

If that takes a wrong insert in about 10 seconds, I'll let you know. Any time.

I'm Sandra Bendayan. I'm here with John Steiner. John is being interviewed today on the subject of Otto Springer. We're doing this interview for the Holocaust Oral History Project. The date is the 25th of July, 1994. Josh [? Mac, ?] who was an intern here, is sitting in as the second today. And John Grant is our producer. John, could you begin talking about Otto Springer, who I know--

Right.

--you're well-acquainted with.

Well, I've come to know Otto Springer in connection with our work at the University, Sonoma State University, where he came and was invited as a rescuer, an altruist. And he and [? Knut ?] [? Diaby, ?] who are very close friends, came together for the first time at Sonoma State to be interviewed because they're rescuers. Because what we like to do at Sonoma State, when we have the lecture series, is to bring in something positive which is not destructive, but also constructive.

And because of that, we just simply bring in rescuers because we all, in so many ways, in everyday life and also when the going gets tough, can become rescuers if we are conscious, if we have developed our moral intelligence and if we are socially conscience. Our conscience and social consciousness has been developed. And that is something which is not automatic. It has to become-- it has to be developed in-- within our environment socialization process.

So that, to me, was very important, that people-- students, in this case, and the general population-- who come to these lectures don't leave with some notion of desperation and hopelessness. Because there is a silver lining in all that by virtue of the fact that we all can become rescuers if we respond to the occasion, to the moment when our services are needed and we are willing to do something for expecting very little in return.

And so these people then, in so many ways, become role models, and also gave hope to the students, and said, well, we don't have to be bystanders. We can indeed become active supporters and not allow anything which then can develop into genocide, Holocaust-like development. We don't have to allow that by the stance which we take, being united and take action rather than be passive and let things happen.

So Otto was--

Otto was one of the people who was a rescuer. However, it should be said that he was motivated, in addition to being the person he was, by virtue of the fact that he was married to a Jewish woman. And they married in spite of the fact that it was not a very prudent thing to do at that particular time to marry a Jewish woman.

Because that happened after the Nuremberg racial laws, 1935, 1936, where the bulk of them was developed, the basis. And that meant that was a mixed marriage. And the offsprings of such a marriage would be then be viewed by the Nazis, who then occupied Czechoslovakia subsequently, would be viewed as mongrels, mongrels.

And as such, there was a chance that not only they would have been sent to forced slave labor camps, but they, under certain circumstances, could have also been sent as second grade mongrels to concentration camps, and under certain conditions, as I have witnessed, because I was a little bit of a mongrel myself-- be sent into a gas chamber. All right. So because Otto refused to-- although, he was pressured to do so-- to be divorced, he was able to save the life of his Jewish wife.

And did they have children?

They had two children, two daughters. And-- but at that particular point, they were not born. So that was not an issue. Now Otto, by the way, also was brought up by an upper middle class family of a professional person, who was a professor of medicine at the Charles University and came from a very affluent, well-to-do home.

They lived not in a mansion. It was virtually a small castle close to Prague, and had the best of the schooling and all that, and then developed-- not only just finished his gymnasium, but also went to the University, Technical University, and became an engineer, a university-graduated engineer.

Were they a native Czech family?

Well, that's an important question. Because when I've asked Otto-- who, by the way, spoke perfect Czech, totally perfect Czech, just like if it had been his native language. He always felt that he was German. He always identify myself as a German. Although, I always quarreled with him and said, you don't really. He was born in Bohemia and all that. But he viewed himself as a German. And also, he even said that he was not a Sudeten German, which, for all practical purposes, he was.

So what he has done, Otto, apart from helping his wife-- because that was a vested interest by virtue of the fact that she was his wife. He also helped many other people and developed close contacts, surreptitious contacts with the Nazis, and manipulated the situation so that he was able to support and help many other people.

In addition to that, he also worked for the British intelligence and risked his life in so many different ways. Now what he actually achieved may be a question. But however, he was risking his life and was active in the underground as an agent of the British Intelligence.

