

Oral History Center  
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University of California  
Berkeley, California

Kenneth Roth

*Kenneth Roth: Human Rights Watch and Achieving Global Impact*

The Marion and Herbert Sandler Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by  
Martin Meeker  
in 2018

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Kenneth Roth, "Kenneth Roth: Human Rights Watch and Achieving Global Impact," Marion and Herbert Sandler Oral History Project, conducted by Martin Meeker in 2018, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2019.



Kenneth Roth

Photo courtesy of Human Rights Watch

**Kenneth Roth** is the executive director of Human Rights Watch, an organization he first joined in 1987. Prior to this, Roth served as a federal prosecutor in New York and for the Iran-Contra investigation in Washington, DC. In this interview, Roth discusses: Roth's upbringing, education, and early career; interest in human rights work; joining Human Rights Watch in 1987; becoming executive director of Human Rights Watch and consolidating several affiliated organizations into one; key activities of Human Rights Watch; meeting Herb and Marion Sandler, thoughts on working alongside donors; foundations and measuring impact.

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## **Project History: the Marion and Herb Sandler Oral History Project**

Herb Sandler and Marion Osher Sandler formed one of the most remarkable partnerships in the histories of American business and philanthropy—and, if their friends and associates would have a say in things, in the living memory of marriage writ large. This oral history project documents the lives of Herb and Marion Sandler through their shared pursuits in raising a family, serving as co-CEOs for the savings and loan Golden West Financial, and establishing a remarkably influential philanthropy in the Sandler Foundation. This project consists of eighteen unique oral history interviews, at the center of which is a 24-hour life history interview with Herb Sandler.

Marion Osher Sandler was born October 17, 1930, in Biddeford, Maine, to Samuel and Leah Osher. She was the youngest of five children; all of her siblings were brothers and all went on to distinguished careers in medicine and business. She attended Wellesley as an undergraduate where she was elected into Phi Beta Kappa. Her first postgraduate job was as an assistant buyer with Bloomingdale's in Manhattan, but she left in pursuit of more lofty goals. She took a job on Wall Street, in the process becoming only the second woman on Wall Street to hold a non-clerical position. She started with Dominick & Dominick in its executive training program and then moved to Oppenheimer and Company where she worked as a highly respected analyst. While building an impressive career on Wall Street, she earned her MBA at New York University.

Herb Sandler was born on November 16, 1931 in New York City. He was the second of two children and remained very close to his brother, Leonard, throughout his life. He grew up in subsidized housing in Manhattan's Lower East Side neighborhood of Two Bridges. Both his father and brother were attorneys (and both were judges too), so after graduating from City College, he went for his law degree at Columbia. He practiced law both in private practice and for the Waterfront Commission of New York Harbor where he worked on organized crime cases. While still living with his parents at Knickerbocker Village, he engaged in community development work with the local settlement house network, Two Bridges Neighborhood Council. At Two Bridges he was exposed to the work of Episcopal Bishop Bill Wendt, who inspired his burgeoning commitment to social justice.

Given their long and successful careers in business, philanthropy, and marriage, Herb and Marion's story of how they met has taken on somewhat mythic proportions. Many people interviewed for this project tell the story. Even if the facts don't all align in these stories, one central feature is shared by all: Marion was a force of nature, self-confident, smart, and, in Herb's words, "sweet, without pretensions." Herb, however, always thought of himself as unremarkable, just one of the guys. So when he first met Marion, he wasn't prepared for this special woman to be actually interested in dating him. The courtship happened reasonably quickly despite some personal issues that needed to be addressed (which Herb discusses in his interview) and introducing one another to their respective families (but, as Herb notes, not to seek approval!).

Within a few years of marriage, Marion was bumping up against the glass ceiling on Wall Street, recognizing that she would not be making partner status any time soon. While working as an analyst, however, she learned that great opportunity for profit existed in the savings and loan sector, which was filled with bloat and inefficiency as well as lack of financial sophistication and incompetence among the executives. They decided to find an investment opportunity in California and, with the help of Marion's brothers (especially Barney), purchased a tiny two-branch thrift in Oakland, California: Golden West Savings and Loan.

Golden West—which later operated under the retail brand of World Savings—grew by leaps and bounds, in part through acquisition of many regional thrifts and in part through astute research leading to organic expansion into new geographic areas. The remarkable history of Golden West is revealed in great detail in many of the interviews in this project, but most particularly in the interviews with Herb Sandler, Steve Daetz, Russ Kettell, and Mike Roster, all of whom worked at the institution. The savings and loan was marked by key attributes during the forty-three years in which it was run by the Sandlers. Perhaps most important among these is the fact that over that period of time the company was profitable all but two years. This is even more remarkable when considering just how volatile banking was in that era, for there were liquidity crises, deregulation schemes, skyrocketing interest rates, financial recessions, housing recessions, and the savings and loan crisis of the 1980s, in which the entire sector was nearly obliterated through risky or foolish decisions made by Congress, regulators, and managements. Through all of this, however, Golden West delivered consistent returns to their investors. Indeed, the average annual growth in earnings per share over 40 years was 19 percent, a figure that made Golden West second only to Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway, and the second best record in American corporate history.

Golden West is also remembered for making loans to communities that had been subject to racially and economically restrictive redlining practices. Thus, the Sandlers played a role in opening up the dream of home ownership to more Americans. In the offices too, Herb and Marion made a point of opening positions to women, such as branch manager and loan officer, previously held only by men. And, by the mid-1990s, Golden West began appointing more women and people of color to its board of directors, which already was presided over by Marion Sandler, one of the longest-serving female CEOs of a major company in American history. The Sandlers sold Golden West to Wachovia in 2006. The interviews tell the story of the sale, but at least one major reason for the decision was the fact that the Sandlers were spending a greater percentage of their time in philanthropic work.

One of the first real forays by the Sandlers into philanthropic work came in the wake of the passing of Herb's brother Leonard in 1988. Herb recalls his brother with great respect and fondness and the historical record shows him to be a just and principled attorney and jurist. Leonard was dedicated to human rights, so after his passing, the Sandlers created a fellowship in his honor at Human Rights Watch. After this, the Sandlers giving grew rapidly in their areas of greatest interest: human rights, civil rights, and medical research. They stepped up to become major donors to Human Rights Watch and, after the arrival of Anthony Romero in 2001, to the American Civil Liberties Union.

The Sandler's sponsorship of medical research demonstrates their unique, creative, entrepreneurial, and sometimes controversial approach to philanthropic work. With the American Asthma Foundation, which they founded, the goal was to disrupt existing research patterns and to interest scientists beyond the narrow confines of pulmonology to investigate the disease and to produce new basic research about it. Check out the interview with Bill Seaman for more on this initiative. The Program for Breakthrough Biomedical Research at the University of California, San Francisco likewise seeks out highly-qualified researchers who are willing to engage in high-risk research projects. The interview with program director Keith Yamamoto highlights the impacts and the future promise of the research supported by the Sandler's. The Sandler Fellows program at UCSF selects recent graduate school graduates of unusual promise and provides them with a great deal of independence to pursue their own research agenda, rather than serve as assistants in established labs. Joe DeRisi was one of the first Sandler Fellows and, in his interview, he describes the remarkable work he has accomplished while at UCSF as a fellow and, now, as faculty member who heads his own esteemed lab.

The list of projects, programs, and agencies either supported or started by the Sandler's runs too long to list here, but at least two are worth mentioning for these endeavors have produced impacts wide and far: the Center for American Progress and ProPublica. The Center for American Progress had its origins in Herb Sandler's recognition that there was a need for a liberal policy think tank that could compete in the marketplace of ideas with groups such as the conservative Heritage Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute. The Sandler's researched existing groups and met with many well-connected and highly capable individuals until they forged a partnership with John Podesta, who had served as chief of staff under President Bill Clinton. The Center for American Progress has since grown by leaps and bounds and is now recognized for being just what it set out to be.

The same is also true with ProPublica. The Sandler's had noticed the decline of traditional print journalism in the wake of the internet and lamented what this meant for the state of investigative journalism, which typically requires a meaningful investment of time and money. After spending much time doing due diligence—another Sandler hallmark—and meeting with key players, including Paul Steiger of the Wall Street Journal, they took the leap and established a not-for-profit investigative journalism outfit, which they named ProPublica. ProPublica not only has won several Pulitzer Prizes, it has played a critical role in supporting our democratic institutions by holding leaders accountable to the public. Moreover, the Sandler Foundation is now a minority sponsor of the work of ProPublica, meaning that others have recognized the value of this organization and stepped forward to ensure its continued success. Herb Sandler's interview as well as several other interviews describe many of the other initiatives created and/or supported by the foundation, including: the Center for Responsible Lending, Oceana, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, Learning Policy Institute, and more.

A few interviewees shared the idea that when it comes to Herb and Marion Sandler there are actually three people involved: Marion Sandler, Herb Sandler, and “Herb and Marion.” The later creation is a kind of mind-meld between the two which was capable of expressing opinions, making decisions, and forging a united front in the ambitious projects that they accomplished. I think this makes great sense because I find it difficult to fathom that two individuals alone could do what they did. Because Marion Sandler passed away in 2012, I was not able to interview her, but I am confident in my belief that a very large part of her survives in Herb’s love of “Herb and Marion,” which he summons when it is time to make important decisions. And let us not forget that in the midst of all of this work they raised two accomplished children, each of whom make important contributions to the foundation and beyond. Moreover, the Sandlers have developed many meaningful friendships (see the interviews with Tom Laqueur and Ronnie Caplane), some of which have spanned the decades.

