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NGOs and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

“A Curious Grapevine”

William Korey

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NGOS AND THE UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

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*To Es, My Loving Wife,
Companion and Counselor*

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It was my last study of the Helsinki process (*Promises We Keep: Human Rights, the Helsinki Process and American Foreign Policy*, St. Martin's Press, 1993) that initially pointed me in the direction of a volume on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The remarkable role that had been played by NGOs in East Europe, in the face of extraordinary obstacles, paved the way for the collapse of the mighty Soviet empire and the disintegration of the seemingly invulnerable Berlin Wall. Perhaps those NGOs were not at all unique. Might they not be symptomatic of a significant trend in modern society that would make the fulfillment of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights a central aspiration of an international human rights NGO movement?

With the encouragement of Ambassador Max Kampelman—"Mr. CSCE"—the very embodiment of the Helsinki process, who had brilliantly tapped the resources of NGOs both in the East and the West, I embarked upon this journey of scholarly inquiry. He brought my proposal to the attention of the U.S. Institute of Peace, which made possible the indispensable travel and research funding of the project. Robert Crane, the President of the Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation, also was keenly interested in the subject and provided additional and essential financial support for the intense three-year study.

The inquiry could not be said to have been launched in a personal, intellectual and historical vacuum. A quarter of a century ago, on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, I was asked to write the introduction to a picture album about Eleanor Roosevelt. It was then that I found her comment about the "curious grapevine" that would carry the message of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its violations through stone walls and across barbed wire erected by totalitarian and authoritarian regimes. Anticipated in that provocative and prescient phrase of the great champion of human rights was the role of nongovernmental organizations. Research on the work of Eleanor Roosevelt, together with an earlier study of the Universal Declaration, commissioned by the Carnegie

Endowment for International Peace, helped shape and focus my personal labors as an NGO lobbyist at the United Nations for some two decades.

Even as Rita Hauser, the U.S. Ambassador to the UN Commission on Human Rights in the late sixties, offered help to my lobbying efforts, so too has she once again extended aid to this work. Additional assistance came from Seymour Reich, former President of B'nai B'rith and Chairman of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations. Reich stood in the great tradition of B'nai B'rith leaders, like Philip Klutznick and Label Katz, who made the rescue of Soviet Jewry a top priority of the organization.

This labor of love never could have been completed without the detailed assistance of major human rights nongovernmental organizations, which provided through interviews, documentation and studies insights into how they operate, what they seek to accomplish and the extent to which they have succeeded in this effort. I express my heartfelt thanks to the leaders of these organizations and to the many staff members upon whom I have relied. A special thanks goes to Felice Gaer, the Director of the Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights, who, with her rich experience drawn from years at the Ford Foundation, the International League for Human Rights, the United Nations Association (UNA) and most recently the Blaustein Institute, was a constant source of advice and documentation.

NGOs were not alone in offering encouragement and help. I was given considerable assistance by human rights professionals at the United Nations and in various government agencies.

This is not intended to be the final word on the subject of human rights NGOs. Their achievement has been enormous in serving as the "curious grapevine" that has made human rights a vital component of international concern and discourse. I hope that I have opened the door to a continuing exploration of an astonishing resource that has helped transform the last half-century and laid the basis for even greater activism in the next century.

When I initially embarked upon this undertaking, I didn't reckon with the magnitude of the research task. Fortunately I had the assistance of several gifted university students who explored a number of subjects which would be incorporated into the study. They were Maria Biancheri Thompson, Kathryn Reardon and Baldwin Robertson, and I herewith extend my deepest appreciation and thanks for their contributions. Especially am I grateful for the valuable research help of Robertson, who

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