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Full transcript of an interview with

ANDREW STEINER

on 06 December 2005

by Peter Donovan

for the

**EMINENT AUSTRALIANS ORAL HISTORY
PROJECT**

Recording available on CD

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Sentences that were left unfinished in the normal manner of conversation are shown ending in three dashes, - - -.

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Interview with Andrew Steiner conducted by Peter Donovan on 6th December 2005 at Stonyfell, South Australia, for the Eminent Australians Oral History Project of the National Library and the State Library of South Australia.

DISK 1

This is tape 1 of an interview with Mr Andrew Steiner. Andrew has followed a distinguished career in sculpture and stained glass and related fields, and is currently continuing to work in these fields. Andrew will be talking to me, Peter Donovan, for the Eminent Australians Oral History Project conducted by the National Library of Australia and the State Library of South Australia.

On behalf of the Director General of the National Library and the Director of the State Library of South Australia, I'd like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this program, Andrew.

Andrew, do you understand that copyright is shared by you and the libraries?

Yes, I understand that and I'd like to say at the outset that this is really a great honour and privilege for me to be interviewed amongst the Eminent Australians.

This being so, may we have permission to make a transcript of this recording should the libraries decide to make one?

Yes, certainly that will be okay.

We hope you will speak as freely as possible, knowing that neither the tapes nor any transcripts produced from them will be released without your authority. This interview is taking place on the 6th December 2005 at Andrew's home at Stonyfell.

Right, Andrew, can we begin? We'll begin at the beginning: tell me where and when you were born.

I was born in 1933 in Budapest, and my immediate family, I have a sister who's two years older than myself. And I'm part of a Jewish family and, although we were naturally affiliated and practising, at the same time we were far more secular and indistinguishable from the local Hungarian people. My father's family have lived in Hungary for hundreds of years and they have been always very patriotic and proud of their country, and they served it well through peace and war and various professions

and trades. And, first and foremost, they were always very loyal, law-abiding, first-class citizens of their beloved country.

But then, of course, in 1933 Hitler came to power and very soon – relatively soon, like 1938 – already *numerus clausus*¹ legislations were passed, which was really the first major restriction against Jewish people. We had permits to come to Australia in 1939, but regrettably, as with so many other people, we were unable to make it then so we had to wait till 1948 to make that momentous journey, and of course in the meantime experienced all the discrimination, the injustices, the cruelty, the horrors of war. Many times we were in danger of being annihilated ourselves. We have been lined up to be executed and something intervened and it didn't take place; but, as most survivors, the experiences are similar in a sense that a split second did make the difference between life and death.

I went to a Jewish primary school for four years and very often the Aryan youth gangs were openly hostile and beatings and name-calling and stone-throwings were a daily occurrence. And these were not official actions, they were just simply manifestations of the latent anti-Semitism, and people by and large condoned it and accepted it, and after a while this became the norm for me. And so I became a very excellent, fast runner as a consequence, getting away from these generally much larger and certainly numerous youth gangs.

And after I completed my primary schools in 1941, there was quite a degree of difficulty in getting enrolled in a high school due to these earlier-mentioned *numerus clausus* restrictions. But my father served in the First World War with distinction and had very high decorations, and through some contacts it was possible to get enrolment in one of the really good *gimnáziums* [high schools]. I was the only Jewish student in the class, so there was some discrimination, some degree of individual hostilities, but by and large – I was not allowed to take part in the student, like a cadets kind of outfit – by and large, I think, I was quite lucky to be there. I did have – which is an astonishing fact to ponder on – but I did have even, during those horrible times, a religious lesson once a week, on a one-to-one basis, which I still appreciate very much, that they were considerate to extend that to me.

¹ *Numerus clausus* (Latin) = restricted number; here, legislation setting quotas to restrict the number of Jews admitted to educational institutions.

As far as the War and its horrors, it's reasonable to say that it's utterly beyond comprehension and very difficult to accept that human beings were capable of perpetrating those heinous crimes against fellow human beings who biologically were absolutely identical. And this is one of the conclusions that one can make, that human beings are capable of infinite good and equally infinite evil. And when one of the most cultured and civilised nations takes it upon itself to create a conveyor belt system of slaughtering innocent victims – men, women, children, elderly people, predominantly Jewish people but certainly not exclusively so, because great numbers of socialists and communists and democrats and homosexuals and Jehovah's Witnesses and gypsies were also part of the victims – – –.

Did your whole immediate family survive?

Yes.

How did they survive?

We were fortunate that our immediate family, like my parents and my sister and I, survived. We have lost from our extended family eleven people. And how did we survive? Well, good fortune and a lot of resourcefulness and initiatives. Now, we – let's go back a bit: in 1943, Germany invaded Hungary and up until then life, especially in Budapest, was pretty well, bearing in mind the war years and restrictions and shortages and coupons and that sort of thing, but by and large it was quite tolerable until the Germans invaded. But then things began to happen very, very rapidly.

So what did your father do? What was his occupation?

Well, my father was qualified as a solicitor, but because of the situation he didn't practise. He had a very high executive position with the Hungarian Dairy Corporation and did a lot of travelling, representing the company. And so how did we survive? Well, we lived in – after 1943, after the Germans came in edicts were promulgated very, very speedily, and these involved a lot of prohibitions, a lot of restrictions. Certainly personal freedoms of Jewish people were affected. We were compelled to wear a yellow star, we were compelled to live in a yellow-star house, and eventually all the adults, with the exception of an elderly aunt, were taken away to various labour forces or auxiliary units attached to armies, and all of these were

really kind of euphemisms just to get people to go to these assemblies unsuspectingly and quietly and complying with the authorities' wishes.

Now, from my father's unit, only two people survived, and we're looking at several hundred people. My father and another person survived, purely and simply because they escaped from the unit. All the rest of them were murdered, either by physical brutality or the kind of workload that they had to perform, like being human mine detectors or digging in minus forty [degrees] or being tortured and of course the outcome of these tortures were always death, very painful. One of the specialisations was for these victims to climb onto a tree naked, in absolutely bitter, freezing, wintry weather, climb up on a tree naked and crow like a cock, at the same time being sprayed with water. So this was a very sort of famous form of torture and amusement. So my father survived by escaping from that unit.

My mother was compelled to turn up to these assemblies and each time somehow she managed to escape. There were occasions when there seemed to be a side gate to walk through or somebody would come along and ask for people who thought they were not well to go forward and then they were – because these people were really underground workers and they ushered these people away. So my mother, on each of these occasions, managed not to be taken away. All of these assembly points were at very important rail junctions or railway stations where there'd be a brick factory or a sports arena, and again the emphasis was for people to be misled and kind of willingly go along, unsuspectingly.

So my parents, once they escaped, then they went into separate hiding – in other words, they at times didn't even know where their spouses were – and once all of these people – initially we had four aunts and three uncles and must have been four cousins in that Jewish star house – so towards the end, which was in November 1944, towards the middle of November, we were left there with one aunt, one elderly aunt, and all the cousins. And then we were ordered, quite suddenly and without any warning, we were ordered to just take what we could carry one evening and leave our own villa.

And so after that my sister and I went into an internationally-protected children's shelter and we were there for a while. I contracted German measles, which meant that I was in a kind of solitary confinement, isolated, which also meant that even during the most severe air raids I still stayed up there on the third floor in that little

room. And of course by that stage we have had what is known as the carpet bombing, which is really a saturated form of bombing. But interestingly we were not afraid at all from the bombings at any stage.

What was this international refuge?