The eighteen interviews of the Herb and Marion Sandler oral history project, then, are several projects in one. It is a personal, life history of a remarkable woman and her mate and life partner; it is a substantive history of banking and of the fate of the savings and loan institution in the United States; and it is an examination of the current world of high-stakes philanthropy in our country at a time when the desire to do good has never been more needed and the importance of doing that job skillfully never more necessary.

Martin Meeker, Charles B. Faulhaber Director, Oral History Center, UC Berkeley

**List of Interviews of the Marion and Herbert Sandler Oral History Project**

Ronnie Caplane, “Ronnie Caplane: On Friendship with Marion and Herb.”

Steve Daetz, “Steve Daetz: Values and Leadership at Golden West Financial and the Sandler Foundation.”

Joseph DeRisi, “Joe DeRisi: From Sandler Fellow to UCSF Professor of Biochemistry.”

Stephen Hauser, “Stephen Hauser: Establishing the Sandler Neurosciences Center at UCSF.”

Russell Kettell, “Russ Kettell: A Career with Golden West Financial.”

Thomas Laqueur, “Tom Laqueur: On the Meaning of Friendship.”

Bernard Osher, “Barney Osher: On Marion Osher Sandler.”

John Podesta, “John Podesta: Building Infrastructure for Progressive Politics with the Center for American Progress.”

Anthony Romero, “Anthony Romero: Leadership of the American Civil Liberties Union in Times of Crisis.”

Michael Roster, “Michael Roster: Attorney and Golden West Financial General Counsel.”

Kenneth Roth, “Kenneth Roth: Human Rights Watch and Achieving Global Impact.”

Herbert Sandler, “Herbert Sandler: A Life with Marion Osher Sandler in Business and Philanthropy.”

James Sandler, “Jim Sandler: Commitment to the Environment in the Sandler Foundation.”

Susan Sandler, “Susan Sandler: The Sandler Family and Philanthropy.”

William Seaman, “Bill Seaman: The American Asthma Foundation.”

Paul Steiger, “Paul Steiger: Business Reporting and the Creation of ProPublica.”

Richard Tofel, “Richard Tofel: The Creation and Expansion of ProPublica.”

Keith Yamamoto, “Keith Yamamoto: The Sandler Foundation and the Program in Breakthrough Biomedical Research at UCSF.”

## Interview 1: March 7, 2018

01-00:00:00

Meeker: Today is Wednesday, March 7, 2018. This is Martin Meeker interviewing Ken Roth for the Herbert and Marion Sandler Oral History Project. This is interview session number one, and we are here at the offices of the Sandler Foundation in San Francisco. Mr. Roth, thank you very much for sitting down and giving some time to this project.

01-00:00:20

Roth: My pleasure.

01-00:00:24

Meeker: I really appreciate it. Off camera I explained to you a little bit about what we're up to here. But every single interview that we do begins the same way, and that is tell me your name and your date and place of birth.

01-00:00:36

Roth: Okay. I'm Ken Roth, Kenneth Roth. I was born in Elmhurst, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, on September 23, 1955.

01-00:00:48

Meeker: Tell me a bit about Elmhurst. Did you grow up there?

01-00:00:50

Roth: And I knew nothing about Elmhurst. I've been back, but no, I grew up, basically, in Deerfield, which is another Chicago suburb. Elmhurst is sort of northwest, and Deerfield is north—and I did grow up there. I basically spent my entire childhood there; my parents still live there. I was just there this weekend. [laughing] So I know it well, and that was really home as I grew up.

01-00:01:09

Meeker: How did your family end up in the suburbs of Chicago?

01-00:01:13

Roth: It was a bit fortuitous. My father grew up in Germany and fled the Nazis as a young boy. My mother grew up in the Bronx. Her parents had come to this country from—basically Belarus and Poland, that area, kind of fleeing pogroms a generation earlier. And the two of them met at a college mixer. My father was at City College; my mother was at Hunter College. They got married and moved, initially [to] upstate New York—to Hudson, New York, along the Hudson River—briefly to Cleveland and ultimately to Chicago. And so it was really business that brought my father there. They chose the suburbs because that's what you did in that era. They were very much postwar looking for a nice, stable environment. And it was—at the time Deerfield was one of the outlying suburbs. Today it's actually seen as almost not an inner suburb, but kind of middle distance. But at the time it was just borderline suburban/rural. And so, you know, I could get on my bicycle and go riding in five minutes and be in corn fields. And it was kind of a small-town existence and a suburban existence at the same time.

01-00:02:28

Meeker:

What was the business that brought your family out there?

01-00:02:29

Roth:

Well, my father, who was actually the first in his family to go to college did his undergraduate degree in mechanical engineering, and ultimately got an MBA. But the company he worked for was called the Signode Corporation, which did industrial packaging, so totally not a household name. And he worked his way up the hierarchy, came in doing sales engineering, and ended up always in that field, but focusing more on the sales of more and more complex machines that would apply the packaging, whether it's in a steel mill or a factory, or what have you. And so he was the one who had the engineering sophistication to understand these machines, but also the personality to sell, and he just rose in the business. And it was totally fortuitous that we were in Chicago, but that's where we were.

01-00:03:27

Meeker:

Did he run his own manufacturing as well, or was he more a technical expert?

01-00:03:31

Roth:

No, he was a company guy. It was the classic fifties, sixties, seventies; you join a corporation and you make your career there. And he really, for his adult life, worked for two companies. One, the initial one after leaving New York City, and then there was this Signode. And in fact, at one stage, when they sold the company at age sixty-two, and he was suddenly without a job, he retired—and actually briefly went to law school, but essentially did various things in his retirement, but that was his career.

01-00:04:06

Meeker:

Did your mom work outside of the home?

01-00:04:08

Roth:

Yes. She was a high school math teacher, and worked—other than when we were little, she worked most of the time.

01-00:04:18

Meeker:

Did you go to the same school where she taught?

01-00:04:19

Roth:

No, fortunately not. [laughter] That would have been awkward. So no, she went to a neighboring town, in just the high school there.

01-00:04:25

Meeker:

Okay. Tell me about your education. Did you go to public schools?

01-00:04:30

Roth:

Yeah. Through high school I was just in the Deerfield public schools. I went to Deerfield High School, which had twenty-five hundred kids and was your classic, sprawling suburban campus, and received, I think, a decent education. I wouldn't say stellar, but I was reasonably prepared for college. I didn't feel

like I was stumbling, but I wouldn't say—having now brought my daughters up in New York City schools with a much higher-quality education, I didn't get anything like that. But I survived. I then went off to Brown University for college and Yale for law school. The college thing was—I really had not even thought about going east at first, and this was in the, basically the early seventies when I was making these decisions. And to me the Ivy League had this snooty sound to it, and I just wasn't interested. But my father said, "Well, why don't we just go take a look?" And so the entire family climbed into our car—I have three siblings. And we, in the course of four and a half days, drove from Chicago east and back, and saw, in that process, six Ivy League schools. So it was really was: see what you can. But I, in that process, fell in love with Providence, and therefore Brown. And it's so funny, at that age when you're so impressionable. But I had never been in a beautiful colonial town, which the East Side of Providence is. And I just remember driving up this particular street, Benefit Street, and being just amazed by how old and completely beautiful it was. And that just somehow won me over. I was, at that stage, interested in a somewhat urban school. I wanted to get out of the suburbs, but I wasn't ready for New York City or hardcore urban, and Brown was a nice middle ground, in that it was a city, but a small city. And so I was quite happy there, and then over time you become much more urbanized.

01-00:06:45

Meeker:

At what point during growing up did you become aware of and then engaged with the broader political world?

01-00:06:53

Roth:

Yeah, I was always pretty politically involved. I mean, my parents were politically involved. And beginning when I was really young and my father was running for the school board in Deerfield, and served on the school board for many years, was the president for a while. One of my earliest memories in Deerfield was there was a referendum on whether to consolidate two school districts or not. It was somewhat arcane. The issue came up—were they going to charge enough taxes in order to support the combined school? And my father thought that the proposed tax thing was too low, and so he was against the consolidation. But there were vehement people on the other side. I remember going around town putting up Vote No posters with my father, in the little shops in town, and him getting into a screaming match—which was so unlike my father—in the dry cleaners with somebody who had the opposite point of view and was trying to put up the other posters. But I spent—as a kid we would go door to door handing out literature for my father's campaign, so at a very early age, I got involved at that level. My parents, though, were pretty politically liberal/progressive, and I think that one memory that really sticks with me was the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, where I was too young to go downtown, so I wasn't a participant. But I was super aware of what was going on. We were watching it every night on TV, and indeed, there was a naval air base right near our house, where plane after plane was landing with the National Guard, to help suppress the demonstrations. And so I

remember not only that, but very much my parents' outrage that this was going on. And so that gives you a sense of the politics of my parents.

