

EXTERNAL DOCUMENT

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**PETER BENENSON  
BIOGRAPHY**

*“Open your newspaper – any day of the week – and you will find a report from somewhere in the world of someone being imprisoned, tortured or executed because his opinions or religion are unacceptable to his government. The newspaper reader feels a sickening sense of impotence. Yet if these feelings of disgust all over the world could be united into common action, something effective could be done.*

*I was spurred into that by reading an article about how two Portuguese students had been arrested and sentenced to imprisonment for drinking a toast to liberty in a Lisbon restaurant. That so enraged me at the time that I walked up the steps of St Martins-In-The-Fields church, out of the underground, and went in to see what could really be done effectively to mobilize world opinion.*

*I became aware that lawyers themselves were not able sufficiently to influence the course of justice in undemocratic countries. It was necessary to think of a larger group which harnessed the enthusiasm of people all over the world who were anxious to see a wider respect for human rights.*

*Once the concentration camps and the hell-holes of the world were in darkness. Now they are lit by the light of the Amnesty candle; the candle in barbed wire. When I first lit the Amnesty candle, I had in mind the old Chinese proverb: “Better light a candle than curse the darkness”.*

*(Quote from Peter Benenson in 1994, taken from AI video: ‘Peter Benenson appreciation’ )*

*If you want this video, please place your orders with: World Images, Dominique O’Regan, 1 Host Street, Bristol BS1 5BX, United Kingdom*

*Tel: 44 (0) 117 930 4099*

Countless people, facing persecution the world over -- people living and those as yet unborn -- have reason to thank Peter Benenson, the founder of Amnesty International. For it was his inspiration in the 1960s that launched what was soon dubbed "one of the larger lunacies of our time": a worldwide citizens' movement to expose and confront government injustice.

Born on 31 July 1921, Peter Benenson was the grandson of the Russian-Jewish banker Grigori Benenson and son of the notable Flora Solomon who raised him alone after the death of her husband, British Army colonel John Solomon. He was tutored privately by WH Auden, then went to Eton and Oxford where he studied history.

His flair for controversy emerged early, when his complaint to the headmaster of Eton about the poor quality of the school's food prompted a letter to his mother warning of her son's "revolutionary tendencies". At age 16, he launched his first campaign: to get school support, during the Spanish Civil War, for the newly-formed Spanish Relief Committee which was helping Republican war orphans. He himself "adopted" one of the babies, helping to pay for its support.

His concern about political imprisonment and mistreatment was inspired by Arthur Koestler's *Spanish Testament*, which described the horrors of imprisonment and threatened execution by the Fascists. It was this concern that led to his next campaign -- the plight of Jews who had fled from Hitler's Germany. Despite some opposition, he succeeded in getting his school friends and their families to raise £4,000 to bring two young German Jews to Britain, thus very likely saving their lives. After leaving Eton, he helped his politically committed mother with finding homes in various countries for refugee children who arrived in London.

After his graduation from Oxford he joined the British army, where he worked in the Ministry of Information press office. While still in the army after the war had ended he studied law and left the forces to become a practising lawyer. He also joined the Labour Party, becoming a leading member of the Society of Labour Lawyers.

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) sent him to Spain as its observer at trials of trade unionists in the early 1950s where Mr Benenson was appalled by what he saw both in the courtrooms and in the prisons. In one instance he was so outraged by the proceedings that he drew up a list of complaints with which he confronted the trial judge over dinner. The trial ended with acquittals, a rarity in Fascist Spain.

It was through such activities that he began to acquire an international reputation. In Cyprus he helped and advised Greek Cypriot lawyers whose clients had fallen foul of their British rulers. He managed to bring together Labour, Liberal and Conservative lawyers and get them to send observers to Hungary in the throes of the 1956 uprising and ensuing trials, and to South Africa where a major "treason trial" was due to take place. The relative success of these two schemes led to the formation of "Justice", another initiative which, like Amnesty International, has had a distinguished record of work in the defence of the rule of law for more than three decades.

It was this constant activity that laid the groundwork for his main endeavour, the 1961 launching of Amnesty International. The catalyst was his sense of outrage on reading a news item about the arrest and imprisonment of two students in a Lisbon cafe who had drunk a toast to liberty.

As he himself put it: "It was in 1960 I think that these thoughts came to a head in my mind. It was during World Refugee Year which was the first of those great international years. That one was set up to try to empty the displaced person camps all over Europe and it was a tremendous success. That led me to think that perhaps we could have another year to try to empty the concentration camps."

So, with the publication of a front page appeal in *The Observer* newspaper titled "The Forgotten Prisoners", Amnesty International was born. The term "prisoner of conscience" soon became common currency and the movement's logo, a candle surrounded by barbed wire, became a worldwide symbol of hope and freedom.

For the first few years Mr Benenson worked tirelessly for the new, burgeoning movement supplying much of the early vital financial resources, going on research missions himself to country after country, and playing a part in all the organization's affairs. On one occasion, in order to get into a particularly inaccessible country (Haiti), he posed as a British folk artist.

Controversy became Amnesty International's *métier*, with its exposures of abuses by BOSS, the South African security apparatus, leading to attacks on its small London office. Revelations of efforts by the British Government to send relief to political prisoners in Southern Rhodesia led to press criticism.

It was out of the experience of those early days that new operating principles were forged upon which Amnesty International was later to grow into the premiere human rights organization in the world -- political impartiality, independence from governments, and rigorous accuracy of information.

"At that time we were still putting our toes in the water and learning as we went on," Mr Benenson later reflected. "We tried every technique of publicity and we were very grateful to the widespread help of journalists and television crews throughout the world who not only sent us information about the names of prisoners but also, whenever they could, gave space to stories about prisoners. It's the publicity function of Amnesty that I think has made its name so widely known, not only to readers in the world, but to governments -- and that's what matters."

In 1966 a major internal crisis erupted over an Amnesty report on the torture of Adeni suspects by British forces. Mr Benenson alleged that the organization was being infiltrated by British intelligence and should move its headquarters to a neutral country. An independent investigation did not support his claim and he retired temporarily from the organization to devote himself to a private world of prayer and writing: he was a devout convert to Catholicism.

But he did not give up campaigning for a better world. He found a society for people with coeliac disease -- a condition from which he suffers himself -- with the goal of increasing awareness of and knowledge about the illness. In the 1980s he became the chair of the newly created Association of Christians

*Against Torture and in the early 1990s organized help for the orphans of Ceaucescu's Romania.*

*He never lost his enthusiasm for Amnesty International and with the appointment of a Swedish Secretary General Thomas Hammarberg in the mid-1980s returned to an active role in the movement as a speaker and campaigner on its behalf. He does not, however, always agree with the organization's policies: for instance, he publicly disapproved of its decision not to adopt as a prisoner of conscience Mordechai Vanunu, the Israeli imprisoned for exposing his country's nuclear weapons program.*

*He was the first to use the words which have since found themselves on posters, T-shirts and postcards in dozens of languages all over the world:*

*"The candle burns not for us, but for all those whom we failed to rescue from prison, who were shot on the way to prison, who were tortured, who were kidnapped, who "disappeared". That's what the candle is for...."*

*Peter Benenson received the UK newspaper's (Daily Mirror), "Pride of Britain" Lifetime Achievement Award on Tuesday 10 April 2001.*