



# Hon. Rya W. Zobel

## Senior Judge, U.S. District Court for the District of Massachusetts

by Wendy Zazik

*Wendy Zazik is vice president and associate general counsel for Fidelity Investments. After graduation from law school, she served as a law clerk to Hon. Rya W. Zobel and continues to look forward to their lunches together. Zazik is grateful to Lily DiBlasi, former judicial assistant to Judge Zobel, for her friendship and contributions to this profile. She also has deep appreciation for two sources she consulted and from which she quoted, with the permission of and review by Judge Zobel:*

*Gabrielle R. Wolohojian (Associate Justice of the Mass. Appeals Court), "An Interview with the Honorable Rya W. Zobel," BOSTON BAR J. (Oct. 7, 2014), with the permission of the Boston Bar Association; and*

*Nancy D. Israel, "Oral History of Rya W. Zobel," WOMEN TRAILBLAZERS IN THE LAW (2008), with the permission of the American Bar Association. ©2008 by the American Bar Association. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved. This information or any or portion thereof may not be copied or disseminated in any form or by any means or stored in an electronic database or retrieval system without the express written consent of the American Bar Association.*

“I think it’s very important to have a sense of humor in this business. And you cannot take yourself seriously. I mean, you’ve got to take the business seriously, but not yourself.”

Four decades after she first went on the bench, Judge Rya Zobel still believes she has the “best job in the law.” That is because she eagerly engages in each of the cases on her docket, deeply appreciates the weight her rulings have on people’s lives, profoundly respects the litigants and their attorneys, and greatly treasures her staff. Judges, understandably, may feel daunted by the myriad of complex matters brought before them, but Judge Zobel brings her enthusiastic curiosity to each new subject. Whether learning about “the provenance of a painting in the Museum of Fine Arts, how the internet runs, how cameras are made, how a small city runs itself, or how a river is affected by something that happens upstream,” she is a quick study who relishes the opportunity presented by each new case.

It is not only her keen intellect that she brings to every case that distinguishes Judge Zobel, but also her compassion and respect for everyone in her courtroom. She has long understood what lawmakers are only beginning to notice: the Federal Sentencing Guidelines can create unjust results, so she applies them with great care. Indeed, she shows kindness and understanding in matters large and small. When a lawyer missed his train to Boston for a scheduling conference, Judge Zobel graciously and with her signature hearty laugh invited him to participate by phone and, from a station platform with the rattle of passing trains, he gratefully did. Once, following a lobby conference filled with multiple all-male parties and lawyers, one cheerfully called out, “Good-bye girls!” to the judge and her female staff. Perhaps another judge might have been offended and viewed the farewell as overly familiar or even patronizing. Judge Zobel was unfazed, understanding that she could be more effective when parties felt comfortable with her and, at the same time, confident in her own ability to maintain decorum.

She is beloved by her staff and recognized as much for her intelligence as for her humor and interest in



their lives. Her judicial assistant is a close confidante whom, along with her courtroom clerk, she relies upon for advice and expertise. Among her former law clerks is an eclectic collection of federal and state judges, criminal defense attorneys, law firm partners and associates, public interest lawyers, and in-house counsel, all of whom are devotees and many have become cherished friends. Some of her current and former staff enjoyed joining the judge in yoga and exercise classes held in chambers or being treated to flowers that she supplied weekly.

It is plain to see how Judge Zobel’s competence, attitude, and determination have led to her success, but she would give due credit to being “in the right place at the right time.” When she graduated from Harvard Law School in 1956 and law firms were not hiring women, Judge Zobel landed a position as a law clerk and remained there for the next decade. She reflects on her good fortune because she was able to work part time when she had young children, which provided more of a work-life balance than if she had gone to a law firm. Thereafter, from being a woman among many who were excluded by virtue of their gender, she became a woman of many “firsts”: In 1976, she was elected the first woman partner at Goodwin; in 1979, President Jimmy Carter appointed her the first