I think what, for me, pushed me in the rights direction—why did I take on human rights? I would attribute it to three things in combination. One which was clearly a big part of it is that I grew up with Hitler stories. My father would cut the hair of me and my brothers in the bathroom. And we were—to keep us quiet, he would tell us stories about growing up in Germany. When we were little, he would tell stories about Bobby [pronounced “Buppi”], the family horse that delivered the meat from my grandfather's butcher shop. And they were funny stories, because Buppi was smart and fast and mischievous; they were great little kid stories. And as we got older, he would tell stories about what it was like living under the Nazis. He was transferred from his regular school to a Jewish school—which is actually still standing in Frankfurt. I've been there. He talked about how his parents told him never ride your bicycle on the sidewalk, but he sometimes just couldn't help himself and did it—and was afraid of getting arrested for that. He told this one great story where my grandfather, who had served in the German army in World War I—and in those days you'd just bring your gun home with you. He—and at some point the Nazis put out this edict—turn in all guns. And he was damned if he did and damned if he didn't. For a Jew to have a gun; it could have gotten him arrested. But to not turn in the gun could have gotten him arrested, so what do you do? So every Sunday he would go for a walk with my father and uncle to a nearby park, and the boys would skip stones into a pond there. And so one Sunday he disassembled the rifle and put the little parts into his jacket pockets. And as the boys were skipping stones, he would skip rifle parts, and gradually threw the whole rifle into the pond. And so these are the kinds of stories I grew up with.

I was fortunate in that my immediate family all got out. They got out late, in July of 1938, and they came out in stages because it wasn't so much getting out of Germany, it was getting *in* someplace else. Nobody wanted Jews. So they ultimately got to this country, but bit by bit, because they had to prove that they wouldn't become a ward of the state. And they were poor, so how were they going to do that? And so they had to come over one at a time, a small group at a time, work, put all their money in a bank account and get a statement demonstrating that they had enough money. I think there was a little—shenanigans that went on where they would get multiple bank statements for the same money. But for whatever reason, my father, in the last group of the family, came across nine months after my grandfather came across, and so finally the immediate family was rescued. A bit broader—they didn't all come, and they were killed. So I grew up very aware of the evil that governments can do and very committed to do something about that.

Now, I think I was also very much formed by the sixties, and even though I was just in my teens in the sixties, so I couldn't really be a participant. But I was very aware of the politics, and that pushed me to want to do something

that I believed in. I was not going to be happy at all, just working for some corporation and just making money; I wanted something I could believe in. I think if I had been a little bit older, I might well have done domestic civil liberties work. But at that stage, human rights seemed like the new frontier. Jimmy Carter was president at the time. When I graduated from law school he had—actually when I was in law school he had just declared human rights to be an element of the US foreign policy, and this was the exciting new thing. I really liked international work. I had not spent a lot of time abroad, but I had spent, I guess, about eight/nine months in France and just loved that international work. By the time I was in law school I wanted to do human rights work. Now, that was not the smartest thing to want to do at that point, because it was a completely new field. I signed up for the one human rights course at Yale, each of three years—and each year they canceled it, so I graduated with no training whatsoever.

01-00:13:13

Meeker:

So for lack of enrollment?

01-00:13:14

Roth:

It was never quite clear, but the professor, who's actually a Second Circuit judge right now, José Cabranes, was at the time general counsel for Yale University, and I just think he had other things to do. So he thought it was a good idea to list the course, and then he never followed through, so that didn't happen. And I then graduated into a world where there were no jobs in human rights. Human Rights Watch, at that point, had two employees. Amnesty [International], who knows—maybe it had twenty or something? But there's just—there's nothing, so I assumed—

01-00:13:47

Meeker:

At that time, did you envision the career would be maybe through diplomacy or working for the UN or something? Was that the job path?

01-00:13:55

Roth:

I assumed that I was going to do this as a volunteer.

01-00:13:57

Meeker:

Okay.

01-00:13:58

Roth:

And that I would have to have another job. So I was also very interested in criminal law, because of the people involved, for similar reasons. And I pursued that, and I was a prosecutor for four and a half years and ultimately thought I could become a defense attorney, or I was thinking about being a professor. But I would, nights and weekends, do human rights work, and did that, on and off, for six years—and mainly volunteered for a different group, a small little group. But [I] was assigned, somewhat arbitrarily, to Poland, because martial law had just been declared in Poland when I just got to the point where I could start volunteering. And it was such a rudimentary/naïve field that they would throw Poland at somebody who didn't even speak

Polish. Which you would never do today. But it was a different era then. And so I became the Poland expert for this group, and wrote on it and traveled there at one stage. And it was on the side. But it was enough to get me known in the field. And so in the meantime, Human Rights Watch had grown a little bit, and I think when I joined them there must have been twenty employees. And the board at that stage felt that the director, my predecessor, Aryeh Neier, who is very close to the Sandlers, needed a deputy—and I think they kind of foisted this on him. It wasn't the best situation to walk into. But I was approached: "Would I be interested in applying?" And I jumped at it, you know.

01-00:15:38

Meeker:

Had you worked closely with Neier at this point?

01-00:15:39

Roth:

No, I didn't know Aryeh. I didn't know him at all. And I, in fact, was kind of worried about this, because it's not a great situation to walk into. But I met with him, and he certainly had a reputation of being super smart and capable. And he was always, actually, very gentle. To this day I have a very close relationship with him. But it was potentially fraught, but he handled it very well and really was my mentor for four and a half years as I—I had a sense of the programmatic side of human rights work, but had done nothing in terms of management, fundraising—the basic work of running an organization, plus the broader strategy, I really learned from Aryeh.

01-00:16:26

Meeker:

Was the job description clear or unclear when you were hired?

01-00:16:29

Roth:

No, it was pretty unclear. And in fact, Human Rights Watch wasn't even called Human Rights Watch then, and my arrival created a bit of an existential problem, and so they started using the name. But until that point, the collective was called the Watch Committees, and there was Helsinki Watch, Americas Watch, Asia Watch—and gradually they would add on different regional watches. They had trademarked the name Human Rights Watch but didn't use it. And Aryeh—really reflective of the fact that he was, for the longest time, kind of only halfway in, didn't call himself executive director. He called himself vice chair, which is a weird title, but that's just what he used. So he was vice chair of Helsinki Watch and vice chair of Americas Watch—even though by that point he was really functioning as the executive director. He had previously been the executive director of the ACLU and came to Human Rights Watch from there.

01-00:17:29

Meeker:

Was his vision for it to be more of a federated, widely dispersed kind of entity?

01-00:17:33

Roth:

No, the reason it started off as Helsinki Watch was because of the Helsinki Accords. The Helsinki Accords essentially ratified Yalta, the division of Europe. But there was the third part, the part that the Soviets didn't want to really talk about, that was the humanitarian basket and included provisions about the right to monitor the human rights practices of your government. And that had spawned little Helsinki-monitoring groups in places like Moscow and Prague and Warsaw, all of which were promptly suppressed, thrown in prison. And so they issued a call to the West to create a Helsinki-monitoring group in the West to try to protect them, and that's what gave rise to Helsinki Watch. So that name was meaningful, and that was done in late '78.

In January '81, Ronald Reagan took office, and he had this UN ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, who had this famous theory that there was a difference between totalitarian states and authoritarian states. Totalitarian states were basically communist dictatorships whose human rights practices you had to contest. Authoritarian states were, in essence, right-wing military dictatorships who were friendly with the United States, who you could work slowly with to evolve into a more pro-human rights direction. And what it was is basically a somewhat sophisticated excuse for a double standard.

01-00:19:14

Meeker:

Particularly well-suited for the Cold War.

01-00:19:16

Roth:

It was perfect, yeah. And so it said, okay, we can be nice to the Argentine junta or to Pinochet in Chile, while contesting the Soviet crackdown on Czechoslovakia, or what have you. So in order to make clear that the people around Helsinki Watch were not Cold Warriors, that there was a belief in principle rather than just fighting the Cold War, Americas Watch was created. And you could have extended Helsinki Watch, but it didn't really make sense, because the Helsinki Accords applied, in essence, to Europe/Central Asia and United States/Canada. They didn't apply to Latin America, so you needed a different name. So that's how it came that there were these watches, and then as money became available different regions were added on. It was a series of names, but really one organization, and Aryeh ran the whole thing with his vice chairman title.

When I showed up, I was supposed to be deputy director—but deputy director of what?

You can't be deputy vice chairman. So at that point they started using Human Rights Watch, really for my title. And Aryeh, at that point, assumed the title of executive director of Human Rights Watch. Now, that was at the same time that all these watch names continued, because there was an executive director of Helsinki Watch, and there was a director of Americas Watch, and none of them wanted to give up their titles—because it's great to be executive director. So by the time Aryeh left—I joined Human Rights Watch in late

1987, and Aryeh left in June 1993, and I took over at that point as acting director, and by October of '93 I was named permanent director.

One of the first things I did was to move to consolidate the names, because at that point I think we had something like twelve public identities. There were not only the different watches, but there was also a prison project, a women's rights project, and something called the Fund for Free Expression. It was just impossible. So this one organization was doing work in twelve different names, and most people had no idea that they were connected. And as a result, it had much less public profile than it should have had. So the first step I did was say, "Okay, we need to move toward one name." And the staff resisted, because everybody liked being the head of their nominally own organization, even though it wasn't. So we went through this period where we had a compromise, and it was a completely untenable compromise, but it was just—we had to take the step. So we went for about, I think, six [to] nine months where we would use the name Human Rights Watch/Middle East, Human Rights Watch/Helsinki—it was just a mouthful. You would never really use those names, but that was the official solution/compromise. And then finally people said this is ridiculous. Let's just go to Human Rights Watch. So whatever it was, I guess some time in 1994, that was just the one name for the organization.

