

May 27, 2004

Roger W. Straus Jr., Book Publisher, Dies at 87

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

Roger W. Straus Jr., the brash and opinionated grandee who presided for nearly six decades over the book-publishing company that bore his name, the last surviving representative of the age of independent houses owned privately by gentlemen of literary taste, died Tuesday at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City. He was 87 and lived in Manhattan.

The cause was pneumonia, said his son, Roger Straus III.

With its distinguished list of authors and its course set almost entirely at the proprietor's discretion, Farrar, Straus & Giroux — as it was known for much of its existence — approached uniqueness as the conglomeration boom swept through the publishing trade in the 1960's and 70's.

"It's an object of great curiosity," an industry member told The New York Times in 1978. "Very rare — like an antique spinning wheel or a nickelodeon." But even Mr. Straus finally acknowledged the squeeze of market forces on his specialty shop. He sold the company 10 years ago to a European media giant, though he remained largely in charge.

Mr. Straus, whose East Side town house doubled as one of New York's premier literary salons, was never shy about speaking out on behalf of his publishing style. He would say of the conglomerates that they were "being run by accountants, businessmen and lawyers who have very little concern for the book." He concluded, "They could just as well be selling string, spaghetti or rugs."

He was equally critical of what he considered the overhyping of books, of book awards in the United States, of the state of book reviewing and of what giant bookstore chains were doing to the marketing of books.

"Most publishers seem like wallpaper," he told Publishers Weekly in 1977 in response to a question about his outspokenness and availability to the press. "Most of them today are either promoted bookkeepers or ambitious men and women who care only for power and couldn't care less what they actually publish." He concluded, "If publishers don't say much, it's probably because they don't have much to say."

He often backed up his words with action, resigning from the Association of American Publishers in 1978 to protest what he saw as its accommodating response to mergers, supporting the formation of a writers union in 1982, and dismissing Philip Roth, one of his most prestigious writers, from his list when an agent demanded what he considered too large an advance.

Even when his actions seemed at odds with his philosophy, he could take bold steps. In 1965 he signed up Sammy Davis Jr.'s autobiography, "Yes, I Can" (and edited the manuscript himself), because even though the book did not fit into his elite list, he saw that it would rise to the top of the best-seller lists, which in due course it did.

In 1994, when he recognized that his house could no longer compete financially as an independent in a world of conglomerates, he sold Farrar, Straus to one of the foreign media companies he so scorned, Georg von Holtzbrinck Publishing Group, in Stuttgart, although, as he insisted in the wake of the deal (reported to have brought him more than \$30 million), the arrangement was such that for all practical purposes FSG remained independent.

Farrar, Straus & Giroux began as Farrar, Straus & Company in 1946 with a small list of historical novels and nutrition manuals and grew into the leading publisher of literary heavyweights and prestigious best sellers.

Even a sampling of its authors amounts to an international roll call of literary book award winners and brand names:

Joseph Brodsky (Nobel Prize and National Book Critics Circle Award), T. S. Eliot (Nobel Prize), Nadine Gordimer (Nobel Prize), Robert Lowell (Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award and National Book Critics Circle Award), John McPhee (Pulitzer Prize), Bernard Malamud (Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award), Czeslaw Milosz (Nobel Prize).

And Flannery O'Connor (National Book Award and National Book Critics Circle Award), Philip Roth (Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award and National Book Critics Circle Award), Isaac Bashevis Singer (Nobel Prize and National Book Award), Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn (Nobel Prize), Susan Sontag (National Book Award and National Book Critics Circle Award), Edmund Wilson, Tom Wolfe (National Book Award), Marguerite Yourcenar.

On a given evening in Mr. Straus's heyday, a few of his authors might gather with other writers at his town house surrounded by members of the press and publishing industry to celebrate another book publication. Mr. Straus would move among them, resplendent in cravat and pinstriped suit and cufflinks, addressing even casual acquaintances as "Baby" or "Darling," regaling them with gossip in his nasal drawl or confiding in them some expletive-studded anecdote about one of his less favorite people — a rival publisher or a literary agent or reviewer — on whom he had pinned some derogatory tagline.

There, at a typical cocktail reception, you could see Edmund Wilson feeding canapes to the Straus family poodle, Mister Schwartz, or, at a black-tie dinner party after which the ladies and gentlemen would retire to separate rooms, you could hear Philip Rahv, the editor of *Partisan Review*, heaping imprecations on some contemporary writer or another.

Was there a connection between Mr. Straus's skill at schmoozing and entertaining, and the distinction of his list? Absolutely! many of his authors would insist. He was always available, they would point out. "They treat me well," Isaac Bashevis Singer once said in a tribute to his publisher, "and if I have to ask a question, I can call up the big boss."

