

### *Julius Rosenwald*

#### *The Man Who Built Sears, Roebuck and Advanced the Cause of Black Education in the American South*

By Peter M. Ascoli

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006. Pp. xii, 453. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00.)

As Peter Ascoli, Julius Rosenwald's grandson-turned-biographer, so rightly observes, it is most unfortunate that Rosenwald remains one of the least-studied luminaries in the history of twentieth-century American business and philanthropy. This book is only the second attempt in nearly seventy years to write a comprehensive biography of this remarkable leader. Rosenwald, born in 1862 to a middle-class Reform Jewish family in Springfield, Illinois, died in Chicago in 1932 as one of the nation's most well-respected businessmen and philanthropists. He lived during the emergence and gradual transformation of the post-Civil War racial caste order but, despite his own paternal attitudes about race, contributed to the eventual breakdown of Jim Crow which began in the late 1940s. As the book's subtitle implies, Rosenwald was instrumental in advancing the cause of black education in the South during the years of Jim Crow. He supported Booker T. Washington, served as a long-time trustee of Tuskegee Institute, built more than 5,000 Rosenwald schools from 1917 through the early 1930s, and in 1928 established the Julius Rosenwald Fund to develop unusual black talent and reform race relations.

Ascoli succeeds in mining untapped archival and rarely used secondary historical sources to reconstruct Rosenwald's contributions to the building of Sears, Roebuck and Co. as a model early twentieth-century business and to the practice of corporate philanthropic giving. The author looks at his work with Jewish charities and social services, as well as his role in the establishment of the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry and the University of Chicago. Rosenwald became legendary for his insistence that the wealthy were responsible for their own generation and therefore should not engage in perpetual giving practices.

In many respects, Ascoli does an admirable job of disentangling the mythical Rosenwald from the real man through his use of archival and secondary historical sources. Unfortunately, the private and institutional collections on which he relies do not provide the in-depth data to fully round out the lives of Rosenwald and those in his personal, social, and professional circles. The scarcity of reliable historical data, combined with the style of the book (which reads too often like a litany of Rosenwald's deeds), results in a frequent lack of historical context.

In some instances, other archival collections, books, and articles could have been selected and would have greatly enriched the story Ascoli was trying to tell. Missing from the author's research are, for example, documents from the Charles S. Johnson Papers at Fisk University, the Commission on Interracial Cooperation Papers in the Atlanta University Center Library, the John Slater Fund Papers, the George Peabody Fund Papers, and the Phelps-Stokes Fund Papers. These collections, as well as seminal historical works such as Kenneth King's *Pan-Africanism and Education* (1971), would have given the author a more sophisticated grasp of the philanthropic environment, especially as it pertained to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century southern black education.

It is also unclear if Ascoli has a grasp of the racial climate of the times about which he writes and of the major black leaders whom he mentions (or does not mention). For instance, he treats only in passing the heated debate in pre-World War I America regarding industrial education for blacks, as championed by Booker T. Washington, and the liberal arts education advocated by William E. B. DuBois. According to Ascoli, Rosenwald's impression of Robert Moton, Washington's successor at Tuskegee, was of a passive incompetent leader, which does not shore up well with historical evidence about Moton. Rosenwald's misconception about Moton could have been

refuted by a number of historical accounts of Moton's leadership, which included opposition to the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s and a willingness to allow liberal arts education into the Tuskegee curriculum. In fact, one could argue that Rosenwald's real problem with Moton derived from Moton's willingness to deviate from the kind of racial paternalism that Booker T. Washington had advocated.

As much as Ascoli's assessment of the Julius Rosenwald Fund should be commended, it nevertheless presents numerous missed opportunities. Without reference to the Charles S. Johnson Papers at Fisk, Ascoli ignores Johnson's central role as a Rosenwald Fund trustee who also became the fund's favorite African American beneficiary and who greatly shaped its priorities. Johnson, along with fund president Edwin Embree and Will Alexander, executive director of the Atlanta-based Commission on Interracial Cooperation, utilized what we now call action social science research to produce a new kind of knowledge which would feed into the racial justice movements of the 1950s.

Finally, the author does not say enough about how Rosenwald, other philanthropists of his generation, and their foundations' staff members changed their minds over time about issues such as Jim Crow. The book provides hints about this process, but not enough focused assessment of the social circles Rosenwald, Embree, and others were pulled into with pro-

gressive racial integration. These men, along with many other whites and blacks, became the progenitors of theories, practices, and value systems which would erode the grip of Jim Crow on American society.

Ascoli is no doubt well aware that this biography will be far from the last word on Julius Rosenwald. The book raises important questions, and it is a noble first step in recovering the life and contributions of an extraordinary man, and the context in which he developed, raised a family, established a national business,

and modestly gave his time and money to cutting-edge issues of his day.

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