Well, this was really – – –.

Why was its status recognised? Was it the Red Cross?

It was similar to the Red Cross and various nations. Ours was from the Belgian Red Cross, but equally there were some which would have been Swiss or whatever nationality originally.

Now, these protections did work for some time, but not really all the time. And when my mother learnt that our particular one was going to be liquidated – bearing in mind she was in hiding, with false documents – then she managed to get more false documents for my sister and I, which meant that on the surface we were three siblings, my mother becoming the eldest of the three children, and we were evacuated from the country with our sort of cover story. And then with these papers, which were very, very bad forgeries – which was unfortunate, because thereby they became of very limited value, although better than nothing – and so my mother came and rescued my sister and I and then we went into hiding. This would have been early December 1944. We have tried very many various places to get accommodation, but invariably these lasted perhaps one night and then people sort of, when they looked at the papers, they suggested it's best if we move on, which was really quite kind because they could have called the authorities and then of course I wouldn't be here now to tell you my experiences.

During one of these occasions when we were searching for lodgings, we came face to face with one of my cousins – he was already a grown up man, a young man – and in order to protect each other and all of us we pretended not to recognise, not to acknowledge each other. And these were the norm. So once we have concluded that we couldn't get any accommodation anywhere, then we went to the villa of my godfather's, who had a resident caretaker and gardener – he was already in one of these auxiliary military service units – and this man was a socialist, this caretaker, and he allowed us to take shelter there and we stayed there for the remainder of the War. So that's my mother, my sister. And, interestingly, one of my cousins – I'm

still not absolutely certain how she knew where we were; she's four years older than I am – and on the very last tram she came out to our villa where we were hiding and then of course she stayed with us for the remainder of the War.

And there was quite a lot of fighting, and certainly there were no services. Absolutely unimaginable when we are so terribly reliant on electricity, for instance. So no electricity, no water, no gas, no food. Quite a lot of bombardment and artillery firing. And so that's how we were. And I had to grow up very, very quickly because, in essence, I became the man of the house at age eleven. And so not much of a childhood, really. And this is one of probably the most tragic consequences of wars – and specifically a very long one like the Second World War – and when people are targeted for absolute annihilation, the young people who survive and they're called 'child survivors' of the Holocaust: well, really it's a misnomer, because very few of them are children any more, by that stage. Maybe in age, but certainly not in experience or outlook or perception. They're not really children any more.

A little bit about immediately after the War: how did your father survive the latter part thereof, and how did you come together again?

Well, my father was hiding and he managed to get a position as a gardener at a very wealthy household and one of the factors which favoured him was that, because of his war experience during the First World War, he mastered the Russian language and the owner of this property thought that it may well be very helpful for him when the Russian liberators arrived to have somebody who can kind of speak up for him and protect him. My mother knew where my father was living, and he too had false identity papers.

And then, once the actual fighting has died down, my mother thought that she and I should go across the hills to try and find my father, which is – even on reflection, after all these years, it was a hair-raising experience. There was still considerable firing and fighting and shooting, and apart from that we went cross-country on the hills, which would have been a tremendous distance just physically to cover, and in areas totally foreign to us. Budapest was a huge metropolis, and some regions, even during a lifetime, one may not ever get to. Certainly, with sporadic fighting and barricades and they had dead horses on the road, to walk across several hills it's really explaining, in a sense, and highlighting, the resourcefulness and the bravery of

my mother. And she probably almost rejected the notion of fear. And it's just inspirational, really, to reflect upon it. She was a medium-sized person, but exceptionally strong in character and willpower, and very, very brave and resourceful.

So when we eventually got to where my father was living, of course he was very, very thin and looked totally different. In earlier times my father had a moustache and so that was shaven off, and he managed in a sense to disguise himself very, very effectively. He was thrilled and very happy and surprised to see us, and then he took us to his room and opened the door, just pointed to the bed, and the bed was full of bricks and mortar and a large circular hole was pierced through a very thick wall. The night before that happened my father had some sort of premonition and said he didn't feel safe to sleep in that room, and of course again he would not have survived had he slept there. So these are the countless moments and experiences that all survivors have had.

Now, this is going back to the really darkest days, or some of the darkest days: October 15th Admiral Hortly unilaterally declared peace and severed the allegiance to Germany, and then of course the Arrow Cross² people of took over and we were then – this was the night of October 15th going on the 16th – at dawn we were forced to line up with our hands raised and one of my uncles asked if the children's eyes could be covered up because obviously it looked like another execution. Prior to that we have heard a lot of shooting and firing, and as a consequence we for that night went down to our air raid shelter to sleep. And another group came in – these were actually four armed men who barged in and barked their commands to us – another group came in and offered their assistance to the first ones, but they sent them away letting them know that they were completely in control of the situation; and subsequently we learned that this second group, in fact, executed our friends and neighbours across the road, sixteen people were lined up, and killed the children who went to the same school with us, good friends, and they were just lined up and

² *Nyilaskeresztes Párt*, a Hungarian fascist organisation that controlled the Hungarian government from October 1944 to April 1945 during World War II. It originated as the Party of National Will founded by Ferenc Szálasi in 1935. Szálasi's party was quite small and underwent numerous reorganisations; it reconstituted itself under a new name and emerged early in 1939 as the Arrow Cross Party.

executed there in front of their own house. So again, why we were saved we shall never know.

How do you feel about being saved? A little guilty that you survived and others didn't?

No, no. I don't feel guilty at all. I think it's just a quirk of fate, really. And of course having survived I think it's important that we do our utmost to ensure that atrocities and horrors at monstrous deeds do not happen. Regrettably, of course there have been very many – still are ongoing – smaller-scale wars and discriminations and inter-tribal wars, but I think we who have come back almost from the other side feel that it is our privilege and duty to pass on our experiences and share them, and very specially with young people, so that there is a direct link between the messengers, the survivors, and future generations. And the hope is that the future generations will make it into a better world than we have had.

How has that experience impacted on the rest of your life?

Well, it's like breathing in and breathing out: it's what I am. I frequently visit schools and talk to students and sharing with them some of my experiences, and this is the direct link that I mentioned. It doesn't really matter how many books people may read or how many films or videos they watch, the effect of meeting somebody who actually was there and experienced it is totally different, and far more meaningful and lasting. I have had probably hundreds of testimonials from various students, and they seem to have grasped the enormity and in many instances they suggest that they will make it part of their lives to improve human understanding and extending the dignity, the tolerance, that every human being is entitled to, irrespective of their background or race or religion, creed, colour, whatever, it's just immaterial. And of course here we have such a diverse, multicultural society that there's plenty of opportunity for diversity and meaningful appreciation of the differences which are very beautiful.

One of the outcomes is that I don't hate. I don't hate anybody. And it's a direct result of my experience. Because to hate is really to differentiate, to single someone or some group out, and make that unacceptable conclusion about them which to me is unacceptable. So people sometimes, especially at these addresses, afterwards they can ask any question at all, and they ask me specifically about how do I feel about the

people who perpetrated these terrible deeds. Well, all I can say to that is that people who have had a choice, in many cases certainly making a choice can be very costly; there is a price to pay. But then again, to do these – not even ‘barbarous’ isn’t really an adequate description when one thinks of SS officers throwing up children for target practice to amuse their own children: how can you describe that? It’s beyond description, it’s beyond any conceivable human behaviour. But this is reality. This is what had happened. And regrettably we have quite a few of those people here in Australia. They came out after the War. A lot of them came with the total approval of the government; some of them were brought out to help fight communism and their services were utilised. Not a single person has been really, truly taken to task in Australia. There were some attempts during those war trials, but then the whole unit was disbanded and nobody ever really had to face the consequences. Certainly, after many, many years, these people – even if they would have been convicted there wouldn’t have been very significant punishment for their crimes, and really there is no adequate punishment.

