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## Philanthropist lands \$1 million prize

A Radnor group cited Sir Sigmund Sternberg for his tireless efforts to promote harmony among religions.

By Ralph Vigoda  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Finding ways to spend money has never been difficult for Sir Sigmund Sternberg.

"The problem," he said, "has been collecting it."

Yesterday, that problem got a whole lot easier.

At a news conference in New

York, Sternberg, 76, was awarded the \$1.23 million Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, the largest monetary award in the world for achievement in any field.

Funded by investment manager John M. Templeton through his Radnor-based Templeton Fund, the prize is given annually to the person deemed to have done the most

to advance the global understanding of God and spirituality.

Sternberg, a Hungarian-born Jew who moved to England as a teenager, more than fits that description. He helped not only to mediate a settlement over the placement of a Catholic convent near the Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland but also to bring about Vatican recognition of Israel in 1993.

A statement accompanying the prize said Sternberg has tirelessly promoted "cooperation, harmony and greater understanding among the world's religions and, despite the enormity of that challenge, has achieved unqualified successes."

Sternberg pledged to use the money to further the work of the Sternberg Charitable Foundation, which he created in 1968. "What to do with it is very simple for me," Sternberg said in a telephone interview.

He will receive the prize from Prince Philip at a private ceremony at Buckingham Palace in May. A public ceremony will be held at the United Nations on June 26.

The first award was given to Mother Teresa in 1973. Other recipients include Billy Graham and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

Sternberg has spent much of his life trying to foster dialogue among religions. The bulk of his work has been done out of the limelight, although it sometimes has produced highly publicized events.

In 1986 in Rome, for instance, Sternberg accompanied Pope John Paul II on a visit to a synagogue, a first for a pope.

"I must tell you that when he left the synagogue, he asked me what I thought about it," Sternberg said in accented English. "I said it was a wonderful occasion, but it was 2,000 years too late. I said, 'If you had come 2,000 years earlier, millions and millions of people would have been saved.' He just smiled."

His current project is the Three Faiths Forum, which explores ways that Judaism, Islam and Christianity can find common ground.

Sternberg spent his youth in Budapest, but quota restrictions against Jews prevented him from attending the University of Budapest.

Those lessons of anti-Semitism 60 years ago, he said, set him on the path that led to yesterday's award.

"In the 1930s, to grow up a Jew was not a convenient situation," he said. "At school I heard from other students how the Jews had killed Jesus. It was not a good way to start life, alienated from other religions."

"It came to me that something would have to be done about it."

He went to London to go to school, but the outbreak of war dashed that

plan. Instead, Sternberg joined the Civil Defence Corps part-time and became engaged in the business of recycling and smelting metals under Britain's war-time Essential Works Order. He learned enough to become established in the metal-recovery industry at war's end.

In the last 35 years, he became a commercial accountant, established a realty and development company, and, in 1986, began a computer software firm.

He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in 1976.

In 1985, he became one of the few Jews ever to be made a papal knight when he was named a Knight Commander of the Pontifical and Equestrian Order of St. Gregory the Great.

In 1984, a small group of Carmelite nuns established a convent at the perimeter of Auschwitz, a Nazi concentration camp. Although the nuns said they were there to pray for death-camp victims, Jews — and some Catholics — protested that it was an insensitive intrusion into an area indelibly connected to the Holocaust.

In numerous meetings with Catholics, Jews and Polish leaders, Sternberg forged an agreement to have the convent moved to an interfaith center nearby.

"Always my idea is to come sit down and talk with each other," Sternberg said.

Although he doubts he will see complete peace among faiths in his lifetime, Sternberg is adamant that progress has been made.

"Faiths do get together to talk, to exchange ideas" in ways that never used to happen, he said.

"There are frustrations, all the time. But that is part of the job. In business, one is used to rejections, to disappointments. That's part of the game. But one mustn't give up."



Sir Sigmund Sternberg will receive the award in May in London.