

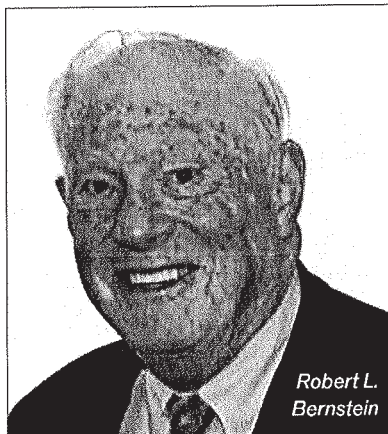
"Robert L. Bernstein made passion a standard for a life of consequence and service."

The Passions of Bob Bernstein

A colleague remembers the many facets of the late Random House chairman

BY PETER OSNOS

People are fortunate if they have one great passion in life. Robert L. Bernstein, who died May 27, had three, starting with his family. He also had publishing. For a quarter century, he led Random House Inc., turning it into an enterprise as luminous as it was successful. In the mid-1980s, when *Fortune* magazine listed its "100 Best Companies in America to Work For," Random House was among them. And there was Bernstein's passion for human rights, starting with his support of individuals under KGB pressure, then moving on to do whatever was possible by peaceful means to protect whole societies from tyrants around the world.



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Bob and his wife, Helen, were coming to Moscow, and my wife, Susan, and I were flattered to be asked to be among the hosts for the Bernsteins. While in Moscow, they met Nobel laureate Sakharov and with a handshake gave him a book contract. Before leaving, Bob told me that he didn't think journalism was "a fit profession for a grown man" and that I should call him if I ever decided to get serious about work.

That is how, in 1984, I was hired as a senior editor at Random House. At the same time, Susan became the first press director of the HRW watch committees. Without a

clue as to what it meant, I asked to be named associate publisher of the Random House imprint if I was still employed after six months. It was in keeping with Bob's management style that he agreed, knowing that it was up to me to figure out what book editors and publishers actually did.

After a few weeks, I complained to Bob about not being invited to a meeting. He looked at me, unsmiling, and said, "Keep your eyes on the books. If they work, you will be fine. If they don't, nothing will save you."

In 1990, S.I. Newhouse, Random House's proprietor, replaced Bob. For the next 30 years—until his final illness at 96—Bob maintained a meaningful place as a sponsor of important human rights-related books throughout the industry. He became chair and/or founder of several human rights groups, including several focused on China. He argued on behalf of Israel, believing it to be its region's only real democracy, whatever its shortcomings. Human rights fellowships in Bob's name, funded by others, were established at Yale and NYU law schools.

In a last good day before he died last Monday, Bob asked one of his 10 grandchildren (there are also four great-grandchildren) to get a computer. He began to dictate an op-ed piece he had in mind on the spread of hate speech.

Robert L. Bernstein made passion—he always said he was, himself, a "triumph of persistence" over skill—a standard for a life of consequence and service. ■

Peter Osnos is the founder of PublicAffairs Books, an imprint of the Hachette Book Group whose books each carry a dedication to Bernstein.

Forty years ago, Bob cofounded Helsinki Watch (named after the signing place of a pact among 35 countries on a range of issues) to monitor the activities of dissidents such as Andrei Sakharov in the Soviet Union and Vaclav Havel in Czechoslovakia. In time, watch committees were added for the Americas, Asia, Africa, the Middle East, the United States, women's rights, children's rights, LGBTQ rights, and others.

That organization is now called Human Rights Watch, and it has a staff of nearly 500 and an endowment of around \$100 million, and it is, unquestionably, the most influential human rights organization in the world. I remember Bob declaring at a board meeting, "We endow universities, hospitals, and libraries. Let's endow our values!"

HRW's combination of impeccable investigation and tenacious advocacy has become a major factor in the never-ending struggle for true freedom and equality. It was Bob who raised the early money, travelled to the Soviet bloc, and mobilized publicity on behalf of activists in trouble. He did all that based out of his CEO office at Random House.

From that same office, Bob also managed the temperaments and talents of some of the most celebrated editors and publishing professionals of the era, and writers ranging from Dr. Seuss to James Michener and Toni Morrison, who left her job at a small academic publisher in upstate New York to join Random House as an editor.

In 1976, I was the *Washington Post* correspondent in Moscow.

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