

Steiner, Andrew
RG-50.165*0113
Two Audio Tapes
In English

Abstract

Andrew Steiner was born in Dunajská Streda, Czechoslovakia in 1908. He had a younger brother and sister who lived in Palestine. When the war broke out he was 31 years old and intended to stay and work in Bratislava throughout the war. He specialized in architecture and wanted to establish his practice there. He was excluded from deportations because his business was important for the future of Czechoslovakia (?).

He organized three labor camps in Slovakia that were for Slovaks. One was developed after he approached a noted Slovak personality and asked him why Jews were being deported when work camps could be created. Because so many people were in need of furniture, he organized a furniture factory where the Jews could work and be exempt from deportation.

Andrew constantly lived in danger because the Nazis knew about his underground activities in Slovakia. He believed that there should be no further deportations of Slovak Jews and that the officials should agree to exempt those Jews in the work camps. He paid the officials off with about \$50,000.

After the war, Andrew had the choice to go to the United States or to Israel and help establish the state. He chose to go to America. From 1948 through early 1950 he was in Cuba because he had to wait for his visa to the United States. While in Cuba, he continued his profession and worked with one of the country's leading architects. Because he was so successful, the Cuban architects wanted him to stay there and join them.

Andrew came to the United States in 1950 on a boat from Havana to Miami. He eventually settled in Atlanta, where he met his wife and started a family. In Atlanta he designed the campuses of Georgia State and Emory Universities and served as the chairman of two professional urban design committees. Although he has plenty of contacts with the Jewish community, he is not very religious. He designed a synagogue in Atlanta, and his family joined it, but when their membership expired they chose not to renew it.

Andrew believes that people have to analyze mistakes of the past so that they do not repeat them in the future. Of all the things he achieved in his life, Andrew is most proud of his work for the Jewish community. His humane achievements as part of the Labor Battalion in Slovakia are above anything else he achieved in his life.

Oral History

Tape 1, Side A

00:00:01 Andrew Steiner was born in Dunajská Streda, Czechoslovakia in 1908. The war broke out when he was 31 years old. He intended to stay in Czechoslovakia for the duration of the war.

00:00:17 He worked before and during the war in Bratislava, where he intended to stay to establish his practice. He had seen the Communist Party use controversial

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means to change Czechoslovakia from a democracy. A friend told him that there were always reports about him. He gave him good advice, telling him to get out as fast as he could. If he criticized what the government was doing, he would be put in jail.

- 00:00:28** Andrew took his friend's advice and decided to get out of the country. For him it was easier to get out because his wife's family was in the United States. He also had papers, for before the war broke out he had tried to immigrate to the United States. He asked to leave with his papers in hand.
- 00:00:34** Andrew was not in a camp during the war. He was in Brno and then in Bratislava working in the underground. He managed to avoid deportation.. He had a background in and specialized in architecture. He helped design and plan campuses and other places in Czechoslovakia, and he received an income based on this specialty. Because he was seen as important for the future of Czechoslovakia, he was not deported.
- 00:00:50** Andrew Steiner now lives in a beautiful area of Atlanta. He designed the campuses of Georgia State University and Emory University. He specializes in university and campus designs as a professional architect.
- 00:01:21** Most of Andrew's colleagues died in Auschwitz. Among those who did not survive were his own parents. Rabbi Weissmandel, an acquaintance of his, escaped because he was able to saw through the lock on the boxcar door and jumped from the train in Bratislava. He never saw his pregnant wife or five children again because they had stayed on the train. Weissmandel always accused Jewish organizations for not having done enough to save the six million Jews.
- 00:01:33** There was a plan called the "Europa"; it was a plan to ransom the lives of Jews for money.
- 00:01:40** When a Nazi officer was facing trial at Nuremberg, Andrew testified against him, and another officer was hanged based on his testimony. This information was featured in an article that appeared on Tuesday, September 20, 1988 in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. The article was written by Jim Auchmuty and was titled "Deals with the Devil: Ransom Plan as a Footnote to the Holocaust."
- 00:01:49** He had a younger brother and sister in Israel. His brother lived in Beersheba, and his sister lived in Nahariya. His brother came on Aliya Bet in 1939, and his sister came in 1940.
- 00:01:54** The Nazis knew about the underground's activities because they were in constant connection with one of their officers in Slovakia. He had a feeling that if he was deported, he would die. He did not know if he would be accepted as a contact or be sent to Poland. There was a time that the Nazi officer with whom he had connections was shouting at him. Andrew told him that if he did not sit down he would not talk with him.