01-00:22:18

Meeker:

Both of these positions you come into not particularly set up to succeed, being an unclear assistant to Aryeh Neier is one thing, and then you have to basically develop this role of deputy director while you're doing it.

01-00:22:40

Roth:

Right.

01-00:22:41

Meeker:

And then basically recreating the structure of the organization through the idea of a new name, but really it's much more profound than that.

01-00:22:48

Roth:

Yeah. To be honest, the biggest challenge was learning how to run an organization. And this is, frankly, where the Slanders came in, but we can come back to that. But I had no experience running an organization, and I remember I had literally never raised a cent in my life. And I remember going into my first donor meeting as executive director and being *incredibly* nervous, and just—not really knowing how to do this. And so you have to learn quickly, because otherwise the place starves. But that was hard. You know, I didn't know the first thing about management theory or philosophy, or whatever, I had to—and I'd seen how Aryeh did it, but I didn't necessarily want to replicate all aspects of that. And in any event, he was a giant in the field and I was a kid. I was thirty-seven when I took over. So I had to do it differently. I was overseeing people who were older than I was, and so I had to develop a different style. And at that stage I didn't begin to have the

gravitas that Aryeh did, who was—he was a big name and he wrote for all these publications. Everybody knew him—and I was green. Aryeh, at that point, had gone off to head George Soros’s foundation, so there was a lot of learning while doing. You can say oh, it all worked out. But there were several years in there where I was just figuring out as I went.

What I very much credit Aryeh for is giving me really a sense of professionalism. There are different ways to do human rights work. I think many people, when they first think about it, think, “Oh, we’re going to do protests in the street and rabble-rousing”—that’s not really my thing, and it was totally not Aryeh’s thing. And he showed how it was possible to have a very professional approach to promoting human rights, which was extremely factual; it was very professional in how you project the information. It was professional in how you deal with governments. And it actually made it possible for me to envision this as a career and not just something I did for two or three years as a nice thing to do, because I saw the seriousness of it, and that there were these extremely high standards that you could aspire to. And I really credit Aryeh with showing me that. I don’t know if you’ve interviewed Aryeh, but there’s a solidity to him. He’s very thoughtful, he’s contemplative—he’s not the least bit a rabble-rouser, even though he likes to make trouble, but he does it in a kind of very careful, professional way. I had actually never seen an activist like that. Even though my personality is quite different from Aryeh’s, I could identify with that; I could see doing that for my life and doing that with pride, because there was a very high professional standard to it. And so I credit Aryeh very much with being the intellectual architect of our core methodology, and just the quality—that it was something I could very much build on. And even though the organization today is very different from when he left, I still see many, many attributes that I credit to Aryeh.

01-00:26:14

Meeker:

During this first period of time, first period of your leadership, do you see any key transformative moments that allowed you to occupy the role of director in a way that you felt like you were being successful?

01-00:26:32

Roth:

I don’t know that I could point to particular moments. It’s—over time I developed a—and in retrospect I can’t even really say why, but it was almost instinctive. There were certain things that I wanted to do somewhat differently. One is I really put a premium on impact rather than publication. And what I mean by that is the organization grew out of a group of publishers, and it would put out—at that stage, pretty thick reports, and they would be bound, and when you’d get done you’d have a report that you could put on your bookshelf. And it was almost like a publication party, and of course you’d release to the press, and you’d want to get press and you did some follow-up. But a lot of what happened seemed to center on these reports. There were times when there would be big battles around particular political

issues, but that wasn't pervasive. A lot of the organization was really about publishing these reports. One thing just became clear to me is that we needed to stress the advocacy and needed to make sure that we took these reports and maximized their consequence.

01-00:27:55

Meeker:

So previously, these reports are published. Clearly, you want the press to cover them, but then the philosophy or the strategy is that the public becomes impassioned over these issues and engages with their political leaders, and so on, and so on, to the point that some of these changes are ultimately made that—?

01-00:28:16

Roth:

Yeah, well, we never thought of ourselves as creating mass demonstrations or whatever. It was more that we would shame governments through the publication of this detailed account of their misconduct. The important thing was the documentation, and then publicity around it. And so it was very press-oriented. But our entire advocacy effort was one person in Washington, and then occasional visits by others. It was a much smaller thing. And we did relatively little rapid reaction. So our timetable was very much oriented around our publications. And the idea of just putting out press releases or statements, or shorter bulletins on things as they happened, as opposed to at the time of the report, was just not at the heart of the organization, and somewhat instinctively I recognized we needed to change that. And it was a gradual process. It wasn't overnight. But I recognized the need to really build up an advocacy staff to parallel the research staff, and then, over time, there were other big changes.

I very deliberately wanted to internationalize that advocacy, which at first meant setting up in Europe. I remember the first—we had an office in London. It was really just a research office. But I remember when we set up our office in Brussels, which was our first European advocacy office, the board—at this point I had just started, and the board insisted that I go to Brussels and do a feasibility study. Did this make sense? And it so *obviously* made sense. But I had to go and travel there and do the interviews and demonstrate all this. But it was—that was a big step, whereas now, nobody even thinks twice about us opening up a new office in Tokyo or Johannesburg or São Paulo, as we've broadened the range of our advocacy.

01-00:30:18

Meeker:

That Brussels office was '93? Would that have been when you were—?

01-00:30:21

Roth:

It would have been '93-'94, somewhere in that vicinity, yeah.

01-00:30:24

Meeker:

Interesting time. That's when the Soviet Union has disintegrated.

01-00:30:26

Roth:

Yeah, the Soviet Union had collapsed at that point, yes. No, no—it was a time of optimism, in a sense. Because the Cold War had been won, Eastern Europe had been liberated. But it was also a time of danger, because this was the era—Bosnia was in the process of happening, the Rwandan genocide was—there was a sense that ethnic conflict had been unleashed, that somehow the Cold War had kept a lid on things. And there was suddenly this explosion of really a series of civil wars, often ethnically based, so that was the big new challenge at the time.

If I think about what were the big transformational steps that I had to take over time, one was internationalizing the advocacy. Second, was pushing all of our researchers into the field. Because originally the researchers were all in New York, with a handful in Washington or London. Today we have researchers based in forty-eight countries working on ninety countries—so that was a process. I very much continued something that Aryeh had started, which was having thematic programs. So before Aryeh left, we had a program devoted to the rights of common prisoners, and a program devoted to the rights of women—which actually the Sandlers played a role in helping to start. But we continued that process then and added programs for the rights of children, for LGBT rights, people with disabilities. We have a new one on older people. We have programs on international justice, on basically business and human rights, on the environment and human rights, that process which Aryeh had carried over from the ACLU—which is also organized that way—I very much continued and have just pushed, on the theory that when you have a country researcher there's a limit to what they can do. They tend to focus on the classic—either wartime or repression-oriented abuses, and they were not going to have time to deal with women's rights or children's rights. You need a separate staff that ensures that those issues don't get neglected. And so again, that was something that Aryeh very much started, but then I had pushed forward.

And then, I suppose the thing that's most different today is the utter communications revolution. We used to put out these books. And today, first of all, every report we put out has a video with it. Every document we put out has photographs with it. We're putting out four or five to six things a day. It's lots of rapid-reaction stuff. We have this huge social media presence, which didn't even exist, obviously. But 3.5 million people following us on Twitter, 2.5 million on Facebook. So there are just enormous new possibilities. The world is so much faster.

01-00:33:24

Meeker:

Also challenges. You have to compete with everyone else who's doing the same thing.

01-00:33:29

Roth:

You do, but what we've always had as our big advantage is the quality of our research because we do have researchers in these countries who really know

their stuff and are super careful, the press relies on us, and we're interesting. And so getting press has—it's always work. It's something that you're always making an effort for, but we also are really successful at that because of the quality of the work. And so on a typical day, if you do a Google News search, you'll find 130 unique citations to our work. And so that's just a product of—partly the amount of stuff we do, but also recognition of its quality and the sense that we're in the policy mix, that when things happen, people look to us to be commenting and to actually push the debate forward.

01-00:34:21

Meeker:

That's one way of looking at impact. It sounds also like you had a broader agenda in terms of impact when you started to move beyond simple publication of research. How has your evaluation of impact evolved over time?

01-00:34:39

Roth:

For impact—the goal is to change policy. You want people's rights better respected, and so you want governmental policy toward those rights to be different. And so, that's the ultimate impact. You then need to be able to measure steps toward that. And so you first say, "Do you have a feasible strategy? Does this sound like a way that's likely to produce impact?" And that's the first thing you look at. You then look at steps along that strategy, and so—obviously, getting the information is the initial step. Getting it into the public domain, so you begin to shine a more and more intense spotlight on the governmental misconduct—that's very important.

You've got to then start engaging with both the target government, but also potentially allied governments, because one reason we've set up all these advocacy offices is that we can go to governments that have influence and say: would you use your influence on our behalf? Would you condition access to arms sales, or preferential trade treatment, or invitations to fancy summits—or whatever the government wants, condition that on an end to x, y, z abusive practices. And so you can then tell—are you making progress along your strategy? Are you succeeding in putting pressure on the government? Because we know that over time, with enough pressure, governments will succumb. Are you forcing the government to engage with you?