woman federal judge for the District of Massachusetts; in 1992, she met with President Bill Clinton as he considered whom he would appoint to be the first woman U.S. attorney general. Janet Reno was selected, but Judge Zobel returned to Washington three years later as the first female director of the Federal Judicial Center. Throughout her career, she never felt demeaned because of her gender, though there were occasionally male colleagues who made rather absent-minded comments and whom she enlightened with gentle humor. While appreciating the significance of her firsts and the impact to men and women alike, Judge Zobel was delighted when other women joined her in every aspect of her professional life, from law firm partnership to the bench to her staff.

In addition to her busy docket, Judge Zobel has spent time in a wide variety of activities, often blending professional with personal. For example, she relishes participating in the annual production of “Shakespeare and the Law” alongside companion thespians from the bench and bar. Her international vacations from Antarctica to Zimbabwe may just as easily involve meeting members of a foreign judiciary as going for a spa treatment. At home in Charlestown, Mass., she enjoys cooking with herbs cultivated from her rooftop garden, where she has created a sanctuary filled with fragrant, bright blossoms. She regularly shares the verdant tranquility of her garden and warmth of her home, welcoming friends and family with delicious feasts she lovingly prepares and often serves on plates painted by her children when they were in grade school. Her many, many close friends span all ages and walks of life, including artists whose work she proudly displays in her home and chambers and whose studios she delights in visiting. She also finds joy in the buzz of activity in her neighborhood, from concerts in City Square Park to children playing in the park. Moreover, for 30 years Judge Zobel has been actively involved in Boston’s Handel and Haydn Society, first serving on the Board of Governors then the Board of Overseers, and always as a Boston Symphony Orchestra subscriber and enthusiast. Not least, she cherishes her children, grandchildren, and extended family.

Her love of the arts has been a touchstone throughout her life. Music was a mainstay in her childhood home in Zwickau, Germany, where she was born in 1931. Her mother was a concert violinist from Hungary who regularly practiced with a professional quartet in their home creating a conservatory of sorts where her younger brother played violin, she played piano, and her father treasured the music that filled their home. Along with happy memories of music, she fondly recalls going to school and taking walks with her father. Her joy, however, was followed by hardship and then tragedy. During World War II, a combination of luck and ingenuity enabled her family to survive food shortages and bombings by the Allied forces. Her parents also made it through Nazi interrogations concealing her mother’s Jewish identity (a fact Judge Zobel did not learn until she arrived in the United States). In the war’s immediate

aftermath, American soldiers established themselves in her family’s home. When the Americans departed, Russian soldiers marched into their East German town and, in July 1945, arrested her parents after a neighborhood boy denounced them as American spies. She never saw her father again, and it would be a decade before she saw her mother. At 13 years old, she and her younger brother spent the next year and a half on a journey West that ultimately led them to the loving arms of their Hungarian-born maternal uncles and grandmother who had emigrated to America many years earlier, and to whom she remains extraordinarily grateful. She has powerful memories of seeing (and saluting) the Statue of Liberty for the first time as their ship pulled into New York Harbor on Jan. 16, 1947. A bright student and outgoing teenager, she thrived in high school and then Radcliffe College where she studied economics. By the time she was reunited with her mother, she was married and completing law school.

Although she became an American citizen 70 years ago, Judge Zobel still feels the pride of citizenship that she brings, along with profound empathy, when she administers the oath to new immigrants during naturalization ceremonies. Her inquisitiveness and humility drive her to ask questions and listen carefully. At the same time, if asked, she generously shares her wisdom. For those paying close attention, there are many life lessons that extend beyond the courtroom. She encourages new judges to trust that they will learn on the job but also to “learn to be concise, and how to hold their own counsel.” She runs her courtroom “gently but firmly, with respect for everyone” and suggests new judges do likewise. To lawyers, be mindful of their own reputation. To all, remain curious and have fun! She is certainly a model in each of these respects. ☺

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