Exactly how did he help his wife? Exactly how did he help?

Well, he helped his wife by simply being married to her and refusing to be divorced. Although, pressure was exerted on all the German people because he was a German citizen by virtue of the fact that Czechoslovakia, at that particular time the protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, was a satellite. More than that, was enacted to the German Greater Reich.

And all the German speaking people of former Czechoslovakia became German citizens. So he was a German citizen, no longer a Czechoslovak citizen which used to be, but a German citizen by virtue of the fact that it was incorporated. And so by virtue of the fact that he was a German, pressure was exerted on him to divorce a Jewish wife.

And some did, for example, yield and said, well, in order to live a better life and have better chances in employment, and promotion, and all that, I'll divorce myself. Because that meant a great deal of risk. Now Otto refused that and also wound up, as a consequence, in a slave labor camp.

What year was that?

That was around 1943, I believe, roughly.

And what happened to his wife at that time?

Well, his wife stayed at home. And they had a relatively safe life and-- which is the incredible thing. Now very interesting story he told me. He actually didn't say that to many people because he thought it would not be of great interest. But to me, it was very-- of great interest. That is why he told me that he had a cousin whom he met by accident in one of the streets in Prague. And this man was in SS uniform and was an SS general.

And so he had some deal of trepidation by finding out about the fact that, yes, he was an SS, and also that he had a Jewish wife. And he didn't know how he would respond. Because if-- SS people are not exactly anti-Nazis. So he brought him home and reluctantly told him that he had a Jewish wife.

And his response, this SS general's response was that he congratulated him for his bravery or whatever he stands, which he took not divorcing his wife, but protecting her. And he felt it was an act of courage, and respected him even more for that, and was very supportive, and embraced her, and all that, and behaved in a way which, of course, was totally in contrast to what would have been expected by a Nazi SS man, SS officer of a general rank.

How did Otto explain this?

Well, Otto explained it, Joseph, by the way, I have to tell you something. My wife is Jewish. And she still-- we are still together. And we are not going to be divorced. And that's the response-- Otto's response was-- that is to say, the SS general's response was, I congratulate you and--

How did Otto understand the behavior of this SS relative?

Well, it was an act of humanity, which is to say, the better part of this person's characteristics came up, very-- a response to the situation. And so Otto was taken by surprise.

And when he was sent off to slave labor, who then became the protector of the wife?

Well, precisely those people with whom he had contact. And one of these people was his former-- the not formal, yeah, former employer, who continued to pay a salary to Otto in spite of the fact that he no longer worked for that outfit, and paid it to his wife so she had ample funds and could continue to live under very, very reasonable conditions.

So the German and/or Nazi regime did not pursue the wife as a Jew?

Well, simply because of the context and simply because of what he was able to do to protect her. And she indeed had the protection of so many influential people, who saw to it that nothing would happen to her. And she was a full Jew. She was not a mongrel or anything of that nature. But she was actually a full Jew.

But those influences didn't save Otto. Those same protectors weren't able to keep him from the camp.

Well, not really. Because he went to the camp because he refused-- one of the major reasons why he went to the-- was sent to the camp, that first he was not sent to the battlefield. He was not-- they didn't draft him. And also because he refused to divorce her. So it was a punishment for him personally that he stayed married to a Jewess.

Let's--

That was one of the reasons. All right.

I was going to say, let's stop for a minute here.

Right.

You know what?

Can you stop the--

This motion, kind of--

It's self-conscious.

Yeah, I know. [INAUDIBLE].

There we go.

All right.

Live video Yeah, we're all set. So you can continue.

What I was wondering was, exactly who was it who was giving the pressure, putting the pressure on Otto?

Well, the German authorities, just then on their Nazi authorities, German authorities, which is identical with Nazi authorities. And they put pressure on all their people who were married to a Jewish partner, regardless of one. So you're still supposed to gesture.

[LAUGHTER]

Yeah, that's right, yeah. And--

So why wasn't he drafted?