He was attentive. By staying in close touch with his stable of writers, he concerned himself not only with their work but also with their lives. When Charles Jackson, the author of "The Lost Weekend," took an overdose of sleeping pills while a guest at the Straus home, he packed him off to the hospital and tended his recovery. When another of his writers became seriously ill, he went about secretly raising money from mutual friends to help pay medical expenses.

And he talked straight. When John McPhee, who was close to Mr. Straus for some four decades, once asked how much money he was losing by not having an agent to negotiate for him, Mr. Straus replied, "Oh, not a whole hell of a lot." When Mr. McPhee thought to request an advance for one of his books, Mr. Straus turned him down with a profanity.

More important, however, Mr. Straus looked after the books he published. Because he remained independent so long and thus had less working capital than did his conglomerate rivals, he might have paid smaller advances against royalties to his authors (except when in 1971 he paid \$450,000 for the English-language rights to the Solzhenitsyn's novel "August 1914"); he might have sold their books' subsidiary rights in advance of publication, thus lowering his risk; and his office fronting on Union Square might have seemed almost pretentiously down-at-heels. (Tom Wolfe once described how the drug deals and assaults out front came to a "momentary but deferential halt" each morning as Mr. Straus's Mercedes pulled up to the building.)

But he designed his books attractively, marketed them intelligently and kept them in print forever (albeit sometimes in small supply, or so his authors occasionally complained). He stuck with writers whose first few books did not sell well (and was often enough rewarded for doing so, as in the case of the modestly selling Mr. McPhee, whose 13th book, "Coming Into the Country," soared onto the best-seller list).

He actively courted the writers of so-called midlist books, generally shunned by other publishers. And in the cases where he eventually had to remainder a book, he paid its authors a royalty on the sale, the first American publisher to do so.

He busied himself with every aspect of his business. Despite his reliance on a stable of outstanding editors, he read manuscripts, sat in on editorial and sales meetings, and involved himself in the sale of subsidiary and international rights. In short, he made all the major decisions, both editorial and financial, that went into publishing each book.

Such was the appeal of Mr. Straus's way of doing business that Scott Turow, the author of best-selling legal thrillers, was moved to accept an advance of \$200,000 from Farrar, Straus for his first novel, "Presumed Innocent," rather than another publisher's \$350,000, because Mr. Straus "had published more of the books I admired than any other publishing house."

Roger Williams Straus Jr. was born Jan. 3, 1917, the second of three children of Roger W. Straus, the president of the American Mining and Smelting Company, and Gladys Guggenheim. His father, of the Straus family that ran Macy's after 1896, worked for his father-in-law, David Guggenheim, who as well as owning a copper mine was a philanthropist. Mr. Straus's paternal grandfather was Oscar S. Straus, former United States ambassador to Turkey and Secretary of Commerce in President Theodore Roosevelt's administration.

Reared in comfort that he described to *The New Yorker* as "semi-formal" — home on Park Avenue; weekends with grandparents in Purchase, N.Y., and in Port Washington, on Long Island — Mr. Straus proved an indifferent student, to the disappointment of his demanding father. Attending St. George's School in Newport, R.I., instead of the more estimable St.

Paul's, and leaving after his junior year because he found being a Jew there mildly uncomfortable, Mr. Straus went on to Hamilton College (instead of Princeton, his father's alma mater), from which he also neglected to graduate.

Inspired by summer work he had done for The White Plains Daily Reporter, he transferred after his second year at Hamilton to the school of journalism at the University of Missouri. The next year, in June 1938, he married a childhood friend he had begun dating in the interval between Hamilton and Missouri, Dorothea Liebmann, the granddaughter of the founder of Rheingold brewery and a student at Sarah Lawrence. Their son, Roger Williams Straus III, was born in 1943.

In addition to his wife and son, Mr. Straus is survived by three grandchildren.

After Mr. Straus graduated from Missouri in 1939 (he received an honorary D. Litt. in 1976), the couple moved back to New York City. With the security of their two trust funds to support them, he went to work as a reporter for the White Plains paper and left after two years to take a job as an editorial assistant at Current History magazine. In his spare time he began to package books for G. P. Putnam's Sons, among them "War Letters From Britain," a successful collection of first-person accounts of the London blitz he put together with the British writer Diana Forbes-Robertson.

When the United States entered the war, Mr. Straus was invited by a playboy friend, James Van Alen (who later invented the tiebreaker in tennis), to join him in running the New York office of the Magazine and Book Section of the Navy Office of Public Relations. For the duration of the war, Mr. Straus wrote speeches, gave clearance to reporters traveling overseas and approved magazine copy. He rose to the rank of lieutenant.

