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## Tycoon in business of building a new world

*Ruth Gledhill learns of the passion for reconciliation that has driven Sir Sigmund since his childhood in Hungary*



Passionate about religious dialogue, Sir Sigmund believes that most of the world's current problems could be solved if the barriers could come down and the different religions communicate more effectively. "Without dialogue, it is civil war," he said. "That's what happened in the former Yugoslavia. They did not talk to each other."

But he believes that talking alone is not enough. "Religious enterprises are usually full of theologians and people who are inclined to talk a great deal. I believe in action."

As one of the most prolific founders of interfaith bodies, business concerns, foundations, trusts and charities, he has collected awards and honours as others amass stamps. In an exclusive interview with *The Times*, Sir Sigmund, known as Siggy to his friends, described how, as a child in Hungary, he became interested in interfaith work.

"There was no mixing between Christians and Jews and I thought that was absolutely wrong. It was a Roman Catholic country and we lived very near the basilica in Budapest. I remember as a child how I would have very much liked to go inside it. It was such a beautiful building."

It was only as an adult that he was able to fulfil his dream. "Every time I go to Hungary, I make a point of going inside the basilica. Miraculously, it escaped the bombing in the war."

While he recalls no anti-semitism towards himself or his family as Nazism took hold throughout Europe, he heard the occasional insult against Jews. "It concerned me that people were saying the Jews killed Jesus Christ, because I knew that could not have been possible."

He recalls the satisfaction he felt in 1965 when the Vatican began to lay to rest the "deicide" heresy with its document *Nostra Aetate*, which argued that the crucifixion of Christ "cannot be blamed on all the Jews then living, without distinction, nor upon the Jews of today".

Sir Sigmund came from a wealthy family in the antiques business. He suffered a devastating loss at 14, when his father died. Prevented by quota restrictions on Jews from entering Budapest University, he was in Britain to study

when war broke out. "I was classified a friendly enemy alien. My permit to stay was given on condition that I did not take any employment, paid or unpaid. So I was driven to work on my own and for myself." Thus were laid the foundations of his business career.

By the end of the war he was established in the metal recovery industry. He became a member of the London Metal Exchange, and in 1947 was naturalised as a British citizen.

Two years later he married his first wife, Ruth Schiff, and they went on to have a son and daughter before their divorce. He created the Sternberg Charitable Foundation and became a leading benefactor.

He left the Orthodox community—he had found himself too busy to take days off work for the major festivals—and became a member of the Board of Deputies of British Jews.

He remarried, to Hazel Everett Jones, a bereavement counsellor, became chairman of a property company and a Lloyds underwriter, and was knighted in 1976.

He considers one of his greatest achievements not the raising of millions of pounds for charity or the running of numerous successful businesses, but resolving the dispute that followed when a small group of Carmelite nuns established a convent at the perimeter of the Auschwitz death camp in 1985.

The project threatened a deep rift between Catholics and Jews. Sir Sigmund helped to negotiate the agreement for the nuns' withdrawal. "I am really proud of that, because it was an explosive situation."

In 1986 he set up and became chairman of ISYS, a computer software company. His one "unrequited passion" is to bring about a reconciliation between business and religion. "It is, after all, in the total interest of the businessman that the society in which he lives, in which he trades, in which he raises his family, is a stable society. It is therefore incumbent upon him to make his contribution to that society."

His aim is to bring together businessmen from around the world "to search together for an ethic... which would bring a whole new set of values to the world of commerce and industry."