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Ursula Springer, President, Springer Publishing Company

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Interview with Ursula Springer

President, Springer Publishing <http://www.springerpub.com>

by Katina Strauch (Editor, *Against the Grain*)

This is the story of how a strong woman took over a small publishing company and made it an institution.—KS

ATG: How did you get started in publishing?

US: A very sad event led me into publishing. My husband, **Bernhard Springer**, who had founded the company in 1950, died of a brain tumor in 1970. I was a professor at **Brooklyn College of the City University of New York** where I had taught for twelve years. Since I had no experience in publishing or in business, other publishers thought I would sell the company and they offered ridiculously low prices. Well, I did not sell it.

ATG: Tell us more. Were you related to the Springers of Springer Verlag? Did you come over to the U.S. during World War II?

US: I was born in Berlin, grew up in Germany, studied languages and literature at Universities in Munich, Bologna (Italy), Berlin, came to the US in 1950 as a student, did graduate work at the **University of Minnesota** (Social Foundations of Education). I moved to New York and finally got my Ph.D. from **Columbia University Teachers College** in comparative education. With a grant from the Ford Foundation I did research on school reforms in European countries, inventing some of the research methods for the project. I also founded a quarterly journal, *West European Education* (M.E. Sharpe published it).

ATG: Was there any relation to Axel Springer or Jerry Springer?

US: No, not at all. My husband descended from **Julius Springer** who founded **Springer-Verlag** in Berlin in 1842. Publishing literature, the house grew to prominence, and when in Germany in the late 19th century, modern science and medicine evolved and began to produce research, **Springer-Verlag** turned to publishing scientific and medical books and journals, as the leading scholarly publisher in Germany and probably Europe. During the Nazi years the Springer family, being partly Jewish, could not continue this publishing work. Bernhard Springer therefore emigrated to the US in 1938 and became an American citizen. He never wanted to resettle in Germany, but established his own American business in New York, **Springer Publishing Company, Inc.**, in 1950.

ATG: What type of books were the first publishing products of the young company?

US: Medical books, neurology, but also nursing, a field where the training level (in the United States) was raised to collegiate study for a growing number of nurses. Bernhard was a pioneer in the field, very sup-

portive of often inexperienced nurse authors, and thus he was quite popular. He was very successful with several titles. *Laboratory Tests for Nurses* in six editions sold about 270,000 copies and *Modell's Drugs in Current Use* (now edited by Duthie) is in its 49th annual edition.

Another field that evolved in the 1950's to growing popularity was psychology, especially psychotherapy. My husband published significant titles of well-known authors in the 1950's and 60's, and through the years we continue to cultivate psychology and psychotherapy (even if "therapy" is no longer quite as popular as ten years ago). Among our authors are **Al Rabin, Albert Ellis, Richard Lazarus**, and many more.

ATG: Tell us more about your list.

US: As a small to midsize publisher, we would be foolish trying to cover all facets of a field. You must develop "niches" and cultivate them. So, in nursing we had to leave the lucrative mass production of basic texts to the oncoming big textbook publishers. We moved "up" to the growing areas of specialized nursing, geriatric nursing, teaching of nursing, management, leadership, and particularly research in nursing. Sixteen years ago we established the *Annual Review of Nursing Research*. (Currently, the "mother lode" will spawn several "children".) Our general success in nursing publishing is shown by many awards we have received

from the *American Journal of Nursing*. *AJN* chooses 40 "best books" of the year annually, of which we garner 10 to 20 percent. That is a lot, as our nursing list (about 20 per year) numbers barely 1% of all nursing publications annually.

Our other very important "niche" is gerontology/geriatrics. My husband also started this field in the 1960's, when the term gerontology was still little known. I pursued strengthening our program in this field by various means: attending all conventions, reading journals, meeting authors, giving parties, starting journals, courting "very important people" — you name it, we did it. Now we have a list of 150 active titles on aging, and an *Annual Review of Gerontology and Geriatrics*, this year it will have its 20th volume. The main work in this field has been our *Encyclopedia of Aging* (1986, 2nd edition 1995, 3rd edition in progress), a great success in regular sales, many to libraries, and sales to the book club. It was translated into Japanese and French, and has brought much other subsidiary income. A sequel to this success story will be another similar one, the *Encyclopedia of Long-Term Care* (or Geriatric Care), just contracted and in planning.

ATG: What other fields do you include in your publishing program?

US: In addition to nursing, psychology, and gerontology/geriatrics, we publish titles

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And discounts, too



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in social work, public health, rehabilitation and medical education, in each of these fewer than 6 titles a year. It is actually a cohesive total, focusing on health and social services.

ATG: *How many books per year do you publish? Do you sell primarily to libraries?*

US: We have currently 800 active titles and we publish 60 books a year. Libraries are very important customers for us, since the majority of our titles are professional books, reference books, annuals, journals, and of course encyclopedias. Our main contacts for libraries are: **Login Brothers, Majors, Rittenhouse, Yankee Book Peddler, Baker and Taylor, Blackwells** and most of the companies represented in *Against the Grain*.

ATG: *How about journals?*

US: We publish sixteen journals, most of them quarterlies, in all areas of our book publishing. Some are association owned (like *International Psychogeriatrics*), some are our property. A successful one is the *Journal of Case Management*, with roughly 1000 subscribers.