Well, why he was not drafted, only two reasons. First of the three reasons, it may have been his health, which I am ruling out because I have no indication that he was not healthy. Two, that he was needed for war industry, which I believe was the reason. Or three, that there were some other circumstances which prevented him, namely being married to a Jewess.

So for this defiance of the German authority, he was sent to slave labor?

That's right. That's exactly the reason.

And this actually was worse than being a Jew. Because she didn't get sent off anywhere.

Well, she was not sent off because he saw to it that she was being protected and cared for, and had sufficient contacts with a Gestapo to see to it that it would be deferred. His-- her removal would be deferred indefinitely. Or some people would have intervened on her behalf whom he had slated.

But for his own punishment.

He was not able to do that, for sure, yeah. He was not able to do that.

Did they have--

And it is all part of that book, by the way, because he describes these things.

Did he have any children by then?

At that particular point, I don't believe he had any children, no. Because his children were born after the war.

Do you have any sense from his history, the background, his family you're talking about, whether they had liberal values?

Yes.

To get someone like Otto to create the-- a Nazi general [INAUDIBLE].

Yes. That's-- they're intellectual. They're academicians. They're well-to-do. And there is no question about the fact that they had a very liberal attitude. And they were not anti-Semitic. They have absolutely no question about that. Because they would have prevented-- they never would have liked him to marry a Jewess to begin with. They certainly would have objected, at least, or interfered in one way or another. And they did not, from what I understand.

Were they any source of support to him throughout those times?

Well, that's something-- you see, one amazing thing is-- and I don't understand it. I never discussed it. Unfortunately, I

didn't discuss it with him. In our conversations and the stories he told people and in general-- not just to me, but in general-- he never spoke very much about his parents for reasons which are not clear to me.

And I don't know why. Because, obviously, I'm not aware of any conflict, or serious conflict, or any conflict for that matter. So it is not very clear to me why on earth he did not talk more about his parents, who must have played a very important part-- as anyone else's-- important part in his life.

And I failed to ask him. Because that's something which only occurred to me after his death, in a way, when I thought more. But since then, it's an interesting pattern, that he really didn't mention his parents or didn't speak. Or unlike so many other people myself, the parents to me-- I talk to many close friends about my parents. It's an integral part. And it's important for me to enter into any dialogue which covers or which deals with more intimate subjects.

Do you know if he had any brothers, or sisters, or--

Otto had a sister. Otto had a sister. And the sister is still alive in Hamburg and is insane, is mentally ill in Hamburg.

Do you know if she had any influence?

Well, that I don't know. Because I never talked to her.

He doesn't mention it though?

Oh, he mentioned it. He mentioned her sister. He mentioned his sister, all right.

And any political connection?

And was very--

And any political connection?

No, no, no, no, not really. Or at least, whatever he may have told me escaped me. So it's not part of my memory. I don't remember it.

Well, could you talk about some of the other people whose lives he influenced?

Well, he influenced all the people, remarkably, who became acquainted with him. Because he was a personage. He had some special, if not charisma, an appeal which was unusual. And he was not only charming. He was a very kindhearted, warm person who was not obsessed with himself, but was able to listen, and respond to the needs of other people, and be a very excellent friend, and had a tremendous sense of humor.

If there was one weakness or error, he just liked women. And he is not the only one who does. And so that was one of his perhaps weaker points, that he liked women to the extent that it interfered with his marriage.

What about in the-- during the war days? You said that he had a great deal of influence to protect other people besides his wife.

Well, see, if one talked about his life during his activity during World War II, he deemphasized his role as a rescuer but emphasized his role as agent, as a spy. That, to him, was more important than that. And he never took himself very seriously.

He never went to brag about the fact that he was a person who helped other people and intervened on their behalf by the Nazi authorities, simply because his position as an engineer, and because of the people he knew, and the way he was able to influence them. So he indeed did that to quite some extent, but not in a way which he considered to be important enough to deemphasize the role he played as British agent--

Do you know of any--

--which he considered to be more important, personally, to him, and also more significant in terms of his activity.