- 00:01:67** Andrew was constantly living in danger. He felt that “one just gets accustomed to danger in the same way one would during peaceful times.”
- 00:01:71** The Jewish community did not ask Andrew personally to smuggle out letters for them or do any other risky activities. There were people working for the underground who contacted the consuls in Switzerland and Bucharest. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee would constantly contact them. Groups from Israel were also in contact with them. The underground had paid people to smuggle out letters and bring in money. They were very well organized.
- 00:01:82** He organized three camps in Slovakia that were for Slovaks. As an architect he had access to the highest Slovak personalities like Dr. Koslow, who was considered the most important man. Andrew approached him one day and asked him why they should deport Jews when work camps for those Jews could be organized in Czechoslovakia. People were in constant need of furniture, so he suggested that they organize a first-class furniture factory in which these Jews could work. He was given approval and tried this idea out. He organized it so that those in the work camps would be exempt from deportation. He calls this his “saving action” that saved people from deportation while he got workers.
- 00:02:02** He believed that there should not be further deportation of Slovakia’s Jews and that officials should agree that those in work camps were exempt. He paid them off with about \$50,000. The Nazis were saving Jewish lives for dollars.
- 00:02:23** He wondered why the Nazis could not save all of the Jews by being bought out if he could do it. This idea directly contradicted Hitler’s plans for the Final Solution.
- 00:02:33** He asked the Nazi officer to submit his plans to his superiors, Heisman and Himmler, who both knew about his ideas.
- 00:02:36** There was some similarity between what he and Kastner did. He was transferred to Budapest and was asked to work with the Orthodox representative. The Hungarian Jews knew about the plan.
- 00:02:49** Andrew’s wife went against his efforts. Men were always notified where the Nazis stood and when they could start negotiations to bring the deportations to a conclusion.
- 00:02:59** There was a lack of cooperation between the Slovak and Hungarian groups of Jews. Slovaks were mostly represented by Orthodox Jews. However, with the Hungarians, there was a complete lack of cooperation in Budapest and therefore a lack of success in Hungary.
- 00:02:82** Kastner started to do something for friends and for leading Zionists.

He distinguished between them who should be saved and who should not. It was decided not to extend his plan to the larger European community. He talks about Bauer and the views of other members.

- 00:03:07** Many claim the Holocaust helped to establish Israel.
- 00:03:22** There is a question of whether it was worth the loss of so many lives. He had the option of going to the United States or to Israel and helping to establish the state. He is happy he chose to go to the United States.
- 00:03:42** He was a professional architect, but questioned whether he should remain one and go to the United States or go to Israel and become a politician. He decided to build factories in America.
- 00:03:62** It was a wonderful feeling to know he had people who relied on him in his success story of saving 3,000 people. He was very happy that he was able to establish himself professionally again.
- 00:03:80** His wife was thirty-two when she came to the United States. His first wife died a few years before the recording. From 1945 to 1948 he was still in Czechoslovakia but left Europe after the Communists took over. From 1948 until mid 1950, he was in Cuba because he had to wait for his visa to America. He continued to work in his profession as an architect in Cuba.
- 00:04:03** He worked with one of the leading architects in Cuba, Dominguez. Because he was so successful, Dominguez and other architects wanted him to stay in Cuba and join them permanently.
- 00:04:13** Andrew did not like the gap between the rich and the poor in Cuba and knew that something was bound to go wrong very soon. While in Cuba he was in charge of the design and planning of the president's summer house.
- 00:04:24** He liked Cuba as a professional, but based on his experience with what went on in Europe, he did not like the disparity between the rich and the poor.
- 00:04:36** Within a decade after leaving Cuba, Castro took over. He received a letter a few years after Castro's takeover from a Cuban colleague which contained a \$1,000 check in it and a note that read, "Andrew, you were right."
- 00:04:50** He talks about democracy and Communism in Czechoslovakia.
- 00:04:57** He came to the United States in 1950 by boat from Havana to Miami.
- 00:04:76** He met a man in a hotel who said he was an architect from Houston, and he told Andrew that there was no better place to start than in Houston. He also met an architect from Atlanta in Havana, so he went to Atlanta when he visited

