

Souvenir Press Ltd

PUBLISHERS

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It is with deep sadness that we announce the death of legendary publisher, raconteur and philanthropist, Ernest Hecht

Ernest Hecht, OBE

Ernest Hecht, founder and publisher of Souvenir Press, has died aged 88.

The last surviving émigré publisher, he came to Britain on the *Kindertransport*, the first refugee to arrive in London from Moravia. Souvenir Press, which he founded in his parents' back bedroom with a £250 loan from his father, began trading in April 1951 and remains resolutely independent today. Three years later, *Their Password is Courage*, a war memoir by John Castle, became Souvenir's first bestseller and it went on to become a box office success starring Dirk Bogarde.

Souvenir's list, ever eclectic, runs the gamut from Nobel laureates to books on knickers and the history of lavatory paper, *Bum Fodder* being a recent Christmas bestseller. Albert Einstein rubbed shoulders with Ken Dodd, as Hecht noted in the programme for the concert to celebrate Souvenir's 65th birthday in 2016, its theme "No Frontiers". Then there was Chomsky and Foucault, Brian Epstein, Ronald Searle, Michel Odent, Khalil Gibran, Pablo Neruda, Arthur Hailey, Pelé and Matt Busby plus a host of his beloved sporting heroes. *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories* broke sales records. And then of course there was the pioneering Human Horizons series, launched, "like all good things", at Arsenal Stadium, when he learned that friends had recently become parents to a brain-damaged child.

Another of Souvenir's perennial bestsellers was *Warning! When I Am Old I Shall Wear Purple*, whose author Jenny Joseph died only last month. It is all about the importance of being a rebel to the last – and on that front Ernest Hecht never disappointed.

But Hecht was much more than a publisher: he was a producer, in Britain and in Europe, of plays and concerts; an angel. Importantly, he was a philanthropist who quietly supported scores of charities, many of them connecting the arts with health and wellbeing and aiming to support other charitable organisations striving to make a difference to people's lives.

An ever-generous host, whether at long lunches or his many theatrical and musical events, Hecht was a loyal friend to many, offering ideas and advice but also criticism when he felt it was needed. He was wise and witty, a great anecdotalist with a mind like a steel trap who forgot nothing. No one would say he was easy – but for Ernest that was all just part of the sport. St Peter won't know what's hit him!

He had many honours, including the Neruda Medal, presented by the Chilean government for services to the arts in Chile for being the first publisher of Pablo Neruda in Great Britain; the Order of the Rio Branco, bestowed by the President of Brazil; and an OBE, awarded in the 2015 Birthday Honours List. He was granted an Honorary Fellowship of University College London in 2006.

Ernest Hecht died in hospital after a short illness, but he remained in harness till the last, conducting business from his West London home and leaving his iconic Great Russell Street offices in the care of his staff. Publishing will never see his like again and his passing leaves a void in a great many lives.

Ernest Hecht, born 21 September 1929, died 13 February 2018

OUR 67TH YEAR OF INDEPENDENT PUBLISHING

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