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INTERVIEW

*Sir Sigmund Sternberg wins this year's
Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.*

Jewish Businessman Works for Religious Harmony

By Ron Scherer

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NEW YORK

IN 1986, when Pope John Paul II became the first pontiff in history to visit a synagogue, he turned to one of his escorts, Sir Sigmund Sternberg, and said, "Well, what do you think of my coming here?"

Replied Sir Sigmund, "It was wonderful, but you are 2,000 years too late." The pope chuckled - he and Sir Sigmund were friends.

Papal kidding aside, Sir Sigmund says the pope's visit, which he helped arrange, was the highlight of his own life. It was symbolic of everything he has tried to do for more than 25 years - end religious strife and foster reconciliation and dialogue.

Because of such efforts, Sir Sigmund, whose resume is filled with honors and accolades, received yesterday yet another award, the prestigious Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. The award includes a stipend of about \$1.23 million.

Sir Sigmund is an unusual recipient because he is not a man of the cloth or a theologian. He is a London-based Jewish businessman who made his fortune recycling metals and buying and selling real estate.

"He's a man of great wealth, but he has used it to promote peaceful understanding between peoples," says Rabbi Joseph Ehrenkranz, executive director of the Center for Christian-Jewish Understanding at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Conn.

"I'm someone who believes this interfaith work is a good investment because people come together and they have dialogue, get to know each other, and usually want to live in harmony and peace," he says. "The alternative is violence."

Since 1979, the vehicle for this dialogue has been the International Council of Christians and Jews, of which he is chairman of the executive committee.

Last year he established yet another vehicle, the Three Faiths Forum, which seeks to explore and develop the common ground of the religions that share Abraham as a common

ancestor. And he is planning yet another effort - an assembly of businesspeople, who regard themselves as believers in a religious ethic.

Many of his friends admire his enthusiasm for these causes because Sir Sigmund could easily be spending his winters tooling around the Mediterranean in a yacht.

"He's in it for the long haul. He could be doing other things," says Rabbi James Rudin, interreligious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee, a nonprofit group in New York. Acquiring assets, however, does not particularly interest Sir Sigmund. "I see so many unhappy rich people," he says.

Instead, he seems to get energy and enthusiasm from his projects. He was chairman of the Wallenberg Appeal Committee, which successfully petitioned for a monument commemorating Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who helped to smuggle thousands of Jews out of Hungary in 1944. Sir Sigmund has built the Sternberg Centre for Judaism, the largest Jewish cultural center in Europe. In 1976, he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II for his charity, political, and industrial services.

Currently, he is trying to get the Vatican to open its wartime



PARLIAMENT HILL STUDIO

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- Sir Sigmund Sternberg

files that relate to the Nazis and Jews. And he is trying to get money stolen by the Nazis and recently recovered in European banks back to surviving families of Holocaust victims.

What makes him remarkable is that he is doing this totally on his own. Sir Sigmund's independence is illustrated by a trip he

made in 1988 to the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) where Erich Honnecker, the country's Communist leader, had invited him to visit for a 50th anniversary commemoration of Kristallnacht, the night when practically every synagogue in Germany was destroyed.

Although most guests stayed at Mr. Honnecker's hunting lodge, Sir Sigmund insisted on staying in a hotel. And even though the East Germans were not happy about it, he crossed through Checkpoint Charlie to attend a similar event in Frankfurt.

That trip was also typical of how Sir Sigmund gets things done. He met with Honnecker and told him the GDR needed to erect a museum in the location of a bombed-out synagogue. He advised the Communist boss to begin talking to the Israelis. A year later Honnecker had done both. "It shows how dialogue works," Sir Sigmund says.

The Jewish businessman also advised Honnecker to tear down the Berlin Wall. Honnecker replied, "That wall won't come down in a thousand years." (It came down a year later.)

Sir Sigmund was curious why he was so successful with a man who had no qualms about shooting his own people as they tried to reach freedom. The British ambassador told him, "He thinks you are an important Jew and he wants Mrs. Thatcher (then prime minister) to come and visit East Germany."

The German history with the Jews is something that Sir Sigmund knows well from his own life.

Just days before World War II started, Sigmund, then 18 years old, fled his native Budapest for London. Once there he was classified a "friendly enemy alien" since Hungary was not at war with Britain, but was not an ally. With that classification, he was not allowed to get a job so he started his own business.

By 1942 there were reports that the Nazis

were murdering Jews. "You felt very bad about it but there was nothing you could do," says Sir Sigmund. As the Holocaust became known, however, it left a lasting impact on him.

"It made you very self-reliant, not trusting anyone, really, or even going along with what you are told," says his wife, Hazel, who married Sir Sigmund in 1970. The two operate as a team. During an interview, Sir Sigmund asks her to get newsletters and documents. She interrupts him to clarify points.

Mrs. Sternberg converted to Judaism to marry Sir Sigmund's cousin. After the cousin passed on, Sir Sigmund divorced his first wife and married Hazel, who was a social worker. "It made it easy on the children - they could keep the same name - Sternberg," she says with a laugh.

By the early 1970s, Sir Sigmund had become involved with the ICCJ. His checkbook helped the organization stabilize its precarious finances. The organization started to get high church officials together.

This was particularly welcome during the cold-war days. The ICCJ brought together religious leaders from the East and the West. "It was the first place I met Polish Catholic leaders," recalls Rudin.

The contacts also came in handy years later in 1988 when Sir Sigmund became involved in a dispute concerning the former Auschwitz concentration camp. A small group of Carmelite nuns had moved onto the periphery of the camp's grounds. This upset Jewish groups and resulted in a confrontation.

Enter Sir Sigmund. He met with Jozef Cardinal Glemp. "I just explained the importance of the site and explained it in a very delicate way that the Carmelites would just have to move," he says. With some help from the Vatican, Sir Sigmund's arguments won out.

Sir Sigmund says his years of negotiating business deals help him broker religious issues. He's learned that eating a meal with your adversary helps to smooth issues. "I learned in my business life that you have to get on with people, and when you get on with people, you usually get results," he says.

Sir Sigmund expects to keep getting those results. He's planning to spend the prize money on his charities. "It's a spur, not a retirement present," he concludes.



HISTORIC VISIT: Sir Sigmund Sternberg helped arrange Pope John Paul II's visit a synagogue in Rome in 1986. Sternberg says the occasion was the highlight of his life.