his wife's sister and ended up staying there.

00:05:10 He traveled from Miami to Atlanta.

00:05:31 His in-laws first lived in New York but moved to Atlanta when the husband got a job. Andrew's father-in-law lived in New York City and suggested that Andrew start in Atlanta because New York was a huge city with lots of pushing and hard work.

00:05:56 After a few years in Atlanta, Andrew was able to achieve anything he wanted. While he was there, Atlanta started to grow into a major American city.

Tape 1, Side B

00:00:01 Andrew had seen many countries, but he did not like the hatred between whites and blacks in America. He did not understand segregation, and it disturbed him. America was a free land, and if you worked hard you could achieve anything.

00:00:10 He made up his mind that he would associate with the community through urban design. He was a longtime member of Committee International, an organization that promoted urban design and planning in Europe as well as in the United States.

00:00:20 Andrew was the chairman of two professional urban design committees for ten years.

00:00:30 He does not have a preference for a certain kind of architecture, but the balance between work and recreation was very important to him, and he would rather build a recreation center than a professional building. He then talks about the recreation areas in Georgia.

00:00:49 He thinks Jews work too hard, but time is a factor.

00:00:53 He was after a reputation and not so much after money. He took big jobs, such as designing master plans for universities.

00:00:60 He is much more invested in work with social consciousness. The purpose of work is not for the individual but for the community.

00:00:68 He has had plenty of contacts within the Jewish community. He designed a synagogue in Atlanta. However, he is not a very religious man and does not feel very comfortable in a synagogue. After his membership at the synagogue expired, he chose not to renew it.

00:00:79 Andrew's family joined the synagogue for social contact. In terms of religion, he is very secular. He really enjoyed designing the synagogue and became intimate with many of the Jewish leaders there.

- 00:00:90** For him, the synagogue was a social network. He really has no feeling for religion. He has two sons. One lives in Louisiana while the other lives in Atlanta.
- 00:01:02** His grandchildren are members of the congregation and the young Jewish generation. Both sons are members of synagogues, and one belongs to a Conservative congregation.
- 00:01:12** His grandson will have a Bar Mitzvah in a synagogue.
- 00:01:15** He is not really active in other facets of the Jewish community, but does belong to the Jewish Federation.
- 00:01:28** He thinks the past should be left alone and that people should look at the problems they have in the present and look to the future. Young people and children should be educated on how to co-exist.
- 00:01:42** Andrew lost his parents during the war.
- 00:01:48** The Holocaust is not only Jewish but part of World War Two. Russians perished and millions of non-Jews perished.
- 00:01:58** Anti-Semitism was widespread all over Europe.
- 00:01:62** Andrew thinks that what happened in Europe could happen in the United States.
- 00:01:66** If Americans did not have blacks to hate, they could very well switch over to hating the Jews. Anti-Semitism is very widespread in the United States.
- 00:01:72** Out of about 220 employees in Andrew's organization, there were only two or three Jews. There was tolerance, but if you scratched the surface, there was much of Baptist-oriented anti-Jewish hate.
- 00:01:91** He went into many different communities in his work as a planner. He found anti-Semitism in some cross-sections of the intelligentsia.
- 00:02:02** The only thing that would get rid of religious hate is to get rid of religion.
- 00:02:10** There are two big troublemakers: religious hatred and national hatred.
- 00:02:14** Andrew has high moral and ethical standards not based on religion. They come from his experience at home and his education.
- 00:02:40** He talks about how moral and ethical behavior is not based on religion. One can achieve high moral standards and a civilized life without religion.