Often it's a good sign if the government starts denying or starts badmouthing us and saying, "You guys are biased." Or, "You misunderstood." You know, the kinds of things they say, because it shows you're hitting them, and they feel compelled to respond. And so that's a good step in the process. And we may have to do another report, and we may have to show that they're lying through their teeth when they deny, but ultimately they're going to recognize that they're not going to get rid of the bad press until they change the bad conduct, and that's when we begin to make progress.

01-00:36:36

Meeker:

One of the big changes in the realm of philanthropy overall, and I think the Sandler Foundation's approach to this, has been, in fact, trying to develop a real methodology about measuring impact. Sometimes this has become very quantitative and very work-intensive on behalf of the grantee organization like yourself, what has been your approach? How has that transformation in philanthropy impacted Human Rights Watch?

01-00:37:05

Roth:

Yeah, we can do the quantitative thing. It tends to be more around communications. So because today the website is important, we barely bother physically sending out reports anymore. But so we can tell very precisely how many people have come to see the report. We can say how many people viewed the video—so those kind of metrics are pretty easy to get. But I resist equating that with the end product. The goal is: did you change conduct on the ground? And for that you've got to tell stories. You actually have to say this was the strategy, and these are the steps we took pursuant to the strategy, and this is what happened—and that's the only way to measure it. It's not quantitative; it's qualitative. And the truth is people don't really press us too much into kind of a quantitative corner. So we can give them the numbers, but the numbers don't tell the whole story. You've got to explain how you got to where you got to—it's a process. It's not numbers.

01-00:38:11

Meeker:

Is that a good description of how you engage with the Sandler Foundation in terms of reporting to them?

01-00:38:17

Roth:

You know, they've never, to be honest, been super insistent on numbers.

01-00:38:18

Meeker:

Okay.

01-00:38:22

Roth:

With the exception, actually, in the fundraising—because the Sandler Foundation, somewhat uniquely, have really focused on building the organization in terms of revenue. And so they've been very numbers-oriented there, but that's the only way to do that. You've got to look at numbers there. But in terms of the work itself—no, they've actually—they *get* what we do. So they've never tried to squeeze us into some artificial quantitative box.

01-00:38:50

Meeker:

Well, let's go back to your first engagement with them. My understanding—and this may be not entirely correct—is that one of their first real forays into philanthropy was on the occasion of Leonard [H.] Sandler's death, Herb's brother.

01-00:39:04

Roth:

Yes, right.

01-00:39:06

Meeker:

And he was always a big advocate of civil and human rights, and I believe that they wanted to establish something in his memory and worked with Human Rights Watch in doing that?

01-00:39:17

Roth:

Yes. As I understand it—and I wasn't there for this—but I think that they first learned about us through Bard College, for whatever reason. I don't know why they were at Bard College, but through that process they met—I think they met Bob [Robert L.] Bernstein, who at the time was chair [of Human Rights Watch]—who they quickly dispensed with. But they then met Aryeh, who they liked. So yes, the first thing that they did was to establish a fellowship in honor of Judge Leonard Sandler. We have a modest fellowship program, which is a very valuable thing. Because what it does is it allows recent graduates—in the case of the Leonard Sandler Fellowship, graduates of Columbia Law School—to join Human Rights Watch for a year, basically as a researcher. So you're a full-fledged member of the professional staff. It is really hard to get on the professional staff, and to get that step, and to then get the training of a full year of doing investigations and producing reports and being overseen, is wonderful experience. And so the people who do these fellowships either stay on the staff or tend to get jobs in another human rights organization. So it's a very sought-after opportunity, and that was the first thing that we did. It quickly expanded.

My recollection is that the first thing that they then supported was when we were creating a women's rights program. This was still at the point where Aryeh was there. The two things really where Aryeh worked with the Sandlers directly were around the fellowship, and then, the Sandlers were one of three people contributing to launching—the Women's Rights Project is what we called it at the time. So that was their entrée, and then Aryeh left shortly after that. And I remember being a little scared having to meet the Sandlers, but I had to assume the relationship, and I came out here. One thing they made clear is that they actually wanted to deal with me, and not with the chair at the time. Because the first time I think I came with the chair, Robert Bernstein, and I remember at some point having to deliver to him the news that they didn't want to see him again, that I was going to have this relationship now, which was understandable.

01-00:41:56

Meeker:

Was it just a clash of personality?

01-00:41:56

Roth:

Yes, it was in a different style. The intellectual architect of what Human Rights Watch is today was Aryeh, but not Bob Bernstein. Bob Bernstein was really more of a marketer and was good at promoting things, but didn't have the intellectual rigor that Aryeh did. And so the Sandlers clearly appreciated Aryeh's intelligence and seriousness, and even though I'm a very different

person, I think they saw enough of that in me that they transferred the relationship there.

01-00:42:27

Meeker:

Well, something that comes across really clearly in all of these interviews that I've done is their insistence on specific leaders. Aryeh departs, yet they continue to support Human Rights Watch, which says to me that upon meeting you they really had some belief in your abilities.

01-00:42:49

Roth:

Yeah—we connected.

01-00:42:52

Meeker:

Yeah, can you describe how that happened? Do you remember the circumstance of it?

01-00:42:55

Roth:

Well, it was a series of meetings, occasionally in New York but mostly here. I remember going to their house, out east of Oakland. I don't remember the exact town. I'd meet them at their bank. But it was just a series of meetings. I would make sure to be out here twice a year. I was quite young at that stage, and so I think that they must have respected me, but I also felt a bit like they were my mentors too, and that they were helping me figure out how to do this job. And there's obviously an age difference, and that was a natural relationship, in a way. But they evidently felt that the efforts were paying off sufficiently, because they kept investing. They were very explicit about saying we believe in leadership.

And I remember the first time I bumped my head into this was when we decided to launch an endowment campaign, which was a bit audacious, because we couldn't find another advocacy group at that point that had an endowment. Hospitals had endowments, universities had endowments—advocacy groups didn't have endowments. And we needed to make the case—why *should* we have an endowment? And, in essence, the case was we're in a controversial business. We piss people off—that's part of what the job is. And so we need a bit of financial security so we're not always worrying about what happens if we follow principles in this direction. And there clearly have been particular countries or issues we take on which are sensitive. And so the case was that the problem of human rights is not going to go away. We have established ourselves, as Human Rights Watch, as a key player. There's going to be an ongoing need for us. We need the financial security of an endowment. This was, at the time I think we must have been less than a \$20 million annual organization, and we decided we were going to have a \$20 million endowment campaign. That was a big number for us, and there were a series of people who stepped up very generously to contribute to that.

I went to the Sandler and I said, "Would you be one of the contributors to this?" And their first reaction was, "No, we don't invest in institutions. We

believe in you. While you're there, we're very happy to keep supporting you, but an endowment is forever. We're not going to do that." Okay. So I went back and I asked for the CVs of my twenty senior-most staff, and I collected the CVs, and I went back to the Sandler and said, "I want you to recognize that this is not just me. There is a depth here and a quality of personnel in Human Rights Watch. If I disappear tomorrow, it's still going to be a very high-quality organization, and here are the people." So I gave this all to them, and I still remember, it was a lunch in New York at a Korean vegetarian restaurant, right near our office called HanGawi, and we're sitting—it's one of these fake take-off-your-shoes, and you're not really sitting cross-legged because there's a place to put your legs, but you're sitting there. And they, at that point said, "Okay. You've persuaded us. *But—*" and this was a classic Sandler *but—*"we don't like this idea of a \$20 million endowment." I have to say, this was what *we* thought was toward the end of the campaign, and we were completely struggling to get up to \$20 million. We had tapped out everybody we could, and we were beginning to approach that number. And the Sandler said, "We'll give you \$5 million, but we want you to double the goal." [laughing] So it's like—thank you, but *thanks*. And I had no idea how we were going to come up with the rest of that money. It was a match, you know. Now, we did in the end. It was a lot of hard work. But that was a very classic Sandler move, is finally buying into it and then raising our sights. [laughing]

01-00:47:21

Meeker:

What year was that, roughly? Do you recall?

01-00:47:24

Roth:

It's hard to say exactly, but it would have been—I don't know, '98 maybe, somewhere in there.

01-00:47:31

Meeker:

So it's still the nineties. This is while they're still running the company.

01-00:47:34

Roth:

Oh yeah. They're still running the company, yes, right.

01-00:47:36

Meeker:

Before they invest in CAP [Center for American Progress], for instance, which was about 2003.

01-00:47:42

Roth:

Yes, right, right. Yes, it was then.

01-00:47:42

Meeker:

Okay. But you had gotten to know them over a little bit of time.

01-00:47:42

Roth:

I had gotten to know them, and we were friendly. We were very friendly and they basically allowed themselves to be persuaded that this was a good thing

to do. They bought the case, and they bought the argument that it's not just me, and so they were willing to invest in the institution.

01-00:48:02

Meeker:

Around this time were they helping build relationships for *you* with other philanthropists? Did that come into it?

01-00:48:10

Roth:

They've done that periodically over the years. There's one person who's asked us to remain anonymous, but who has become a big donor who they introduced me to at one stage I've actually never met again, but we've worked through their foundation and they've become big supporters. They periodically introduce me to people in the Bay Area, so they've been very generous in that sense, because obviously through their work, whether it's through CAP or ProPublica or just the stuff here with UCSF, they know a lot of people. And so when they have seen somebody who they think might be interested, might have common values and the means, they've been very generous about facilitating those introductions.