One of the journals, *Contemporary Gerontology*, was modeled on *Contemporary Psychology*. It mainly contains reviews (25 to 30) of books on aging within their first year of publication. (I founded it out of frustration with the few reviews published in the field and their long delays in appearance).

ATG: *Let us talk about international activities. I know that you have attended the Frankfurt Book Fair since 1974. What do you do there?*

US: Yes, we have regular international trade conventions, selling nursing, psychology, and social work, also medical education titles abroad. We have a double booth at **Frankfurt** every year. Appointments for my meetings with foreign publishers are made two months in advance, so I can fit into the four days circa 40 appointments, always at my booth, since my goal is selling foreign rights, never purchasing rights, as we cannot sell translated books. Our areas of publishing are ahead of those in other countries, and our rare attempts to sell translated titles, even if of high quality, were unsuccessful. I do enjoy the **Frankfurt Fairs**. They are a book person's highlights of the year.

ATG: *What about the Web? What sort of presence do you have there?*

US: We have a Website <www.Springerpub.com> with complete bibliographic information on all our books. For


the most recent ones we plan to have tables of content. Of course we are actively dealing with Barnesandnoble.com and Amazon. They buy from us almost daily. Future plans include our own "selling on Web" system and developing "Distance Learning" courses with the **Nursing Division of New York University**.

ATG: *Why do you like being an independent publisher?*

US: Above all, I enjoy the freedom. I can be creative, act fast, create contacts, don't have to think of money every minute of the day, can make mistakes without losing my job, can follow my hunches, don't need to fabricate reports all the time. And very important: I can manage staff and company as I feel it to be fair. My staff of 40 has free health insurance, 401K, 12 days vacation (plus two personal days). New mothers can nurse babies in my offices, mothers with occasional baby-sitting problems can bring a child for a day to the office. As a woman business owner, I want to be an example. ("If not I, who?") I feel responsible for part of the "quality of life" of my employees.

ATG: *Tell us more about yourself.*

US: Looking back from today to the years when I started, I realize what mistakes I made then, especially overprinting. In course of time we had to discard thousands of books, which pained me much. On the other hand, I was somewhat successful, at least in the view of other publishers. For example, I was elected in 1976 as member of the Board of Directors of the **AAP**. And three years later I was asked to join the first delegation of American publishers invited by the **Chinese Publishers Association**. I was asked to give a lecture on publishing in the medical sciences, in English with a local translator. I had it translated in Chinatown before the trip. It was an interesting visit to Peking, Shanghai, Canton, but not much business came out of it then.

Other international meetings of the scholarly professions took me to Italy, England, France, Hungary, Germany, Japan, Mexico, and Brazil. This life has been interesting. Today I tend to reduce my travel and spend more time in my country place, hiking in the woods north of New York, and spending time with friends. 

*This interview took place one Saturday morning in February. I felt invigorated after it was over! I hope you will take the time to meet Ursula when she speaks at the **Charleston Conference** November 2-4, 1999!—KS*

From the Reference Desk

Column Editor: **Tom Gilson** (College of Charleston) <gilsons@cofc.edu>

Almost a quarter century has passed since the war in Vietnam ended and at last we have a multi-volume encyclopedia which puts the war and its legacy in perspective. The *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War: A Political, Social and Military History* (1998, 0874369835; \$275), published by ABC-CLIO, attempts an objective look at our country's most controversial and divisive war.

The *Encyclopedia* contains over 900 entries covering specific battles and operations, military tactics and weapons systems, as well as domestic issues, like the draft and the anti-war movement. Significant personalities (from all sides), are covered as is the role of art, music and the media in shaping perceptions of the war. Additionally, editor Spencer Tucker opens with a brief introductory essay outlining the history of Vietnam and includes a number of articles which discuss prior European involvement, and the perspective from the Vietnamese side. In short, this *Encyclopedia* lives up to its subtitle, and offers a thorough treatment of the many political, social and military complexities that inform the Vietnam experience.

While notable for its quality content, the *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War* also contains a number of other features adding to its value. There is a series of 22 helpful maps, reprinted in both volumes one and two, as well as bibliographies included with each entry and *see also* references guiding the reader to related articles. However, it is the third volume which supplies the most significant feature. It contains over 200 related primary sources including speeches, telegrams, memorandums, letters and official documents. This material is arranged chronologically from 1920 through 1995 and demonstrates the changes in official thinking and policies, both in the United States and Vietnam, over that period.

Editor Spencer Tucker and his over 125 contributors are to be commended for doing an admirable job. Given the quality of this set and the importance of its subject both academic and large public libraries will find it a necessary addition. Those libraries where interest is high should also consider Stanley Kutler's fine single volume *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War* (1996, Prentice-Hall, 0132769328; \$125) and the *Historical Atlas of the Vietnam War* by Harry G. Summers published by Houghton Mifflin (1996, 0395722233; \$39.95).

Subject specific atlases are useful reference books which are sometimes overlooked and under appreciated. Often, maps are just part of the story. Usually, these references include tables, charts and narrative text which truly enhance their value. Macmillan Library Reference's *Growing up in*

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