- 00:02:64** Americans do not understand what really happened during the Holocaust.
- 00:02:76** Because it was irrelevant to Americans at the time, they did not think it really applied to them.
- 00:02:97** He rarely ever talks about the Holocaust because he looks to the future.
- 00:03:31** He insists that somehow we have to get over hate.
- 00:03:51** Napoleon killed many people, but people learn about him as a hero.
- 00:03:62** He states that we must analyze mistakes in the past so that we do not repeat them in the future. He rejects a preoccupation and focus on the past.
- 00:03:91** Andrew attributes his success in Cuba and in the United States to his ability to put the past behind him.
- 00:04:00** His son in Louisiana is married to a non-Jewish wife. He had no objection to his son marrying her.
- 00:04:19** He feels comfortable with Jews and feels the closest to them. He had a wonderful feeling when he arrived in Israel.
- 00:04:55** The fact that Israel is an independent country makes him feel very comfortable as a Jew.
- 00:04:96** He does not look at European-born Jews differently than those who live in America. He earnestly helped the black community in Atlanta and discovered that blacks hate whites just as much as whites hate blacks. There was also a degree of anti-Semitism in the black community.
- 00:05:27** He does not feel blacks hate Jews more than other whites.
- 00:05:51** It may be a Jewish trait to care about and care for people who have suffered. Some blacks appreciate what he did for them.

Tape 2, Side A

- 00:00:08** Many Hungarians looked at Slovaks the same way as whites look at blacks in the United States. National hate was very apparent.
- 00:00:15** He talks about a democratic experience that he had and how one man's strong spirituality eliminated hatred.
- 00:00:20** Based on that experience he came to Cuba. In Cuba, whites, mulattos, and blacks lived together. They never experienced that type of hatred.

- 00:00:22** In Cuba, his bosses Don Castro and Dominguez were both Catholic but they were his friends. If that type of attitude is possible in one country, there does not have to be such a crass hatred.
- 00:00:35** In Andrew's opinion, the only American leaders of both the past and present that have had forward-looking and progressive views were Franklin D. Roosevelt and John Kennedy. If he had been around longer, Kennedy would have had a bigger influence on young people.
- 00:00:45** He highlights Roosevelt's achievements, influence on world matters, and great importance during World War Two. He does not consider it a big failure that Roosevelt did not help the Jews as much as he had wanted.
- 00:00:51** He said that one cannot look at world history only from Jewish eyes. His priority is not the Jewish perspective of world history.
- 00:00:59** He and his wife are among the few of their Jewish friends who have just as many intimate non-Jewish friends as Jewish ones. Just as many non-Jews are part of their social life as there are Jews.
- 00:01:04** Of his four best friends right now, two are Jewish and two are not. He is egalitarian, and his wife has the same attitude. She has two best friends who are not Jewish and two that are. She was born in America and was affiliated with a synagogue in the past.
- 00:01:10** While working, listening to classical music was one of his main hobbies. He has more than a thousand records. His main hobbies are reading, listening to classical music, and making art. He reads every day for at least two hours and listens to one or two hours of classical music. Five o'clock is his "happy hour," when he takes a drink and listens to classical music for an hour. After dinner, from eight until nine o'clock he listens to more music and has a black or Turkish coffee. For him it is one of the most important parts of the day. Then he reads books by Bernard Malamud and literature by other Jewish-American writers. He reads through every book they had ever written to see the characters of the writers. He has kept this up for the past two years.
- 00:01:29** After the article in the newspaper was published about him, he received a number of telephone calls from Jews who read it, appreciated it, and wanted to get together with him. Despite this, he wants to get away from it as much as he can. He was not interested to get together with people and does not know why.
- 00:01:42** He wants to assimilate and get away from all those things. He never went back to Bratislava.
- 00:01:86** He thinks that his success in Atlanta professionally, socially, and family-wise

