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STEINER
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C.L. Well, let's start a little bit to talk about yourself, about your background. You were from an assimilated Jewish family.

S. That's right.

C.L. And did you grow this beard out of religious reasons?

S. Here? No, not for religious reasons, just for fun.

C.L. Can you tell me a little about yourself, about your family?

S. Back from Czechoslovakia?

C.L. Yes.

S. I came from Czechoslovakia by - I don't know if you are interested from my birth, or only....

C.L. No, no.

S. So maybe the only interesting thing for you is my life in Brno, because there were the whole starting of the holocaust and the German occupation started. I was an architect in Brno and built quite a few homes for Jewish clients. My first encounter with the Germans was in connection with my buildings, and basically that saved my life because the Consul General from Belgium, Mr Haecht, was building

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apartment houses and I was the architect for it. The money for paying all the different bills he put in escrow, and only I had the right to sign the cheques for payments. Because my father-in-law, who was in the Jewish Agency, was a leading man in the Jewish Agency in Czechoslovakia, because he was at that time in London, they came and took me into prison. That was the first time I was in prison there

C.L. Who took you to prison?

S. The Germans, because they came to ask where my father-in-law was, what we were doing, they were pretty sure we had money hidden and so on.

Another part of the German department from the Gestapo suddenly asked for my release because the homes could not be paid for without my signature. So I was one of the few people who, instead of going to Spilbag (and from Spilbag there was deportation to Poland at that time) they took me out of prison.

C.L. That was when?

S. In 39.

C.L. After the occupation?

S. After the Czech occupation. And the leader of the department in charge of the buildings told me very frankly that immediately after I had paid the last bill, because I had a Slovak passport and not a Czech passport, he told me I should immediately be prepared, the moment I had paid the last bill for the house, to get out of Brno because the Gestapo had already planned that the very moment everything was

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finished and paid they would come and pick me up, and then I would go back again to prison. That was my first encounter with the Germans - Bericali - and I didn't understand why he helped me, so I asked him(?) and he said "Certain things we have to do and certain things we can do, so I want to show my humanity that I am giving you a last chance to get out of here."(?).....I immediately went with my family - my wife and son - to the railroad and sent the last cheque for this house from the railroad station and at the same time we went to Bratislava. That is how I came to Bratislava. A few days later we received a letter from my mother-in-law, who had stayed in Brno, that the Gestapo had come and asked for me.

- C.L. To search you?
 - S. To search me. But at that time I was already in Bratislava.
 - C.L. How old were you at the time?
 - S. I beg your pardon?
 - C.L. How old were you at the time?
 - S. I think I was 30 years old.
 - C.L. And you were already a well-known architect?
 - S. That's right.
- After I came back to Bratislava, I think I told you I was editing an art magazine, and my friend with whom I edited this magazine was in Bratislava, architect Szörny(?). After I came back I spent a

year with him in his office, working with him and editing this newspaper, called 'Forum'. In 1940, '41, the time that 'UJ' was established...

C.L. 'UJ' is the Judenrat?

S. The Judenrat, yes...

C.L. What is the name in Czech?

S. But at the time I came it was not yet. The Judenrat was established in Slovakia I think in '40 or '41. At that time I was asked to come and join them and work there in the 'Bauabteilung' as an architect. So that is basically the short story of how I came in contact with... from Erno to Bratislava and from Bratislava, being an architect, to being in the UJ, that was the Judenrat in Bratislava.

C.L. What is the name in Czech or Slovak of the UJ?

S. Ustinya Jekov(?)

C.L. Which means exactly?

S. Jewish Centre - centre of the Jews.

C.L. And did you enter the Judenrat immediately? I didn't understand.

S. No, I didn't enter the Judenrat. I entered the special department, the so-called 'Bauabteilung', and through the Bauabteilung I came in contact with the State Resort Places, and I was for quite a few years the architect and planner for the State Resort Places...

C.L. State Resort Places?