Currently we have a couple of cases – they’re both Hungarians: one is in Perth and the other one, the more recent, and seems to be of greater consequence, is in Melbourne – and, interestingly enough, yesterday’s *Australian* newspaper had over half a page about this criminal in Melbourne, Polgar is his surname, and he claims to be totally lily-white innocent, which is absolutely inconceivable with the position that he held. And the whole tenor of the article is very painful for people who suffered under the Arrow Cross. And their brutality surpassed all other Nazis. And when the Germans decided to liquidate the remaining Jewish people from Budapest, by then they were fully aware that they have lost the War; yet all their resources were just directed towards this one mission to accomplish, and they themselves acknowledge that without the help of these zealous Hungarians they could have never achieved this. And some four hundred and twenty thousand Jewish people were butchered in about three months. Direct lines were built in Auschwitz to the crematoria, specifically to save time and make the killings speedier.

So I still don’t hate those people.

How did you and the family made the transition to peace?, but the post-war period?

Well, post-war period for a while was still very troubled and a lot of shortages, a great deal of war damage. There were, at the end of the War, when we were liberated, there were no bridges across the Danube and very few houses were unscathed. So there was an awful lot of damage everywhere and shortages. After a while, schools began to function. Immediately after the War I went to three different *gimnáziums*: two were very brief, and then, once we managed to get back to our own villa, which was also damaged – a shell went through the roof – and had to be repaired before we could move back in, I went to a local *gimnázium* there and I did five years, completed fifth year prior to coming here.

Why come to Australia?

Well, in 1939 – – –.

Was there no future for you and your family in post-war Hungary? the Russians, of course.

Yes. Well, in 1939 we already had permits to come here because my uncle lived here in Adelaide, and so throughout the War there was this cherished hope to survive the War and at first opportunity come to Australia, as far away as possible from the turmoil and the injustices and discrimination and hatred which we experienced. Now, indicative is that when we went back to our own villa, which would have been towards the end of 1945, some of the neighbours, who prior to the War were quite okay, but then progressively they became more and more pro-Nazis, and some of them openly said to us, ‘Oh. So. You came back. You survived. What a shame. More of you came back than were taken away.’ Now, this probably sums it up why we didn’t wish to live there. And of course a lot of our loved ones were lost, a lot of our possessions were lost. And anti-Semitism was still there, that didn’t go away. So the idea was to start a new life. And that’s why we came here.

How difficult was it, starting a new life in Australia? Where did you start? You’d come by boat, presumably.

Yes. Yes, we came in an old, converted troop ship, and its name was *Misr*. It was miserable as well as *Misr*. It was an Egyptian ship, M-I-S-R, *Misr*. And very bad ship. And arduous, long journey. Weeks and weeks of it. And eventually we got to Fremantle, first port of call, which was sort of quite heavenly, really, to see everything so plentiful. And I remember we went for a walk and beautiful butchers’

shops full of meat, which was still not all that readily-available. And then from Fremantle we went to Melbourne and my uncle met us there and introduced us to some of his friends, and then after a few days we arrived here by train overnight, overland, and it was (telephone rings) quite efficient, the railways – – –.

END OF DISK 1: DISK 2

This is Peter Donovan speaking with Andrew Steiner on 6th December 2005. This is tape number two.

Righto, Andrew, we've now got you to Adelaide.

Yes, we arrived – – –.

Presumably you still are a youngster and you probably didn't have English at this stage. How did your family fit in, what did your father and mother do, what did you do, where did you do it?

Actually, we studied English in Hungary with a private tutor, the whole family, and apart from that I did several years of English at the *gymnázium*, so all of us spoke English, which was really helpful because the majority of people here could only speak English or were only prepared to speak English. Speaking a foreign language wasn't really the done thing in those days, and people really frowned upon it and disassociated themselves from any would-be horrible person speaking a foreign tongue. So we were fortunate. And of course it's crucial. It's astonishing how many people, having lived here most of their lives, still don't speak English for a variety of reasons, which means that of course essentially they, whoever they were, to a large degree they must remain outsiders within this community.

Languages, all languages, are very, very beautiful. I'm very interested and fascinated in languages. I have studied English and German at Adelaide University and I think it's just wondrous, the skills that one can acquire and the communication it allows one to have. Now, having said all that, initially we worked in various jobs – office, factory, whatever – and ultimately we started up a small family business making leather goods; and then later on, many years later, that same business specialised in making very high-quality camping equipment because I was very interested in bushwalking and nature, so that sort of was very sensible extension of that interest. And then, subsequently, I did my matriculation here and then I enrolled at The University of Adelaide. I mainly specialised in History, with an emphasis on

modern European history and in particular Nazi Germany. I had Peter Phillips, who was probably one of the outstanding scholars in this subject. He himself was victim of Nazi Germany because he was shot down as a British airman over Germany and then interned in a POW³ camp, escaped, interned again, escaped again, and then he was thrown into a concentration camp, horribly tortured, and then after that, once he was back in England, he seriously undertook the academic pursuit. And Peter Phillips's conclusions were that it can happen anywhere and human beings are capable of these things, and the more you look into it, the more you study it, the less you can understand it and comprehend it, and the answer is that there is no answer to this. And this conclusion I do share with him to a certain extent. So I was very lucky in having him. I was also very lucky in people in the Political Science: we had Gordon Reid and Bob Heatherington, and there was another reader as well, and it was very recognised. In fact, one more still contemporary person within that department was Neil Blewett, and I was in his group. It was a very excellent ---.

So what years are we talking about here?

The university years? They started in 1965, so quite late, I guess. But they were really an enabler to study and get a much wider view and historical perspectives, and so they were good and I really enjoyed them.

Was this part-time study, or were you working at the same time?

Yes, yes, part-time study, yes. And also I was very interested and involved in theatre, I did a lot of acting and producing and stage directing. And so that was really my first main involvement in art: acting, which started really probably at something like age eight I was already involved in one of the famous children's theatre in Budapest. So I did a great variety of productions, both professional and amateur, and had some great successes, and very rewarding experience. Its main problems are that it's very transient and unreliable in terms of continuity, and I was pursuing the Stanislavsky Method which means that one is totally absorbed in this particular character one is creating, and the actors are really the instruments through which that character emerges, which means very, very long, dedicated rehearsals and periods during which

³ POW – prisoner of war.

to establish that particular character; and then after that a brief season and that's the end of it. So, whilst it's extraordinarily beautiful and rewarding, it has this degree of dissatisfaction that one puts so much into it and the outcome is the experience and a memory, but nothing tangible, nothing lasting.

And then, in 1973, which is jumping a bit, we were invited to a friend's place for Sunday lunch and during the course of the conversation I was asked what would I think of carving and would I like to try it. And this is a very innocent remark and I'm sure happens daily, that people say, 'I think you'd be good at playing golf', or 'I think you've got the making of a good orchid grower' or whatever, or 'bridge player'; but I mean that's the beginning and the end of the conversation. But on this occasion, straight after lunch I was taken out to the workshop, given a lump of wood and some tools, and immediately I said, 'Yes, this is it.' So we talked about somebody in the ceramics having this kind of extraordinary fortuitous happening and exactly the same with me, and this was the Sunday; Monday I enrolled in a carving class and then subsequently I went and studied in England, then I came back here and continued my studies, and –

And the rest is history.