is due to the fact that he could distance himself from everything having to do with the Holocaust.

- 00:01:92** He thinks of himself as a very optimistic person but is pessimistic about the future. The future worries him.
- 00:02:00** If the evolution towards a better future took a thousand years, it would be okay with him.
- 00:02:07** If he were living in Israel, and the Jews there were threatened with annihilation, he would do the same thing there as he did in Czechoslovakia. He would try to find Arabs he could influence so that both Arabs and Jews could work together toward a better future. He would work on a solution so that the Arabs and Israelis would live together in peace.
- 00:02:16** He says that peace must happen. There are pessimists who see that another Holocaust will be needed before we are able to compromise.
- 00:02:27** Of all the things he has achieved, he is most proud of his work for the Jewish community. The human to human achievement of the working crew in Slovakia is above anything else.
- 00:02:32** Everybody raises children, but not everybody has the opportunity to do what he did in Slovakia.
- 00:02:37** The thing he is least proud of is divorcing his first wife. He was a big believer that as a human being, to live with one person for sixty years is quite something. No human being can live with another so long in harmony. He came to the conclusion that every human being should marry three times in their life. Once around age twenty-five, again after age fifty, and again after age seventy-five. He believes that twenty-five years is a time frame when human beings can live in harmony and give each other joy. After that, something goes wrong. After his first marriage, he found someone else he was in love with. But when he looks back and sees what he did to his family and what he did to his two sons, he thinks he may have done the right thing for himself but overall he did not.
- 00:02:69** He was twenty-six when he was first married. One son was born in Czechoslovakia while the other was born in Cuba. After the divorce, he maintained contact with his first wife.
- 00:02:87** His advice is to be an optimist in one's overall attitude. He encourages people to be active in something you do professionally that fulfills you and that you like to do. He only really remembers the beautiful part of his life and the nice experiences because he was in a profession he loved. He woke up in the morning, went to the office, and would love every minute of it up until he left and went home. He spent the majority of his hours doing something he loved to do. The

most important life experience to him is what one does with the whole day professionally.

- 00:03:05** One son was in the military and is now retired. His other son is an accountant. The one in the military married a non-Jewish girl while the accountant married within the faith.
- 00:03:34** He takes vacations two or three times a year. He mostly goes to Europe because his wife is in love with Europe, but he never went back to Bratislava. He is afraid and does not know how he would react if he met somebody he knew who was involved with anti-Jewish activities.
- 00:03:41** Andrew is afraid Bratislava would bring back the ugly part of his life. He is very glad he distances himself from that part of his life and believes he is better off for doing so.
- 00:03:61** He went to Israel to visit his brother and sister. His siblings are the better part of his past in Czechoslovakia. They had come on Aliyah Bet before the deportations started, and he often thinks about the teenage experiences he had with them. Everyone who he had some contact with as a young man is now in Israel.
- 00:03:75** He does not think he could have done any more to help people during the war.
- 00:03:79** His children ask him all the time about what he did and they are very proud of it. He does not dream about the war, but he used to. He remembers some things but he doesn't remember them now.
- 00:03:91** He had an interest in sports while in Czechoslovakia but not in America. He played tennis, skied, and played soccer in Europe. He followed sports as a spectator. Baseball and football in the United States are very boring to him, but he follows soccer.