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- S. Yes, the State Resort places. Why I mention this is because that was very important for the establishing of the work camps and getting jobs for the work camps, which I was in charge of. That was my first activity in the Judenrat.
- C.L. I don't understand very well. Why was there a 'Bauabteilung' - let's say a Building Abteilung - in the Judenrat? Why did they need this?
- S. Because in '41 they started to do the concentration of the Jews. For the concentration they selected 3 places - Seret, Nova Raki, and Visnya (?). It was necessary to build them up, because in Visnya there were facilities already, but in Seret and Nova Raki there were only very primitive facilities. They asked me to go out. Dr Kossow and Petya, who were the leaders in this whole project on the Slovak side, to look at these places and look into what type of building and remodelling was necessary there. That was how I came in connection with the UJ and the Slovak people who were in charge.
- C.L. What kind of buildings did you build in the camps? Because they were concentration camps.
- S. It was concentration camps, but at that time we didn't know what kind of concentration camps they were going to be. We just knew that some of the... In every town where the Germans had come and occupied

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or influenced, the first thing was that they took the Jews out of economic life. Now the question was what should be done with those who had been taken out of economic life? Firstly we were told that they would go into these camps. We had no idea that it was a concentration for deportation; we thought that it was a concentration for work.

I don't know whether you know about these things, but at that time Czala Gross, who was mentioned very often as a representative of the Orthodoxy, was with the Socoso, and Czala Gross gave me the authorization to go out and be helpful and build up these camps.

Having this connection, I want to mention it because in the whole fight against deportations, later on the work camps had a very important role, because

I proposed to the Slovaks: "Instead of deportation, why don't you leave all the Jews who are working in the Slovak work camps?" At that time we knew it was better to stay in Slovakia than to go anywhere, whether it was Poland or Germany or anywhere. It was

my idea, and I think we had already ^{had been} found out, that those who worked there, in Slovak we used to say 'dimeka', the exceptions, and it was agreed with

Dr Kossow, who was one of the most important Slovak politicians immediately after the Minister President. Tuka was Minister-President, and Dr Kossow was his so-called Chef of Presidium. But

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he was one of the most important, most influential Slovak politicians, and Czala Gross had contact with him. Gross was in charge of this building up of the concentration camps, and this is how I came to work with Czala Gross in the beginning....

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S. I would very much like to say a few words about the Slovak work camps, because my discussions with Dr Kossow and Petyu, who was below Dr Kossow but was really in charge of the day-to-day activities of the camp and preparing it; I convinced them that they should let us, parallel with the concentration for deportation, they should let us do a concentration for work. All those who went into the so-called working part of it were to be exempt from deportation. Dr Kossow was willing to do it, and after that promise came from him we started to organise part of the work camps for real work camps - not for concentration camps. The understanding between us and the Slovaks was that in a period of 3 months we must have enough work to be self-supporting, because they were not willing to pay anything for the work camps. I made the promise without even knowing whether we were going to be successful or not, and I promised it.

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That was the first time I got together with Gizi Fleischmann and Dr Neumann.

C.L. But all this was much later.

S. No, that was the beginning. That was even before deportation started, and that is exactly why I want to mention it, because we already, even before deportation and before we knew what was going on, we had somehow the bad feeling that it was better to stay in Slovakia and not to get out. It was necessary to find some ways... What could we submit to the Slovaks to tell them "Please, leave them here, it is better for Slovakia to have them here than to send them out"? Especially because at the same time I remember the Germans asked the Slovak Government for around 20 000 Slovak workers. The Slovak Government said "Instead of giving you Slovak workers we are going to give you 20 000 Jewish workers." I heard about this, and it was one of the reasons that we knew that the danger was here so we had to do something. That was the idea, and Dr Neumann and Gizi Fleischmann supported the idea. Schalabross was very much against it, and Schepersczy very much against it too, but Gizi Fleischmann and Dr Winterstein too, and Neumann and myself, we decided we were going to give it a try. There was a good friend of ours, another Zionist, Kosnianski, by chance was the head of the so-called , a big building

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concern, and they needed urgently ^{for} 100 new homes, 100 wooden stairs. I told Kosnianski to give us this job, "and I am going to India" to organise for you a big cabinet and workshop where we can produce these stairs."