– well, in a sense – – –.

But going back a little – we'll come back to that and develop it a lot more – but where did you get this artistic bent and this skill? Were your parents patrons of the arts, or art people?

My father was very interested in theatre and he had a number of productions in Russia when he was a prisoner of war there for eight years. It's a long, long time. And so I suppose the theatre part, if there is such a thing as inherent genes coming through that way, might be like that; and plus the fact that, as a very small child, already we were introduced to children's theatre, so it was very natural. And there has been a great-uncle of mine in Hungary who was a very accomplished sculptor, but I think it's probably far-fetched to suggest that there is any connection. I wouldn't think so.

Just a little à propos of that, who do you take after, your father or your mother?

I don't think either of them, really. No, not to my knowledge. It's probably harder for one to evaluate it objectively, but to the best of my knowledge I'm unlike both of

them. But I would have to ask – I probably would have to ask my sister and she would be in a better position to gauge than I am, so I'm probably a little bit too near to myself to be able to come up with the answer on that one.

Again jumping forward a little bit, and back just to establish a benchmark, because at this stage, if this is 1973, you're forty years old.

Yes.

It seems a long time and old, relatively old, to be getting into something brand new.

Very new. Yes.

If you couldn't make a living as an actor, how were you going to make a living – or did you see yourself at this stage as being a professional sculptor? Or wanting to be?

Yes. And I think undoubtedly there is a creative urge which is all-powerful and is the dominating force, which means that you're there to create and that is the ultimate, really. The only explanation that I sometimes think may be partially responsible is that having been through the most horrendous upheaval and destruction, I wanted to go exactly the opposite way: to be creative, to be harmonious, to behave pretty well the opposite way to what I have experienced. And the most rewarding achievement for human beings, in my experience, is creativity. And so it's an ongoing challenge and reward.

Are you able to mark the little milestones from becoming a very novice wood-carver to becoming perhaps a craftsman, to becoming an artist and then becoming a competent artist? How long – if you took up woodcarving in 1973 when you were forty, how old were you when you considered yourself to be an artist, a sculptor?

I think very, very quickly. Very speedily. As though I have had this within me but somehow it didn't emerge. It was most natural, and some of my earliest works I think even today would compare very, very favourably, even my first work, which I still have; and one of my earliest commissions was for a Catholic church – in fact, that was my first one – for a full-sized carving of a mother and child to commemorate the memory of a young boy who was killed in a road accident. So to be able to do that and knowing that it gave some solace to the family it was a wonderful feeling. And when it was consecrated it was a very unexpected and moving experience for me, and it was quite hard to accept that here is this wood which I carved and

somehow it attained an almost spiritual significance. And throughout this consecration ceremony there was definitely this sort of feeling within me which was overbearing, really, and very complex. How could it be possible, because after all it's just what I did? And yet I had this, which is on reflection today still memorable and significant.

How did people learn of you for your first commission? The first one's always very difficult.

Yes. Well, I mentioned that I went to a carving class following the introduction to woodcarving, and the teacher recommended me for this commission, that's how it came about. So that was very nice that he did that, yes.

The mother and child I have revisited within the last year, because we were doing a video, and so all my public sculptures are within that video clip. And it was really special to catch up with it, yes.

So you went to Britain?

Yes.

How did you survive in Britain whilst learning. What did you learn? Were you learning just skills?

I learnt modelling and carving, and we had a very excellent teacher, Ian Wilshire was his name, and the method of teaching was really to a large extent just being an enabler for the students and there were no rigid requirements or programs, and very easy way to absorb and learn. And I did a number of carvings there. Some of them were in soapstone and others were in wood. That certainly, yes, established the continuity of my interest and the skillset I have learnt there was helpful in starting up at Salisbury CAE⁴ when we came back.

In England I think sculpture is very, very well-received and established. They have one of the finest specialists – or at least they had it then – Tiranti's of London, just purely catering for the tools and needs of sculptors. Subsequently, on a visit to New York, I have been to some similar establishments, but they didn't quite have the atmosphere of Tiranti's. I only use hand tools in my work, so therefore it's a special interest to me. Some of the special tools that I need I have designed and some of it I

⁴ CAE – College of Advanced Education.

have made, others have been made by a blacksmith friend; and one in particular I needed for a special carving and I thought about it and eventually I came up with a design and then, many years later – again in England – I came across a little, modest book on coopers' tools and, lo and behold, this tool that I so smartly designed here were hundreds of years old and have been used almost at ancient times, and there I was coming up with the same solution for the same problem, which is very rewarding and reassuring. I have a most beautiful collection of weird and wonderful tools, and one of the draw knives that I have bought some years ago, I bought it on the same day as I bought a new car. But the draw knife has a lot more importance and significance than a new car, and that's how it is.

When you were introduced into sort of the wider world of art, you still stuck with wood sculpting, you didn't get into metal sculpting or bronze sculpting. Why stick with wood, when you've got all these other opportunities?

Well, I did always feel a very special affinity with wood because there's no other material like it, and in particular a great number of my works are in Huon pine which only grows in Tasmania, and it's the most wonderful and unique timber. All of the pieces I use are very ancient, some may be twenty thousand years old, and they can lay in rivers or swamps, and with its protective oil within it, which can be seven per cent, they are totally protected from rotting and vermin. So therefore it's almost an indestructible material. Certainly it can be wantonly destroyed and burnt and things like that, but with normal usage they're, in a sense, almost everlasting. Some of these ancient pieces have been used by scientists to establish the weather patterns hundreds and thousands of years ago, so they in a sense also act as a sort of a time capsule. And some of the boats that pioneers constructed from Huon pine in Tasmania are still in water today. So having such a wonderful, wonderful, venerable material is probably the ultimate. And the timber varies greatly depending on where it was grown, what were the climactic conditions, how long it's been dead, where it was laying and so forth; so, in other words, no two pieces are quite the same, so that's very, very inspirational and almost inexhaustible challenges and delights. But I have also done a good number of steel sculptures. When I was studying at Salisbury part of the course was environmental pieces, and some of them are in my garden now and one of them, which is called 'Felicity' because it's a very joyous piece reaching up towards the sky so hence the name, that was invited to one of the international

Mildura sculpture exhibitions, and that was very early – it might have been my first year there – so this, in a sense, supports my earlier statement that it didn't take long to accomplish significant works.

But realistically, I think others should evaluate one's own work. Of course, the creator of it has to be satisfied – that's as much as possible; never totally satisfied and one shouldn't be totally satisfied because that leads to smugness and being conceited and feeling that there are no more challenges. Well, that is not the case at all. Each piece presents itself as a new challenge and a new creation. And it's like having a very extended family because all of them are part of me. So yes, I do steel sculptures. There are fifty of them in my garden. And some bronze ones as well. And I very much enjoy these different mediums, but the wood itself and the affinity with man and wood and its importance, and the realisation that without trees, without wood, we couldn't exist, so therefore there's a very, very important relationship and so I just get an enormous joy out of using it.

When did you discover Huon pine?

I think that was – – –.

As your favourite medium, if you like?