Following the war, after determining that he preferred book publishing to journalism, he decided to start a company of his own. His father put him in touch with Charles Merz, then the editorial page editor of The New York Times. Merz in turn introduced him to John Farrar, who had co-founded Farrar and Rinehart in 1929 but did not return to the company after the war. Farrar agreed to become a founder of Farrar, Straus & Co. in 1946, with \$30,000 of Mr. Straus's inheritance, \$70,000 from Van Alen (whose parents reportedly didn't want his name to appear as a partner because Mr. Straus was a Jew) and \$50,000 from several other friends. The company began operations from Mr. Straus's Naval office for rent of \$1 a year. Mr. Straus was 29.

Although in 1950 the young company was buoyed by the commercial success of Gayelord Hauser's "Look Younger, Live Longer," which sold 300,000 copies in its first year, Mr. Straus found that he didn't have the capital to compete with the more commercial publishers. This confirmed his intention to become a literary house, with the benefit of higher prestige and lower costs.

But since literary agents were unlikely to choose Farrar, Straus over houses like Scribner's, Harcourt and Knopf, he decided to go abroad for material. By doing so he picked up writers like Carlo Levi ("Christ Stopped at Eboli"), Alberto Moravia and Cesare Pavese. These in turn attracted the likes of Edmund Wilson, Shirley Jackson and Marguerite Yourcenar. The plan was working.

The house also grew by acquiring other companies, or "eating other fish," as Mr. Straus put it, "because that's the way it is": Hendricks House (1948), Creative Age Press (1951), Pellegrini & Cudahy (1953), L. C. Page and Company (1957), Noonday Press (1960), Octagon (1968) and Hill & Wang (1971). These acquisitions served the various purposes of bringing in new authors, like Marguerite Duras and François Mauriac, of building up the company's backlist, and of getting Farrar, Straus into children's books, college texts and quality paperbacks.

As the company grew, its name changed, first, in 1950, to Farrar, Straus & Young (after Stanley Young, an original stockholder); then, in 1953, to Farrar, Straus & Cudahy (after Sheila Cudahy, a partner in Pellegrini & Cudahy); and finally, in 1964, to Farrar, Straus & Giroux (after Robert Giroux, who came over from Harcourt, Brace & Co. in 1955 as editor in chief and was promoted to the position of chairman of the board in 1964).

Mr. Giroux, who had run Harcourt Brace's trade division but left because he was concerned about the growing emphasis on the textbook business there, was to attract some of Farrar, Straus's major writers, among them 17 who followed him from Harcourt Brace, including T. S. Eliot, Robert Lowell, Flannery O'Connor and Bernard Malamud. Yet other talented editors played important roles over the years: Henry Robbins, who brought in Tom Wolfe and Joan Didion; Aaron Asher, who attracted Philip Roth, Brian Moore and Arthur Miller; Michael di Capua, who edited Maurice Sendak and William Steig; and Jonathan Galassi, president and publisher at the time of Mr. Straus's death.

But Mr. Straus remained the house's dominant figure. Even his after-business hours were devoted to the care and feeding of his writers, whether that involved entertaining them at home or in restaurants, or traveling abroad to add more of them to his stable, or accompanying them to Sweden to collect yet another Nobel Prize. ("He gives a fake groan and says, 'Oh, my God, I have to go to Stockholm again,' " Derek Walcott, one of his many laureates, told The New Yorker.)

His only breaks from his publishing routine were weekends at his country house in Purchase, where in temperate weather he would lounge by his swimming pool with his family and poodle (and often enough an author or two) or play tennis at the Westchester Country Club. The Strauses' devotion to the weekend home, passed down to them from his father's family, was so great that when it burned to the ground in 1985 they built as exact a reproduction of the sprawling structure as they could practically manage.

Such was Mr. Straus's presence in his publishing house that finally no room could be provided for his son, Roger W. Straus III, who after several attempts at working for the company with the idea of eventually taking it over, left the business in 1993 over "philosophical differences," a company news release announced. He now makes his living as a photographer. In the place of his son, Mr. Straus designated Mr. Galassi as his successor as publisher, although the future of the company would ultimately depend on Holtzbrinck's plans.

Yet Mr. Straus's aura remained ambiguous, with the barest hint of intellectual insecurity, "a jock's self-consciousness about his poetic roommate," as Ian Parker put it in a New Yorker profile.

"I don't understand a quarter of what I publish," he once confided to this reporter.

But his protestations were deemed by some of his intimates to be a pose for someone who was actually a sensitive reader and a lover of good prose.

The thrill of discovery never ceased to entice him. "That's why you get up in the morning with a bounce in your feet," he told Mr. Parker. "You've discovered a new author you think is marvelous."

"It's very sexy," he added. "It feels great. It's a triumph."