Do you know--

That was my very specific impression.

Are there any individuals that you know of, other than his wife, that owe their lives to him?

Well, you see, his wife ended in some bad situation because they got divorced. And his children were, I think, very much affected by that fact. And so what you really are asking me is to respond whom he influenced. That's what you are now trying--

Who he influenced. Or if there was any specific individuals who could say they owed their life or their protection to him.

Well, more specifically, I have not met anyone other-- and I have not met his wife, to be sure. I am not-- I have not talked to any person whom he saved the life. So I can't really tell you that. And one of the reasons, perhaps, why he became a little bit more well-known was simply because his role he played in connection with his wife.

What about his role, as you say, in the British-- what underground [INAUDIBLE]?

Well, his role was that he simply conveyed messages which had some importance for the war effort and strategy. To what extent is another thing he writes about it in his book. And to what extent it really made a difference, he was one of quite a few.

I think what it really connotes is his resistance against the Nazis. So that he was willing to risk his life even doing things which may not have been major in terms of agent work, or spying, or what have you. But that he indeed resisted with all he could do. Now that was written in later. After the war, he then was working with the CIA.

And that was his preoccupation. Because when people met him first, so the first thing, it was better they understood the circumstances or had some notion of history. It didn't make much difference to him. But he always, somehow, talked about his role as a spy in the CIA, and his exploits during the war, and this connection rather than that role of a rescue. Because as I said before, it was more significant to him.

Do you know, what were his experiences in the slave labor camp?

About-- he had a very important role. Because he was what you call the camp senior. That is, he was in charge of the camp for quite a while simply because he was very levelheaded and not corrupted. And so I think, in terms of his role in the slave labor camp, he just was an excellent choice.

By the way, this labor camp was not run by the SS, but members of the Organization Todt. And the Todt was an organization which, for example, among other things, was building structures, including the highways, the famous German Autobahn.

And so that was the Organization Todt which was primarily engaged in construction of sorts. And then during the war, of course, they were told they were working on war-related construction. And that was done in these camps of which he was a part, and then later became a leader of that camp.

Do you think he might have been sent to that camp because of his engineering facility?

Well, that's very well possible, that he sees his capabilities. His expertise, certainly, was used. So he applied it. There is

no question about that.

So then he may not have been one of the actual construction laborers?

Well, not just some plain. He was more than that. Because he was an engineer. He was a university-educated engineer. So obviously, that came very handy. Because these people were needed and very much in demand.

Do you know how long he was in the camp?

I think about-- I think over two years, roughly speaking, yeah.

And his wife remained in Prague?

She remained in Prague all the time.

So what happened, then, when he was liberated from the camp?

Well, he went to-- well, first of all, by virtue of the fact that he was German, he had to somehow prove that, as a German, he was not a Nazi. Because otherwise, he would have been deported. Because virtually immediately after World War II, all Germans were rounded up and treated in a similar vein as the Jews. They, in other words, were reduced to powerless individuals without right, and disenfranchised, and what have you.

And they were put into camps, or put into jails or prisons, or put to death, depending where they were sent. And so for example, one of the places is the small and close to Theresienstadt, the small fortress, so-called small fortress which was next to the ghetto. And they sent people there and-- the Czechs after the war, and killed by the dozens. And that used to be a Gestapo prison where people were killed by the Nazis. And then the Czechs took over and killed the Nazis.

So even people like him who had been imprisoned themselves as slave labor. And they still had to prove themselves.

Oh, well, yes. Well, they had to prove that they are not working for the Nazis or they didn't know Nazis. Well, he did that. And then he also then worked against the communists. He stayed there until the communists were already in power.

And then with the help of the American authorities, he was able to get out of the country. Because if he had not, the chances are that the communists would have taken him and treated him very harshly if-- they could have even could have killed him.

Let's stop here for a moment then, please.

So I think it's--