Yes. Yes, I think it was in the late 1980s that we went for a trip to Tasmania and once I discovered it, well, that was it. Instantly. There was this relationship, and I think there's almost like a co-operation between the material and the enabler to allow it to come forward from within. I generally can see, in my mind's eye, what's within that wood, and when I select them they look ugly and twisted and gnarled and dreadful, grey-green colour, but within it there's this extraordinary, beautiful, honey-coloured wood which can be finished silky smooth and very tactile, and almost irresistible to touch, which is one of the features of my work. And there have been many instances where people, especially in very high position, were kind of shy and surreptitiously when they thought nobody was observing them, they sort of sneak up to the works and caress them. On the other hand, I had the experience of a blind music professor in Paris who was just absolutely transformed and overjoyed by touching the pieces, and the communication it established has been probably one of the highlights of all my exhibitions because this Daniel just lit up and he was transported into a different world, and just he couldn't get over the beauty that he

could sense with his fingers. I had a large exhibition in Melbourne some years ago and I put up signs 'Please do touch', and then little Johnny was immediately reprimanded by the parents: 'Can't you see you're not supposed to touch?' 'But Mummy, Mummy, it says "Please do touch".' Well, the moral of this story is that we are conditioned not to touch, to sort of step back behind the line, and just not really acceptable; and yet, with sculpture, using all of one's senses is what I'm aiming for and some of the pieces even make a sound. Certainly they have a perfume from the oil of the Huon pine. Certainly there's a possibility of utilising all of our senses and I do invite people to do that, and also to make their own interpretations. The majority of my work is abstract and so therefore it just depends on people's experience and imagination, and anything is totally fine by me, whatever that person sees or whatever that work does to the person is totally in order.

When were you able to support yourself by being a sculptor?

Well, I think it's not that easy, really. And I have to – we did speak about making an honest interview and the facts. (laughs) Well, the truth is that really I need other income as well as income derived from my art, and that's the reality of the situation, so I'm very fortunate that I have worked in a sense towards that, which enables me to be creative and enjoy the various commissions when they come up without having to be totally reliant on living from them. So it's quite idyllic, really, to be in that situation.

So the other aspect of it is and can be that frequently people attempt to exert overmuch influence over commissions, which can be constrictive and not really helpful in terms of individual creativity. Yes.

To be a successful artist, to make a living, you need to be a bit of a businessman.

Yes.

Because if you have an exhibition in Melbourne you've got to collect your material, you've got to pack it up, you've got to ship it there and hopefully make a profit out of the exhibition.

All that effort, yes. Well, it's true that one has to be a very successful promoter, and there are a number of artists who very deliberately concentrate at times more energy on self-promotion than creativity. I don't think that I'm very good at that at all. So recently I have seen some American promotion films of paintings, and really the total

hard sell approach, it just became another commodity and in this case limited editions of four hundred and fifty, and you could be the proud owner of one of these originals for four hundred and fifty. The whole notion is just absolutely absurd and I'm sure that it's very successful if you rate that *being* successful. But there are different ways of evaluating success, and I think first and foremost the integrity – both of the material, the design and the workmanship and the finish – and with sculptures the base of the sculpture – is absolutely as important as a major part of the sculpture, and frequently even fairly successful sculptors sadly neglect that and the finish as well, and it very much detracts and partially destroys the merit of the work. It's not possible to separate and say, 'Well, this is my beautiful carving – ah, the base: oh well, the base doesn't matter.' There's no difference. It's the one unity.

A lot of my sculptures are mobiles and I design that they have a physical ability to move, which again involves the viewers and they're capable of shifting it to a different position, and so therefore can have totally different views and experiences as a result. I think movement, dynamism, energy are all part of it and essential components in my designs, in my works. Sometimes people ask or make the comment, 'Oh, did you find these pieces just like they are now?' With one major mobile the actual top section – that is, discounting the base – from the top section I have removed thirty-five kilograms, six cubic feet of material. So therein lies the answer: 'Yes, of course. Just as I found them. Still I removed the thirty-five kilogram and six cubic feet. It's all there.' And Michelangelo, well, all you have to do is just remove superfluous and it's within the marble. I mean, it's very straightforward, no ambiguities. So that's how it works.

Putting your work in context, how many peers in Australia do you have?

By that do you mean people I look up to or people I work – –?

Look up to, look down a little, at your level?

Well –

Are we talking three, ten, thirty?

– I think essentially I would say that there aren't very many people whose work I really admire and look up to. One of them is a very dear and special friend, is John Dowie. And his special talent and modesty, humility, creativity, energy and of course

the results of his work, are truly admirable. We have a very special, close, beautiful friendship which is quite, quite extraordinary and I am very fortunate and I treasure that. I see John very frequently. He's going to be ninety-two next January, all being well, and it's quite beautiful, yes.

John Dowie has survived in Adelaide, you've survived in Adelaide.

Yes.

Has it been easy to survive in Adelaide? In terms of commissioned work, presumably it would be good to be in Sydney. Or Melbourne.

Well, yes, I suppose the opportunities would be a lot greater there. I'm very fortunate in having found this old coach house and stables in the foothills, and when I discovered it it was just fit for demolition and nobody ever lived in it, only horses. In actual fact, where we are, this is where two horses were, and immediately behind that wall, which of course wasn't here, there were another two horses. And our living room had two carriages and the pegs for the harnesses are still on the wall. So this is a very historical and important place in terms of heritage, and I have managed to make it into something extraordinarily beautiful, so I would be – selfishly, I would be reluctant to move to Sydney or Melbourne or wherever, because everywhere there is evidence of my work round me and it has a very tranquil, inspirational atmosphere. I've planted something like five hundred trees and shrubs here, I reintroduced the bird life, I have about fifty sculptures in the garden, so it's a little world of my own and we have Stonyfell Creek running through the property – which nearly flooded last year and was very rapid again this year with all the rain, it's a winter creek – and there's wonderful bird life. Occasionally, like yesterday, we had two koalas, an adult and then the smaller one. So there are immense joys in just being here. And in terms of creativity it's really very inspirational. And I think basically all my work derives from nature and it's just a shorthand method of portraying and a different language, being abstract, but it means that the real essence or the attempt is to just capture the innermost essence rather than the superfluous bits which are there on the periphery.

How much time do you spend sculpting?

I like to work every day if it's at all possible. I don't only do sculpture, I have a very powerful and ongoing more recent interest in drawing, which regrettably was not part

of my studies and it was not fashionable, which is sad because it really is the basis, so therefore I'm making a concentrated effort to make up for that missing link and I have been to probably by now could be ten what they call 'drawing marathons' and master classes, and there's another one coming up in January, and so that's another great interest that I pursue apart from sculpting. I'm also working towards a major retrospective and recent works exhibition for next year in May, at the Institute Building on North Terrace, the gallery of the South Australian Royal Society of Arts, which will be commemorating its hundred and fiftieth anniversary, and we have been invited to participate within that program. That is Stephanie Schrapel is going to have the wall space with her wonderful photographs, and I'm going to have the floor space with my sculptures. I think it's going to be my biggest exhibition ever, although I have had very major ones in Paris and Budapest and Melbourne, and a couple of years ago I had one here at Gallery M at Marion. All of these were very substantial, but this next one will undoubtedly surpass those previous records. Everything will be for sale – we talked about business before and the need for making sales – so I mean it will be very rewarding (telephone rings) to have some sales. (telephone is answered) There's going to be a voice.