01-00:48:53

Meeker:

Can you tell me about the nature of your engagement—were you regularly in telephone contact and correspondence?

01-00:49:04

Roth:

Yeah, you know, we would talk. I would periodically send them things by e-mail, periodically call, but I think in many ways the most important part of the relationship was the periodic visits, and I would just make sure to be in the Bay Area periodically. And when they were in New York often—when they were still running the company they would have to go I think quarterly for shareholder representations, and so it wasn't hard to see each other. And we developed a very warm relationship, and it was almost a kind of parental relationship. Obviously, we're different generations, and they really are slightly younger than my parents, but not that different from that generation. And so I never looked at them entirely as a peer, and always looked at them as elder statesmen who had a lot of wisdom and had a lot to offer.

What was nice about the relationship, I think, is that they really did take an interest in building the organization and helping me to do that. And a lot of that was, obviously, around fundraising, because this matching campaign that I described around the endowment, they then repeated several other times with other campaigns, with comparably difficult matches that would push us to really have to work hard to make the match, but then we'd be a lot better off. Their typical match these days is, we will give you  $x$  amount of money as long as you double that in new contributions defined as people who are already giving you \$100,000 who increase their gift, or people who begin to give you \$100,000 or more. So in other words, the aim is to motivate the largest donors. And so they're perfectly happy for us to do lower-level fundraising, but they want people like themselves to get engaged, and they deliberately would

condition many of their gifts in order to motivate others, like them, to become supporters.

01-00:51:11

Meeker: You know, going back to this early work that you did with them in terms of women's rights.

01-00:51:16

Roth: Right.

01-00:51:18

Meeker: Can you describe what that project was, and what it has gone on to do?

01-00:51:23

Roth: Yeah, it's interesting. Today when you say a human rights organization is working to support women's rights, it seems like a no-brainer—I mean, of course! It was incredibly controversial at the time. I think our largest donor at the time—or at least one of them, but probably the largest—was the Ford Foundation. And the Ford Foundation was adamantly opposed to our starting a women's rights program, and they took the view that doing women's rights work would dilute the stigma of a human rights violation. That was their terminology. That it's—human rights work—and this is kind of a classic old style Amnesty [International] approach, it's about summary execution, it's about torture, it's about political imprisonment—but don't start getting into this stuff about discrimination—that's just too far afield. And if you start broadening what you mean by human rights too much, it's going to mean nothing. And they were so adamant that they actually reduced our grant when we did it anyhow. And it was one of several examples where the Ford Foundation was a little bit behind the times, whereas for the Sandler's it was the no-brainer it should have been. *Of course* you should have a women's rights program, and we're very happy to help you. And so they were one of the three supporters that made it possible.

Now, what did it do? One of the first reports that we did, which was also pretty trail-blazing, was we looked at, in Brazil, at the response to domestic violence. So it's one thing to say oh, the government is discriminating against women, they say women can't drive, as in Saudi Arabia, or something like that—that's pretty obvious. But we deliberately went beyond that. We looked at how does the Brazilian state or the Brazilian police—how do they respond to domestic violence against women? And we found that they largely ignored it. But how does it become a human rights violation? A common crime isn't human rights. Common crime is what private people do. How do you turn this into a human rights issue? Well, we addressed it as discriminatory non-enforcement of the law, and that was a big conceptual leap. Nobody had ever done that before. But that was the kind of work that we'd been able to do.

So today, we do a range of things. We deal with child marriage, which is a disaster for young girls who are married away—they get no education, they're

often subject to spousal abuse, they have children before they're physically ready for it. It just ruins their lives. And so we have a lot of work on that. We do a lot of work on migrant domestic workers, basically maids who often are isolated in the home, very mistreated, particularly in the Gulf States in the Middle East. We do a lot of work around rape and sexual violence in war contexts. We look at things like discrimination in the law for things like inheritance or the right to own property, or custodial rights in the case of divorce. So it's a pretty broad range of issues, but it's various ways in which the system is discriminatory toward women. Sometimes in the law, sometimes just in practices that are detrimental to women.

01-00:54:48

Meeker:

Is this something that you had to struggle with throughout the period of time in which you were transforming the organization to what it is today? I mean, that is, what *is* human rights, and what falls under its rubric? Are you constantly going back to the International Declaration of Human Rights, which is a really broad document, I think a very broad statement that clearly includes women's right, I think.

01-00:55:12

Roth:

Right. No, it does. We do always have to decide what is an issue that we're going to take on and what not. The answer to that—yes, you can look to treaties, and that's part of the answer. But the real answer tends to be where will our methodology work? Because our methodology is really about basically assessing governmental conduct against public moral expectations. And those moral expectations are shaped by the law, by treaties, but it's not exclusively that. And so to give you an example of a contemporary case where we're just going beyond the law, but we think it's the right thing to do, is around immigration today.

Trump is justifying his mass deportations of undocumented immigrants by portraying them all as rapists and drug dealers and violent criminals—and if that's all they are, you know, of course—let them go. But in fact, 60 percent of the eleven million undocumented migrants in the United States today have been here a decade or more. They have US-citizen children, US-citizen spouses, jobs, houses, mortgages. They're American in all but legal status. Now, this is something we've chosen to take on, and there's no law out there. US domestic law is against us, international human rights law doesn't address this, but we feel that popular sentiment is with us, that there is sufficient public recognition that despite your formal legal status, after a certain point, when you've built a life someplace, you deserve to get some modicum of respect for that life. It may not be citizenship; it may just be permanent legal status—but something that enables you not to disrupt that life. That there are people and expectations around you—and your own expectations—that deserve some degree of respect. And so we are taking that basic insight, which is really playing off people's sense of right and wrong and using that to shame the government into adopting a better immigration policy.

We do this, really very concretely, by stationing researchers on the US-Mexican border, just over the border into Mexico, interviewing people as they're deported, doing little videos and profiles of them, and showing who these people really are. Every opportunity we have to highlight the human costs of these mass deportations—particularly of the long-term immigrants—we do that. So we're not advocating open borders; that's a very different thing. But once people have a degree of investment in a life, we push for that to be respected. And so this is something that our methodology is very well suited to address. The reason we're doing it is not the law. This is an area where we feel that this should be considered a human rights issue even though if you look at chapter and verse, it isn't right now.

01-00:58:14  
Meeker:

Interesting. You know, you had mentioned the Sandlers' support of the Women's Rights Initiative, and very early on the fellowship. From what I've learned, they and their foundation are very interested in general support.

01-00:58:32  
Roth:

And that's what they moved to.

01-00:58:34  
Meeker:

So that's what they moved to?

01-00:58:34  
Roth:

Yes.

01-00:58:35  
Meeker:

But in your interactions with Marion when she was still with us, and Herb to today, do you get a sense of what, particularly, they are passionate about?

01-00:58:49  
Roth:

You know, I think that both Herb and Marion were very focused on impact and they clearly totally believed in the values we were promoting. So that was never a challenge. And what they really wanted to know was how you do it. How are you addressing obstacles? How are you moving things forward? So they were really interested in the health of the enterprise. In part, are we making a difference on the ground? But they were actually—and this is where I really value the relationship. You could see it—because they are businesspeople, they wanted to know the health of the institution. And so we would talk about very basic things: financial health, personnel issues.

Marion in particular must have been a marketing genius. I think that was her contribution to the business, and that's what she always talked with me about. She was constantly pushing for simpler language, more compelling language, more use of visuals. You could just see her thinking this is how we would present the bank. This is how you bring in customers. You can't do it with highfaluting, complicated language. You've got to meet people where they are. And so she was always pushing in that direction, and we do—I think that one of the ironies, since we lost Marion, is that I think we probably do this

better today than we've ever done. And I sort of wish that she had lived to see how visual we are, the fact that we're constantly producing these videos for every report, that everything we put out has photographs with it. I think Marion would have been a master of Twitter, because you've got to reduce it to 140 characters. The way the world has gone has forced us to do what Marion always advocated, which is to communicate in a much more compelling, straightforward, really emotional way—but to meet people and grab them. And that was always her big focus.

01-01:00:59

Meeker:

Do you recall any examples of her impact—or her criticism, or something?

01-01:01:07

Roth:

I do remember one particular annual report, and I can't even tell you the year, but we had sent it, proudly, to Herb and Marion, and it was recording our accomplishments of the last year. And she basically critiqued it, that the font is too small and there are not enough pictures, and there are just too many words. She was totally right. And we actually didn't do that again, and you learn these Marion Sandler lessons. There was a certain wisdom that then guided our production of annual reports going forward, because we just hadn't thought about that. But she was completely right, that we could be more effective by being a bit more user-friendly.

01-01:01:51

Meeker:

What was the nature of your engagement with Herb? Did he have these same kinds of interests, or was he more focused on issues?

01-01:02:00

Roth:

They were both focused on issues. Marion was a deceptive figure. On the one hand, she was almost famous for sitting in meetings and doing her knitting, and so forth. That was *never* a sign that she wasn't paying attention. She was sharp as a tack. And people were a little afraid of Marion because she was so sharp. It's funny—I always—I never really got the brunt of that sharpness, and I think I was fortunate in that sense. We always liked each other, and we always had a very supportive relationship, so I never had to endure Marion being mad at me, which I don't think would have been a pleasant experience. But I was fortunate not to have had to encounter that. But she was a friendly critic and would really look at things to make them better. Both Herb and Marion, throughout, were interested in the program. They really wanted to hear how are we doing in particularly difficult issues, something like Israel, where there's a lot of resistance and where they played a very important supportive role at a stage when we were getting a lot of resistance.