C.L. Ok, we will come back to this but now we will go in order. Could we say that you yourself were a member of the Jewish Centre, the Judenrat?

S. Not the Judenrat, because the Judenrat was divided into different departments and my 'Bauabteilung' was part of a department of which Czala Gross was head. I became later head of this department, I think in the beginning of '42.

C.L. So can we say that at the beginning of '42 you were a member of the Slovak Judenrat?

S. That is correct.

C.L. Why did they appoint you? Because you were extremely young.

S. I think it was basically because of my professional background, architecture, and they knew that I had very good entrance to even very important Slovak people, like Kossow and the State Resort places directors. Even before that happened I organised in the Bauabteilung an architecture Abteilung, where I put all the Jewish architects and engineers who had already been put out because of the economic dislocation. I organised in the framework of UJ an architects' office, and this office worked for the

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State Resort Places. Through that I had a very good umbrella in the HQ, in that I could go to certain high Slovak positions because I always had the excuse that as an architect for the State Resort Places must go to Mr. So-and-so to discuss something.

C.L. But at the time you were a member of the Judenrat, you were working for the Slovaks too? You were building for them?

S. I was building, I was planning the development of the Slovak State Resort Places...

C.L. Can you explain what these State Resort Places are?

S. The State Resort Places are, for instance, the Golden Coast in France. State Resort Places are places where you go for recreation, partly in the High Tatras and partly in Szliadz(?)..

C.L. But why the need for a Jewish architect at the time, because the Jewish laws against the Jews were already enforced?

S. That is partly what I call my 'Rettungsaktion' even before deportation started. I was working in Piest'any with Dr Szörny(?), with whom I was working before I entered the UJ. Through architect Szörny and Dr Winter, who was the owner of this resort place, I had again connections with different other directors of the State resort places, and I proposed to them: Here is a group of skilful, fine architects who are without work. Why don't you let

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us do the work for the State resort places for you; it will be much cheaper for you than with Slovak architects. Let us work for you." And I started to work for them in Piest'any. It was very successful. And then slowly, slowly we had to increase it; instead of only Piest'any I became the architect for Tatras Kalonnice(?), Szlepske Pressow(?) and quite a few other resort places. Constantly I took all the Jewish architects who had been out of work into that office. That was our first cooperation with the Slovaks, that we could show them how much better it was for the Slovaks that they should keep us here working for Slovakia instead of being sent out to Germany to work for the Germans.

C.L. Did it last a long time?

S. It lasted till the last moment. We worked for the State resort places constantly; for instance this cabinet shop in Seret worked for the State resort places constantly, and that was one of our strongest parts. I think you know that making furniture, designing furniture was an important part of bribing: Dr Wasek, for instance, even Minister Mach received... his home furnished, designed by our Jewish Bauabteilung by our architects, myself and some others, and in Seret it was producing chairs(?).

C.L. This means you had a position of force?

S. Correct. And that gave us not only a position of force, but also the possibility to negotiate and be in intimate contact with some very important Slovak

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positions.

C.L. And when you were appointed member of the Judenrat, did you participate in the meetings of the Judenrat?

S. Oh yes, sure.

C.L. All the meetings?

S. Not all the meetings. Because quite a few, especially under Dr Schepersczy(?) were ^{lay unit, mostly and hearing} (?) (inaudible)...

C.L. Why? This was the second head of the Judenrat.

S. That was the second head. First of all because that is how our so-called working group started.

Schepersczy was a yes-man. Everything the UFU, the

' , the Slovak part... the head of

the UFU was the head of the UJ too. Everything the

head of this Slovak UFU said, Schepersczy immediately

followed up, together with Hochberg. We didn't like

this attitude, we saw that all the time next to the

Negativum there must be some Positivums too. Because

we didn't like it we started to meet in Gizi

Fleischmann's office - Dr Winterstein, Dr Neumann

and myself.

C.L. But all these people, Gizi Fleischmann, Dr Neumann were members of the Judenrat?

S. Sure. And after the Judenrat meetings - very often we didn't even go because we didn't want to be part of the 'Yes Yes Yes' and the negative attitude - we got together and started to think about what else we could do. The decision at that time was that one