But look, we can just sort of do our best on that. I certainly would like to think that there'll be good publicity. I think, Peter, you asked earlier about various write-ups about me: well, they have been consistently good and some of them quite lavish and outstanding in their praise, which is better than the other way. But the actual immense power of advertising is overwhelming and certainly frightfully expensive, which I don't think that I could afford, so it will have to be perhaps local papers and possible write-ups. I have had very excellent ones. I had some years ago a full page, colour, in *The Advertiser*; I have had one magazine of the Hungarian World Association which had circulation around the world; I have had TV interviews and exposure; but really it has to be maintained and there is this pre-exhibition lead time and all of that, and so a lot will depend on these external factors which to some extent are beyond my control.

END OF DISK 2: DISK 3

Speaking with Andrew Steiner. Today's date is 6th December 2005. Andrew, we're still talking about your art. Have you ever been 'fashionable', or have you ever fallen out of fashion? Is there a fashion in wood sculpture?

Well, I think if somebody is deliberately being commercial and catering for a perceived need or fashion, then yes, there is. I think generally it's very prevalent in America in all forms of art that it is definitely 'the' fashion. And then next year the same art dealers will take their clients and introduce them to the latest sensational fashion. I think that is utterly the wrong attitude and my belief is that inherently it must have longlasting qualities to make it a real piece of art, irrespective of what it is. Nowadays, in particular with sculpture, anything can be sculpture. You put a bag on a table and there is a sculpture. Or somebody hanging himself off the wall with tongue hanging out and a little bit of marmalade: lovely. Lovely living sculpture. Well, I can't really subscribe to any of the fashionable pursuits. But it has to be, I suppose, individual and a lot of it is far too contrived as well, and there doesn't seem to be anything to support the attempt. So I think they're very whimsical at times and transitory, and may well be fashionable.

When I was in New York I went round to the various galleries, I was attempting to arrange an exhibition, which is not that easy and it's much better if people approach you because that's a good start. So we were going round the leading galleries and I recall one of them in particular, I carried a folio of my works plus a couple of medium-sized pieces as well so they could see it, and one of the pieces I had is called 'Intertwine' – and I still have it here in my collection, which I treasure and keep: some of the pieces I'm very attached to and they're kind of my core collection – well, this 'Intertwine' in New York, the director called somebody else and somebody else and 'Extraordinary!' 'How wonderful it is!' and 'It's really fantastic!' However, they only exhibit works of dead artists. So I asked them did they want me to shoot myself there and then. So that's, again, another aspect of it. So I didn't get an exhibition but I'm still here to tell you, so I think it's preferable this way.

And the other which comes from here is posthumous recognitions and glories rarely help the artist, whether he was starving or not starving. But a lot of people firmly believe that artists should starve and artists should not be recognised and artists can be sort of paid a pittance, really, for all the energy, effort and work and hours – I mean, an hourly rate, you couldn't work out how minute it would come to.

But some of the pieces, some of my major pieces, might take several months to do. So that just sort of can't really be considered. Doesn't work like that, no.

But look, I had beautiful, beautiful experiences, for instances, with stained glass windows, and invariably it's a real joy to do them and have them installed, and very few stained glass window artists do the actual design, the physical work and then the installation. Quite a lot of them do the design and then hand it down to somebody else and they sort of execute the work.

So one of the really memorable ones have been a commemorative work for the arrival of a family here a hundred and fifty years ago, and this depicts the Creation, which is an awesome, hard philosophical subject to try and portray that meaningfully in stained glass, not very easy. So I worked for a long, long time to come to grips with this concept and then eventually it all came together and it's just a wonderful encapsulation of the creation of the world.

Tell me a little bit more about the stained glass. Has that been contemporaneous with your wood sculpting, or ---?

Yes, I have been doing stained glass windows now probably for about twenty years, something like that. How it came about, I have a small stained glass window upstairs which was done for me by Cedar Prest, and that sort of gave me a daily joy just looking at it, and then some time later I did a short course and just came from there. My first piece was like a very intricate spider web and again it's not an easy thing to do, and the instructor said, 'Wouldn't you like to try something simple?' I said, 'No, no, this is simple.' And it adorns my studio.

I have two stained glass windows in my studio. And all of these things, I remarked earlier that everywhere here there is evidence of why this place is the way it is, because I have made it into what it is and without all the trees which I planted there was just barrenness; without all the work and care and love to restore this beautiful building ---. People told me afterwards that, had they bought it, they would have just knocked it down and used the stones from it. And in those days heritage building, restoration of an old building, just wasn't on and I had a great deal of resistance, difficulty with the council, to do it. And a year or so after the completion of the work one evening the builder sheepishly arrived unannounced, unexpected, and he said he felt that he just has to apologise to me because it's been a burden to him all

that period. And I said, 'I can't see for what.' He said, 'Well, to tell you the truth, when we were doing the restoration I told everybody that you're stark raving mad, it can't be done. Look at it now.' So this was very, very wonderful.

And now in my early years – must have been I would think about twelve, thirteen – frequently the question [was] asked what did I want to be when I grow up, which is an impossible question, really, but parents repeatedly keep on asking it. Don't they ever learn? No. So there it is, periodical 'What are you going to do when you grow up?' 'I don't know.' And I still don't know. So in sheer desperation I was taken to vocational guidance centre to evaluate my capabilities and whatever – of course, parents must have thought they had a little genius in the making because at age three I said that all the world is a stage and that's without Shakespeare, so they thought, 'Oh, he's something special.' But of course they were wrong again. So I was taken there and very difficult, various co-ordinations and trick questions and 'give one pencil to the other hand' and all that sort of mumbo-jumbo stuff, and then ultimately the moment arrives and they give you the results: well, I could definitely be an actor, they said, which is 'Yes, that's good'; I could be a writer – have done some of that as well – or I could be a detective. But never, ever could I do anything with my hands. Forget it. So this must have been the challenge for me in the background to contradict them, you see. And basically everything, to a large extent, I've done with my hands, without power tools, without computers, without anything like that. And really the human hands are just an extraordinary wonder what they can do – and, at times, what they shouldn't do. But in terms of capabilities it's just extraordinary.

Touching on a subject we discussed before we went on tape and I asked you if you'd had any patrons –

Oh, yes.

– and you said yes.

Yes.

And your face lit up.

That's right. I had almost a patron *saint*, one could say, because Morris West was an ordained priest, pretty well – not quite, but almost. And I had a solo exhibition at Bethany Art Gallery and –

Where is that, and when?

– well, Bethany is very close to Tanunda –

Oh, right, I thought it might have been in New South Wales or something.

– no.

That Bethany I know.

That Bethany, yes: heart of the Barossa Valley where there's good *Gemütlichkeit*, which is hospitality, German hospitality. So I had this solo exhibition there and the then Hungarian Ambassador⁵ very kindly agreed to open it, and so we were there and, as it happened, within a few days we were there again and Morris West and Joy West came in and they kind of fell in love with my work. Naturally, they were introduced to each other and as a result Morris made arrangements with the Hungarian Film Corporation to make a film, and he bought one of my pieces there and they were visiting with some friends from Queensland and they bought another piece, and then subsequently Morris West and I became very close, very good friends. And actually Morris liked painting as a relaxation and he said to me, 'I always wanted to be a sculptor.' And so I said, 'I've always wanted to be a writer.' And I said, 'Well, you carve words and I carve wood.' But we had very memorable times together and then, subsequently, I set up my own gallery upstairs and Maurice came to open it from Sydney, and he made of course a very beautiful opening speech. And coincidentally – by then there was another Hungarian Ambassador and he was here as well and a lot of dignitaries – and I think the gallery is again part of me and it's a sort of extension of this special atmosphere that I have here, and the works essentially were born here so they fit in very, very well. Occasionally I held open days. I haven't been doing that for some time now, but I do receive people by appointment, which is preferable really because it means that they are attuned to what I'm doing. Some of my pieces are in private collection around the world and also there is one public sculpture in the Hungarian National Fine Arts Museum.