01-01:03:13

Meeker:

Can you talk about that a little bit?

01-01:03:15

Roth:

Oh sure. I think this came to a head beginning in 2006, when the Hezbollah war happened in southern Lebanon. It was, I think for Israel, a very difficult

experience, because rockets were just raining in on northern Israel—and so it was quite traumatic, in that sense. They fought the war by basically issuing warnings for people to flee southern Lebanon. And then, we found, bombing everybody who remained—as if they were Hezbollah. But of course, many people who remained were not Hezbollah—they were just old or too poor to move. There were lots of reasons why people didn't abandon their homes. And so they killed a lot of civilians, and we did a very detailed report showing that.

We were lambasted by certain more conservative members of the American Jewish community, who were very upset with us. And this was the first time where there was a very concerted effort to go after our donor base. And so people would deliberately look at our Jewish supporters, of which there are many, and try to get them to stop supporting us. And it came to a head where Robert Bernstein, the founding chair, was actually persuaded to write an op-ed in the *New York Times* denouncing us and disavowing his association. I don't remember the exact year for that; that was a couple of years later, but it was this pattern of attacks.

Herb and Marion really stood with us there, and they saw the quality of the work. They saw we were trying to be principled, and as objective as we could be. And that was a very important symbol, because they were seen as—unlike George Soros who was seen as a bit too anti-Israel—the Sandler were seen as fair arbiters. But nonetheless, they totally stood with us. It was a difficult period because we didn't know what the consequence would be for our donor base. In fact, we barely lost anybody, and it was a strengthening experience in the end, because we realized that the people who prioritize defending Israel over anything else already don't support us, and the people who do support us want us to apply the principles fairly. And so it was a learning experience, but it was a *difficult* learning experience. And the Sandler were very much there with us during this.

01-01:05:53

Meeker:

You know, I think there are organizations in Israel—NGO Watch is probably one of them—who use the term anti-Semitism fairly liberally. I know that you were probably personally called an anti-Semite, or something along those lines?

01-01:06:09

Roth:

Yeah, they hate the fact that I'm the director of Human Rights Watch, because it's really hard to call me anti-Semitic.

01-01:06:13

Meeker:

Right!

01-01:06:14

Roth:

You know, I was raised Jewish. My father fled the Nazis—I'm not anti-Semitic. That's just almost a joke. And so they don't really try that. They try

to say that we're biased or that we're partisan, or this and that. But either the charge of anti-Semitism, or the corollary to that: self-hating Jew—is just silly. So I actually don't really get that very much. That hasn't been a mantra. Now, I think if somebody else were heading the organization—that may well have been thrown at us more, but it has not been an issue in any serious way.

But groups like NGO Watch, which pretend that they're objective monitors, and are, in fact, just there to defend Israel and attack anybody who criticizes Israel, we *are* enemy number one, precisely because of our credibility. So if we, in fact, *were* more partisan and more easily dismissed, they would ignore us. But because we're persuasive and seen as credible by the press and by powerful governments, they go after us. But it's such a one-note criticism, where Israel can do no wrong, and we're always biased and nothing we ever put out is ever accurate. It's always some excuse for Israel. They've kind of lost credibility. So when they were more of a novelty, they had more impact. At this point, people are kind of tired of them, because it's just the same thing over and over and over again, and it's almost like a reflexive response to defend Israel rather than any serious effort to look at the facts.

01-01:07:46

Meeker:

Well, and it's no surprise that conservative governments, or defenders of conservative governments who have spotty human rights records would criticize Human Rights Watch. But Human Rights Watch has also been critical of left-wing governments like Venezuela.

01-01:08:00

Roth:

Oh yeah, absolutely. Yeah, right—and they attack us too. Yes.

01-01:08:01

Meeker:

They do, yeah. I guess it's, in some ways, having principles makes it difficult, but it might also make it a little bit easier.

01-01:08:17

Roth:

Well, we're totally equal opportunity critics. When I review our work, all I want to know is: is there a principled basis for what we're saying, and are we factually accurate? And if the answers to those two questions are yes, we're going to go forward. And if there are consequences, there are consequences. If those two things are in place, the consequences will never be that bad. And so we are, especially in this day of social media, we are attacked all the time. Armies of trolls will come after us.

01-01:08:53

Meeker:

Who might not even be human.

01-01:08:51

Roth:

Yeah, sometimes they're not. You can tell usually. But that's just the cost of doing business. But I don't really spend a lot of time listening to that. I want to know just—are we right?

Every once in a while you'll get a more sophisticated response, and we just had this experience with Rwanda, where we put out a report showing that in a series of cases, the Rwandan government had picked up just petty criminals, who had stolen a cow or who had done some smuggling to the Congolese border—and executed them on the spot. And this is, frankly, *not* surprising, given the kind of dictatorship that the [Paul] Kagame government is in Rwanda, but it's not the image they want to have. And so we put this out, and they—a few weeks later, maybe six to eight weeks later, held a press conference in Kigali, under the auspices of some kind of national human rights commission they had set up and said Human Rights Watch got this wrong. They said that so-and-so was executed, but here he is! Look at his ID card. And here's another's wife—she says he's studying in Brussels. They just got it wrong. Now, that was a bit more sophisticated effort to rebut us. It was chutzpah, because they were just making it up. But we had to go back in there, try to do it without endangering the people who just are poor peasants, and showing that the guy with the ID card was in fact named that name, but he was thirty years older than the guy who was killed. And the guy who was supposedly off studying in Brussels is illiterate—and dead, so he's definitely not studying in Brussels. So we had to come back and rebut that, and that required a more sophisticated response. Because if they're coming back and saying we got the facts wrong, we need to check. But we're pretty careful.

01-01:10:47

Meeker:

Were there ever any fine-line issues that the Sandler wanted to talk to you about and needed more explanation for understanding why Human Rights Watch was moving in that direction or was going to fight a particular battle?

01-01:11:06

Roth:

None that's coming to mind. I'm sure there have been, but I'm not thinking of that at the moment.

01-01:11:12

Meeker:

But never any sharp disagreements then?

01-01:11:13

Roth:

No, I actually don't recall sharp disagreements. There would be problems that we would puzzle over, whether it would be the Bush Administration's abuse of counter-terrorism policies, or more recently, just the rise of populism and Trump, and so forth, and how you deal with those sorts of things. So there was always a very strong interest in how do you take on some of these big challenges, and we would talk that through. But not from a perspective of disagreement, more of a perspective of common puzzle-solving.

01-01:11:45

Meeker:

Did you find them to be good interlocutors in that sense, about working through these kinds of questions?

01-01:11:53

Roth:

They're super smart. And they would challenge. I found it was always instructive to speak with Herb and Marion, because I learn things, and it forced me to—I thought I would come in, and I was making a presentation and it was just—this is the way it was. But then they would start challenging me, and it would force me to think through why are we doing it this way? And why not that way? And so—and that was the kind of partners that they were. They really wanted the institution to succeed, but they were perfectly willing to ask questions and be probing.

01-01:12:27

Meeker:

As we discussed earlier, Human Rights Watch was really, I think, their first major philanthropic work, which grew considerably, especially after the sale of the company in 2006, is that—yeah, I guess 2006—where they really expanded their philanthropic work. I'm trying to think about how this is a question. You know, I guess I'm interested in if you have a sense about the role that you or your organization might have played in educating them as philanthropists, or just maybe watching them step up to play a bigger role?

01-01:13:15

Roth:

Well, the thing that is striking about the Sandler is their willingness to *create* institutions. So Center for American Progress, ProPublica—they were really the reasons those things started. Human Rights Watch doesn't fit into that scheme. We were an ongoing entity. The reason they would start, say a ProPublica, is that they saw a void. And they looked around and they didn't see somebody to support, and so they created their own thing. I guess with Human Rights Watch, they felt that we filled the void, and that there's no need to start something new, that we were doing enough of what they wanted done, and so they could invest in us. And so, I took that as a compliment. But it actually is not what they're most famously known for, because there are very few philanthropists—lots of people start their own thing. Very few succeed in launching such successful institutions.

01-01:14:18

Meeker:

You know, I do a lot of work with the Library Development Office. Our little office at Berkeley is not funded by the university, so I'm always very aware of the need to raise funds to support the work we've been doing over sixty-five years, and I'll sit down with the development officer, and they'll go through this CAD system, which is a way of keeping track. And there's always this idea of potential giving of certain individuals. When you first start working with Herb and Marion, clearly they weren't giving to their capacity in the mid-1990s.

01-01:14:55

Roth:

Right.

01-01:14:57

Meeker:

Can you give me a sense of how it was that you helped develop them into supporters at the level that they were capable of?

01-01:15:08

Roth:

The key really was a series of campaigns that we launched. And each campaign embodied a vision, and that vision was a product of a conversation. So the—just as an example, in—must have been, I guess—we really did this just around the time of the financial crisis.

01-01:15:37

Meeker:

Okay, so 2007-2008?

01-01:15:39

Roth:

Yeah, in that vicinity. And we delayed the implementation for a little bit, but so I think we didn't really go fully into it until just after the crisis. But we, at that point, wanted to really take Human Rights Watch global. And it was coming out of the Bush era, and it was recognition that we couldn't be as reliant on the US or the West to promote human rights, that we needed to have a range of governments, influential regional leaders, to which we could turn to get things done, and that we had to build a parallel global donor base to make that possible.

