I noticed that you've kept up your Judaism here. Have you become more religious or...

The reason I kept up my Judaism, because of my wife. My wife was religious. I didn't care about religious. I didn't care. And then when the kids come, came, I had to keep up, just keep up that way because of the kids and my wife. That's the only reason and I never drove on *Shabbos*, never worked on *Shabbos*, never worked on any holidays, you know. I worked for a Jewish company and he said, "It's another holiday?"

So you did not ... Your business was always closed on the weekend?

Oh, yes. Yes. Any holidays, always closed, yeah. Never... I mean, if we had our meeting, the managers had a meeting and I supposed to be there, so the managers used to sit in for me, you know, for the buildings.

So you had someone to cover for you?

Right.

So do you feel that ... What does being an American mean to you? Do you ... Do most Americans take their freedom granted?

America means very much for me. I mean, they gave me opportunity to make for myself something, to accomplish a life - a good life. Which we brought up two kids. We sent them to the best universities, which I didn't have it, and America, I appreciate it very much. I think a lot of people take advantage of their freedom and it's the greatest country of all is America.

Well, good.

[End of interview]