⁵ The Bethany exhibition in 1984 was opened by Anne Levy MLC, representing the RH Premier of South Australia. My Canberra exhibition in 1984 was opened by HE Steven Molnar, the Hungarian Ambassador. – AS

There is a very significant sculpture in Melbourne at the Holocaust Museum, which is commemorating the memory of the six million innocent victims and the Resistance and the righteous people who stood up, who were prepared to sacrifice their life who were wonderful, wonderful human beings. Now, this is the edition one which was originally made for a travelling exhibition honouring the righteous gentiles which went right round Australia; and then subsequently I made edition two which is in Safed in Israel at the Hungarian-speaking Jewish Museum; and then I made a third one which is upstairs in my gallery, which travels out from here to various exhibitions when the opportunity comes about. All of these have been made with the ancient lost wax process, which means that whilst the actual design, the theme, is the same in all three editions there are variations, and especially the edition three has got marked variations from the previous two. And this would be probably my most powerful statement and significant work. People who have survived the greatest horrors have been extraordinarily touched and moved by its message and power, and when I first saw it myself I was totally overwhelmed by it. And one group of people said to me, as a form of criticism: 'It's far too powerful, far too powerful.' It means it's doing its job, that's all. And if people are disturbed by it, all the better: they ought to be disturbed, everybody should be disturbed. Very much so. Because – we mentioned it earlier – there is still far too much of this hatred going on and innocent victims suffer. So we're still sort of a long way from being a harmonious world within humankind or within nature – that's the other gigantic problem that we have but are reluctant to face, putting off the day of reckoning, and keep on destroying and keep on being consumers. Although we are getting repeated little – some of them not so little – warnings, seem to be of no avail, so it must be a real good fool's paradise that we're living in.

Let's go back a little again: your parents, how did they survive in Australia? Did they live for very long?

Well, my father died in 1971 and we arrived in 1948.

So he didn't live to see you sculpting.

No. And really he would have approved, because he loved creativity and he loved building, and this whole reconstruction of the coach house I always look upon it as my biggest form of sculpture, because architecture and sculpture are very akin, as you

well know. And to put new life into something which is decayed and almost totally destroyed is a wonderful accomplishment. So yes, my father unfortunately, regrettably, it's sad because I think he would have appreciated it and approved of it.

My mother died in '98, so that's seven years. And she came to the Paris exhibition opening, which was done by Monsieur Jacques Augarde, who was Ancien Ministre of the arts in Paris (telephone rings) and Gough Whitlam. I had joint openers. And all the ambassadors, so it was a very special occasion. And in fact Gough Whitlam had it researched very extensively and said to the group that this Huon pine is not really a pine at all, and Huon is really Huon, a French discoverer, and it's named after him in his honour; and the next was that he thought that I became almost an ambassador for Australia through the Huon pine. Which was very touching and beautiful. Yes.

So we'll continue with a few personal ones. When did you marry Helen?

Oh! Well, this is a recent marriage, like '81.

Is it your first marriage?

Did I say '81?

You said '81.

I did say '81. Well, I think I should have said probably '91. So I sit corrected, I say '91 now, and that is absolutely correct: May 15th, '91. Yes, this is a second, late marriage. And we haven't got any children, I have to be honest.

Any children of your first marriage?

No, no, no, I'm talking about with Helen, yes. No; from my first marriage I have two children and my son is thirty-nine, Ben, he's an actor, which is rather beautiful. But again we're getting back to the precarious situation of the theatre: he can't really get full-time work so he sort of probably largely pays bills through gardening. He's very talented, very dedicated. He wrote one play which he acted in and produced and put on himself, which was pretty fantastic. He did a course in Queensland, dramatic acting and producing, Townsville University. And then there is my daughter, Tamara: she's thirty-seven and she has I think at least half a dozen degrees – I've lost count. She's very scholarly – and my mother forever was studying and she became a solicitor here in Adelaide and practised for many years here, and Tamara

has this, I think, quality of loving to study. She did English, Psychology, Women's Studies, Disability, Librarianship – I mean, these are the ones I can just sort of rattle off. And then, from a different mother, I have my youngest child, Hannah: she must be twenty-four, another beautiful child. All the children are beautiful. And Hannah did International Relationship honours degree, and she was very good with singing and violin. My family have been very musical, some of them very high-calibre, world-class. I have one nephew currently and he's a top violinist; and one of my uncles was also a great violinist and master chess player as well; and one of my aunts used to be a concert pianist; and my sister probably has played something like four instruments. So it's quite a musical family. (pause)

We have one grandson who was born in May, and that's Ben, my number one child, 'Benny Boy', so that's a great joy to us all. We're a closely-knit family but it's very different nowadays in terms of unless you live very, very close to each other, with all the various commitments and undertakings and work and whatever, at times it's not possible to catch up with everybody on that particular day and things like that. But that is probably inevitable and very frequently, of course, children move to other cities and other countries in search of adventure or opportunity or a combination. Currently all three children are living in Adelaide, but there were stages when only one of them was here. So this is very much the current trend.

Your earliest experiences were very much dependent upon your Jewishness. This is why your family was marked out for –

Elimination.

– destruction, I suppose.

Yes.

Are you still Jewish?

Yes.

You said you were secular Jews, without being really zealots.

Yes. Yes, we are involved in the communities here in Adelaide.

You've done some work in synagogues.

Yes, yes. Both the synagogues have stained-glass windows and one, the Progressive, has other works as well, like I have a Tree of Life there and also a bronze plaque of the Ten Commandments. And in addition to that there are, in that synagogue I think there are four major stained-glass windows and also special bronze handles at the entrance door which are the Torah Scrolls – I don't know whether you are familiar with them. They're cylindrical and they have like a finial at top and bottom, and I made four of those in the form of the handles of the main entrance, which means that people should be reminded of the sacred scrolls every time they touch it, and that is probably the most important part of Judaism; and of course its teachings have gone through, to varying degrees, and made the foundation of the civilisations as we know it. A lot of it is very universal, like we are not allowed to stand by idly whilst the neighbour's house is burnt down. It's a very simple thing but it says an awful lot. And there were laws for everything: how servants had to be treated, how animals had to be treated, the various seasons, various festivities, persecutions, battles – everything is there. So hence these handles are very, very significant in this context. So yes, yes, we are part of it.

Look, it's essentially for mainly the reason that we have survived and so many of our brethren have been lost, and so therefore I think it's fitting and proper that I maintain it. But it's all very individual and for every survivor it's a personal decision to make, and a good number have opted out. They don't want *any* religion, they don't want *any* affiliation whatsoever; they just want to sort of be part of the society they live in, because it's too painful for them. And I can appreciate and understand and respect their feelings equally to the others who say, 'Well, I definitely want to practise, absolutely, and be fully committed.' So they're equally valid and it's not for me to judge one way or another.

Two quick questions to just put something behind us: you were President of the Society of Arts for a period.

Yes.

Were you much involved in art politics?

I was President for two periods, two terms. Not really. At that time there was quite a significant undercurrent and I think I did my best to even out the situation and certainly there was no favouritism on my part and I had a very open mind about it.