It was quite transformational, because up until then, we really had been about enlisting western governments to get things done. And even though we had broadened outside of Washington—and the Brussels office that I mentioned was paralleled, over time, by offices in Paris and Berlin and London, as well as Geneva and New York for the UN. So we were already international, in that sense, but it was still largely western. We wanted to take the next step of developing a series of influential governmental allies in other regions, because often the western power was not the most influential power. And so this was a vision. There are other dimensions of it as well, where we were trying to push more researchers into the field, but it was part of an effort to become a genuinely global institution, and no longer just be an American institution with an international gloss to it.

They were very supportive of that idea and were willing to invest in it quite significantly. And that, in a sense, was the latest example. But if I think about the first campaign that they supported after the endowment—the endowment was the first one. And that was really just okay, we're going to give you the stability of an endowment. Then, we were at that stage—let's say we were a \$20 million organization and we wanted to double in size in five years, so get up to \$40 million.

At that point the major theme was we wanted to achieve what we called minimum geographic coverage; that is, we wanted to have a researcher for every seriously problematic country. And we didn't have that. We would have one researcher for two or three countries, which was hard to do. And we said, "Look, the minimum we need to responsibly cover this stuff is one person." And they bought that and invested in that, and so these investments were—at the height, they were giving \$3.5 million a year. But to get to that level was a product of really articulating this vision, and then agreeing that this was an

important thing to do, investing in it, always investing with a condition that we match these funds or match a portion of these funds. And so it was always done to maximize their ability to leverage their gift to bring others in.

But these ended up being, all of them, successful campaigns. And so we did the \$20 [million] to \$40 million growth. We did achieve this minimum geographic coverage. The next campaign, we did globalize the organization. We built all these regional advocacy offices. We doubled the organization again. And so they were, for many years, the largest or the second-largest donor to—and they still are really way up there. So I think at this point they're—the foundation is still the third-largest donor to the organization. So they, to this day, are incredibly generous substantial supporters of Human Rights Watch.

01-01:19:54

Meeker:

To what extent do you rely on donations from small donors?

01-01:19:57

Roth:

We do, but it's still really a major donor-led organization. So if you take, at this point, probably on the order of 170 families or foundations that give us \$100,000 a year or more annually, that probably represents 65 percent of our budget. So it is a very concentrated donor base. We then, obviously, have many smaller supporters.

A big part of our growth has been the creation of city committees. Today we have these committees in twenty-three or twenty-four cities around the world, and each one of them becomes a network where people bring in their friends. And so Herb and Marion were both quite involved with our San Francisco Bay Area committee. We now actually have two—it's subdivided between San Francisco and Silicon Valley. They were never active—they didn't want to bother with the committee work, so they never would attend committee meetings, but they were big supporters of the effort and they would always come to the dinner, because we do an annual dinner. They would always bring friends, introduce people. So they were very active members of our San Francisco community, but then also interested in this experiment, because I don't know any other organization that has done this, this effort to create these hubs of supporters in cities around the world.

It's worked really well for us—that's how we've built the organization. But it is a bit of an experiment, because we move into a place like Tokyo, or whatever, and people say you're out of your mind! They have *no* philanthropic tradition—what are doing in Tokyo? But we needed to go there, because Japan was one of our advocacy targets. Here was an influential wealthy government. It gives away a lot of money to a lot of bad governments with no human rights conditionality—we needed to change that. So we needed to set up in Tokyo, and we thought we'd be stronger with a donor base rather

than just an office—and it worked. Our last dinner there raised \$1.5 million. And we have a very vibrant committee in an active office, and it's going great.

We've replicated that in a bunch of places around the world now. Nobody else has done something like that. And the Sandler were very supportive of this effort, but it, from their perspective, started locally and started very much here, in making this a vibrant committee. And it was up and down. We didn't always have the right people here. Today we're actually in a pretty good place, but it took work. It's a matter of finding the right leadership locally.

01-01:22:37

Meeker:

Speaking of networks, has the Sandler Foundation and its family of institutions that it supports—have you been in contact with them? Do they set up sometimes perhaps fruitful or interesting engagements?

01-01:22:54

Roth:

Well, Anthony Romero and I are close friends.

01-01:22:55

Meeker:

Okay.

01-01:22:56

Roth:

And these are—that makes sense. We are two very parallel organizations. The ACLU [has] a domestic focus, obviously.

01-01:23:04

Meeker:

And also—he started his job about the same age that you did.

01-01:23:07

Roth:

About the same time, yes. Exactly, yes.

01-01:23:08

Meeker:

Yeah, I imagine that you would have had interesting conversations. [laughing]

01-01:23:10

Roth:

Yeah, yes—we regularly chat, and we're very supportive of each other. So that's been a nice relationship. I have not been as close to CAP or ProPublica. We view them as sister institutions, but I don't have that same real friendship with them that I do with the ACLU. Ironically, my daughter is working at the ACLU right now. [laughing] That's a recent occurrence.

01-01:23:32

Meeker:

I don't know if these are—like the Center for Responsible Lending. Those are probably not—

01-01:23:39

Roth:

Right. That's a bit further afield.

01-01:23:40

Meeker:

A bit further afield.

01-01:23:41

Roth:

Yeah, but the ones that are really—it's ACLU, CAP, ProPublica are the three that are really in our domain to different degrees, and obviously doing different things. ProPublica still is mainly domestic journalism. They occasionally do international stuff. We do have a significant US program, but we don't really look to ProPublica for our international work. Similarly, CAP has a foreign policy side, but is mostly domestic policy. So Human Rights Watch, in that sense, probably stands alone in this collection, this constellation of Sandler-supported organizations, in that we are *so* international. But there is overlap with a number of the other institutions.

01-01:24:26

Meeker:

Where do you see Human Rights Watch going in the next five years?

01-01:24:33

Roth:

Well, at this point we have a methodology that works, and we are, in a sense, trying to build upon it. So some of it is predictable. There are certain explosive countries where I feel we're understaffed, and we just need more help there. There are certain capitals where I want to set up, continuing this effort to diversify advocacy targets. So my next one is—we're just setting up in Seoul, South Korea right now. After that we're probably going to go to Dakar, Senegal. But that's not a radical change. These are more just natural progression.

I would think the biggest new thing that we're doing is in the realm of communications, and I've explained how already now, using video and photos and social media, is now just kind of normal for us. It's routine. But we use that traditionally as an alternative way of conveying our findings or our analysis. And we're beginning to do something new right now, in that—and this is very much driven by the populist attacks. Because what the populists have succeeded in doing—and this is not just Trump, it's Orban and Kaczynski and Erdoğan and Sisi and Duterte—you can go on and on. But they have made the violation of the human rights of certain demonized minorities *popular*. And so ordinarily, if we shine a spotlight on governmental misconduct it's shameful, and that's how we get pressure to force the government to change. If you go to Viktor Orban in Hungary and say, "You're violating the rights of Muslim immigrants," he would say, "Damn straight," and get applause for it.

So that's a challenge, and it really is almost an existential challenge in terms of our methodology. So we have to address that, and the way we're beginning to do it is we're working on new communication efforts designed to reinforce human rights principles. And so these are not necessarily about our research—they're about just the importance of human rights. Why should you *care* about the human rights of a refugee? Well, because if you're going to let governments pick and choose whose rights to respect, *your* rights are not secure, because today they're picking the demonized minority to take their rights away, but tomorrow it could be you. And that basic Kantian insight is

something that we have to pay more attention to and reinforce within the public.

And it's not enough to do it just the way I just described it, by making logical arguments—you've got to do it emotionally as well. And so this is our new challenge, really using short videos and social media, because this is not news. This is not something the *New York Times* is going to write about. You've got to hit people through social media, which we can do now, but persuade them emotionally why rights are important. And that's the big new challenge, and it is an essential challenge that we take on. It's new for us, because it's not something we've ever done before, but we are now actively moving in this direction. And there are tools out there—the fact that you can, with Facebook, very much target a particular community. So you can say I'm going to look for the movable middle, the purple community, and we are going to hit these people around immigration or women's health or criminal justice—some wedge issue. And we're going to use this tool to reinforce the basic norms. And the aim doesn't have to be to persuade everybody. The aim is just to move 2, 3, 4, 5 percent of the population—and that's plenty. That can make an enormous difference; that can tip the balance politically.

So this is a new challenge, and it's a challenge not just in the US, but in a number of other countries as well. And so there's huge interest in our doing this. We're actively experimenting right now, we're actively investing in it, and we're in the process of doing the polling and getting the feedback to do this in several languages in several different countries.

01-01:28:48

Meeker:

Great. Is there anything else you'd like to add about the work that you're doing or the impact of the Sandlers on the work that you've been doing? Anything I haven't asked you?

01-01:29:01

Roth:

I'm trying to think—well, we've covered a lot of material.

01-01:29:09

Meeker:

Yeah, this has been really great.

01-01:29:10

Roth:

Okay.

01-01:29:10

Meeker:

Why don't we wrap up then?

01-01:29:11

Roth:

Okay, good.

01-01:29:12

Meeker:

Thank you. I really appreciate this.

01-01:29:15

Roth: My pleasure. Yes.

[End of Interview]