

Active oleh

• ALAN ROSENBAUM

Wizened, venerable and appearing somewhat frail, Kurt Rothschild shuffles into his office with the aid of a walker and laboriously sits at his desk. Speaking slowly and carefully, Rothschild looks and sounds every bit of his 98 years, but once he lists his daily schedule, it becomes apparent that the pace and scope of his daily activities are, amazingly, those of a man half his age.

The diminutive nonagenarian rises each day at 6 a.m., attends morning services, studies Daf Yomi – the daily page of Talmud – and then heads to his office at World Mizrahi headquarters, where he works until 4:30 p.m., when he returns to his Jerusalem home where he lives with his wife Edith, 97.

Rothschild, who wears a large black kippah and matching black glasses, looks mild and unassuming, but the two ballpoint pens in the breast pocket of his suit jacket, as well as his harried secretary attest to the vast amounts of energy, determination and tenacity he still possesses. Rothschild spends most of his days helping and supporting Jewish educational institutions in Israel, Canada and the United States.

To understand what makes Kurt Rothschild so active, one must examine his beginnings. Born in Cologne, Germany, in 1920, Rothschild was raised in an Orthodox family, and attended the Moriah and Yavneh schools in Cologne. After the Nazis came to power in 1933, his father, who was a grain merchant, was forced out of business. In 1937, Kurt was sent to England by his parents to finish high school. Three years later, Rothschild, together with 5,000 other Jewish refugees from Germany, was deported from England by the British, who feared that German refugees living there would help the Nazis, should they invade. Half were sent to Australia, and half were shipped to Canada.

Kurt was sent to Canada, and after the internment period ended in late 1941, he was given the choice of returning to the UK or remaining in Canada. He opted to remain in Canada, and studied electrical engineering at Queens University in Kingston, Ontario, graduating in 1946. The training he received was vital to his future activities. He married in 1950 and worked in electrical contracting in Montreal for 12 years, moving to Toronto in 1958. There, he developed an electrical and mechanical contracting firm engaged in industrial and commercial construction from coast to coast.

In 1987, Rothschild retired from his business interests and devoted himself full time to Jewish communal and educational affairs. In 2011, at the age of 91, he and his wife, Edith, moved to Jerusalem, “in fulfillment of our life’s wishes.” Rothschild has had a home in Israel for many years and many family members live here, including children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Rothschild confesses that growing up as a child in 1920s Germany, he never thought that he would someday live in Jerusalem.

THROUGHOUT ROTHSCHILD’S life, he has always attempted to help others in need.

“As a youngster,” he says, “I belonged to the Ezra group in Germany, and then joined Mizrahi in the UK. In my subsequent involvement in Canada, I helped support Jewish institutional life and Torah education in Canada and in Israel.”

Rothschild supports numerous Jewish organizations and institutions in Israel and around the world, including Orot Israel College of Education, Bar-Ilan University, Shaare Zedek Hospital, Jerusalem College of Technology, Yad Sarah, Yeshivat HaKotel and other hesder yeshivot. He is president of the Canadian Zionist Federation and is a board member of Yeshiva University, the Jewish Federation of Toronto, and the United Israel Appeal of Toronto.

He tries to personally visit as many of the institutions he supports. Rothschild firmly believes in the classic Jewish concept of *Torah im Derech Eretz*, which sanctifies the relationship between Judaism and the modern world, and sees inherent worth in having a worldly occupation. Says Rothschild, “That’s how I grew up. That’s what I believe in most.”

Rothschild is far more than a major donor to large institutions. Throughout his life, he has given to individuals in need and distress.

“As it happens, I have assisted a few women to get a *get* [bill of divorce] from their husbands. It cost me a lot of money to engage lawyers and do it. I’ve been involved in many private situations where women were



KURT ROTHSCHILD, 98
FROM TORONTO, CANADA,
TO JERUSALEM, 2011

abused and had to fight hard to get a *get*.”

At the age of 98, Rothschild has a longer perspective on history than most, and has seen the triumphs and tragedies of the Jewish people over the past century. What are the challenges of today?

“Externally,” says Rothschild, “it is Iran and the Arab population surrounding Israel. It is both the renewed antisemitism in many countries and the assimilation, of particularly younger Jews, to abandon our heritage through intermarriage and secular life.”

Keeping true to his beliefs, Rothschild believes that the best way to counter assimilation is through education. But, he adds, “We need to make education pleasant and not enforced. People – particularly in our century – don’t know want to be forced into a straitjacket. If we can make education pleasant, it helps a lot.”

Recently, Orot College honored Rothschild on the occasion of his 98th birthday, and presented him with the institution’s Badge of Honor. At the event, Prof. Yuval Sinai, president of Orot College, said, “He has helped us immensely by setting up a scholarship fund for needy students as well as supporting our activities in vision and in deed, by developing Torah academia and advancing religious education for the next generations with love for the Torah, the nation of Israel and the land of Israel.”

Rothschild is determined to continue.

“We will try as long as the good Lord lets us. Some die early, and some die late. I happen to be the one who has lived the longest in the whole family.” When asked to explain his life’s credo, he pauses for a moment, then taps the desk with his hand, and says, “I strongly feel that we should contribute to society while we have the opportunity – which in my case was very strongly originated by my knowledge of the Holocaust – even though I was fortunate to live during those years in Canada. As survivors of that catastrophe to the Jewish people, we ought to be part of the continued future existence, most particularly, to assist the resettlement of Jews in the State of Israel and in assisting those in its development.”

Kurt Rothschild may be short of physical stature, but in his resolute activities on behalf of the Jewish people, he stands tall. ■

SPEAKING AT Orot College of Education, where which he received the Badge of Honor. (Sharon Chen)