We did succeed in getting some fairly significant grants. With one of those I put on a huge sculpture exhibition, Sculpture '85, and that was – I think we had about seventy, and a very major event. Now, even in that one might say that there must have been some politics involved in the background in getting the grant, but in terms of dealing with the Art Council, things like that, I had no dealings with them. Where we are now is the original building which was purposefully built for us, but currently, with the redevelopment of the [State] Library, we are in a sense in a tenancy situation which I'm not totally familiar with all its legal implications. Undoubtedly, originally the Society had this building built for them, and in perpetuity, so whether these are sufficiently sacrosanct and still meaningful and valid today to the same extent I don't know. But the actual gallery, with the refurbishment, looks magnificent once more and we're quite fortunate in having a lot of natural light and beautiful space and atmosphere.

And the Society is very, very active. The South Australian Art Gallery is really an offshoot of the original Royal Society of Arts because that's where it all started, and we have had a lot of very illustrious, world-famous artists through it. So it's been quite a privilege to be their president, which I didn't lobby for; in fact, it was sort of decided and I was informed that it would be rather nice, (laughs) and a lot of people, 'a lot of people who know feel positive that it would be very, very good'. The question wasn't asked whether it would be good for the Society or good for me, but it was just stated it would be 'very good'. And I think it was very good. We had some fantastic exhibitions and some of those wounds were healed during my presidencies, and I did my best to give something back within that context. So I think everybody in the art world can kind of look forward to next year's special activities: there'll be some fantastic exhibitions and functions, so – – –.

One last question: if you were to design a sculpture of yourself, what would it look like? Would you get a nice, smooth piece of wood, timber, or a gnarled piece of timber; would it have symmetry, would it be – – –?

Well, to that I take – well, it's not necessarily the easy or the easiest way out, but John Dowie a few years ago said that he had thought about it and he would like to do my head, which he did, and he thinks it's one of the best portraits he has ever done. And he said, 'Well, really, old boy, you look like a Renaissance man', so I thought that was rather wonderful; and of course to be asked, invited, such an honour because

John has refused very many commissions if they were not to his liking – awkward people or whatever – and it’s an extraordinary experience. A number of people have painted my portrait, but John did this wonderful, wonderful head in clay and then ultimately it was cast in bronze, lost wax process, and it’s just amazing to see this coming to life in front of you. It’s kind of uncanny, because it’s you and it’s not you, and it’s another person almost. And this one has captured my innermost thoughts, really. And it’s not at all smooth, it’s very rough, and one can see John’s thumbprints, and he put a little cap on me, being a Renaissance man. And subsequently Di Fenwick did a painting of me, a portraiture, which is very, very successful in a different way, and she called it the ‘Renaissance man’ as well. So it’s probably not a bad reputation to have.

Can I ask one more question?

Sure.

This might be getting very personal, and in one sense it harks right back to the very, very beginning. During the course of the interview you’re a very serious person. Do you ever do anything whimsically?

I think essentially I am very serious. And I think it’s a combination of all those experiences, and I do treat things seriously and so I feel that I am responsible for what I’m saying or what I’m writing or what I’m doing, and it is a quite serious matter. But I also have a sense of humour and invariably and inevitably I can make people laugh very readily, so that’s another side of me. But doing – look, since – – –.

As grandfather you must –

Do something that – – –.

– beam and delight [in] having a grandchild.

Yes, it’s a wonderful joy and of course a great moment. But there was very little lightheartedness and so I remember that probably would have been in very early 1950s, maybe ’55, and someone said to me, here in Adelaide, ‘Why is it that you never laugh?’ And what can one say to that? With all those bestialities and horrors, destruction and suffering, it’s probably not that easy to sort of have – – –. Sure, I appreciate at times when people wholeheartedly laugh, it’s probably very good for them, but it’s something that very rarely happens to me. I don’t think it does.

Did it happen when you were about six?

When I was about six?

Prior to 1939, was it a happy household?

Well, yes. But –

It's getting a long time to remember back, I know.

– no, no, no: look, I can remember it very clearly. The point was that children were largely a separate little existence, and the kind of approach and the way we addressed our parents and that upbringing was really very, very strict and in a sense almost, looking back, old-fashioned; but certainly in certain stratas it was the norm. In Hungarian language we have ‘you’ and ‘thou’ differentiation, and of course with parents, with elder people, it was always ‘thou’ and none of this thing like, ‘Oh, hi George’, and ‘George’ being the father just didn’t exist at all. So we didn’t have all that much lightheartedness. My father was in a very demanding, high position, so we didn’t see much of my father at all. And he was a lot older than my mother, and immediately I think it must have widened the age gap – if somebody here has a child at say twenty, that person is terribly, terribly young, so therefore the actual gap between that twenty year-old parent and the child is – my father was forty when I was born. And then, having gone through the First World War and what he has seen there is beyond belief and comprehension: mountains of frozen dead, absolute devastation, eight years a prisoner of war. But he had a terrific sense of humour, he sang nicely, loved dancing, loved the theatre, opera, and lots and lots of work, of course. And the work was a career and in an executive position, speaking several languages, he travelled all over Europe and England. So there were times when we rarely saw him. And then we had the paternal grandmother. Each Sunday afternoon all the family went there. They didn’t have to go, they wanted to go, they loved being there. All the uncles, aunts, cousins, every Sunday afternoon. I don’t think I’m really necessarily nostalgic about it, but it’s a historical fact.

And, incidentally, she would have been saint-like, beautiful, beautiful person, and people from far and wide went to her for advice. Didn’t matter what it was – matrimonial, job, health, money, whatever – they went to her, because she was just total goodness and compassion. And very educated woman. Bear in mind that we’re

talking about – she would have been born, must have been very early 1800s, and she came from a very wealthy and prosperous and respected family, and then the girls were educated – she had two sisters – they were educated. And she was fluent in at least German and Hungarian. So it was different sense of time and responsibility.

Now, how often you ring up nowadays and ‘What’s your name?’, you give them your [name]: ‘Well, *Peter* – – –.’ I mean, excuse me. I’m not being snobbish, but really I don’t think it would hurt overmuch to maintain some of the formalities and nice behaviour. And that’s of course after you have been through the waiting period of being told how important your call is and how your time is very valuable for them. And then, eventually, a human voice appears somewhere at a distance, which might be New Delhi now, and ‘Oh yes, Peter. Oh!’ So I mean that’s the difference between then and now. But I have no sort of – I’m not wishing to turn the clock back or anything like that, I’m just stating my experience, that’s all.

Andrew, we’ve got about two minutes left.

Yes.

Anything you haven’t said that you would like to say?

Yes. I would very much like to see that more emphasis is placed in the education on understanding, harmony, the respect of every fellow human being, to the same degree as you would like them to respect you. And also very much to respect our nature, which I have briefly mentioned before, how we are callously and wantonly destroying it. Irreparable damage is being done while we’re sitting here now, still huge areas of Queensland are being cleared, Tasmania’s another good case, so is Victoria. I think within our state we haven’t got many native forests and we have been quite prudent here in setting up the pine forests, although it had its own problems; now we have switched to native plantations in the South East, which is very encouraging. But we could be doing all sorts of things with – more specifically with solar energy, which is so very readily available to us and we just haven’t been doing it yet. The water, the wastage of water, is another horrible, horrible thing that we are still doing here in the driest state of the driest continent, and we just haven’t really woken up, we’re not taking it seriously enough, unfortunately. I shan’t get on to being cynical about the politicians because that would be another story.

And a need for another tape, but I'll have to leave it there, Andrew. Thank you very much. It's been wonderful.

Well, thank you very much, Peter, for the interview.

END OF INTERVIEW.