

Julius Rosenwald: Building Partnerships for American Education

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Abstract

Julius Rosenwald (1862–1932) made enormous contributions to African American education, rural education, and many aspects of American life. Even so, he remains a little known figure to many. To a large extent, his impact was the result of an ability to build and maintain effective partnerships. This brief history summarizes Rosenwald’s thoughts on philanthropy and it reviews some of his major contributions to American life. However, it focuses on the social, cultural, and economic circumstances that influenced Rosenwald’s development.

Julius Rosenwald grew to maturity during the period following the American Civil War. In fact, he was born in Lincoln’s home town during Lincoln’s presidency. It was an era charged with emotion. Debates about social justice, freedom, and individual rights and opportunities were the order of the day. The social, cultural, economic, and political milieu of his era resulted in the development of strong beliefs and values on Rosenwald’s part as they did for many of his contemporaries. Rosenwald, however, accumulated enormous wealth, which enabled him to transform many of those beliefs and values into actions benefiting many he regarded to be in need. This paper includes a description of the development of Julius Rosenwald as a true philanthropist and summarizes some of his contributions to American life.

Family Influences

Julius Rosenwald was born August 12, 1862, in Springfield, IL, to Samuel and Augusta Rosenwald, German-Jewish immigrants. Samuel Rosenwald was a merchant who was born in Bünde, Prussia, Germany, in 1828 and, following his schooling, was engaged in the clothing business. In 1854 he immigrated to the United States. He settled in Baltimore, MD, and worked as a traveling salesperson or, as recorded in the 1881 History of Sangamon County, Illinois, “peddled with a pack” (1881) and later, with a horse and wagon between Baltimore and Winchester, VA. In 1856 he married Miss Augusta Hammerslaugh. A search of the Baltimore City Directory reveals that her father, Lewis Hammerslaugh, operated a dry goods store at 155 Lexington Street in Baltimore in the 1850s and 1860s (Matchett’s Baltimore Director for 1855–56, 1856).

Samuel Rosenwald soon contracted with Lewis Hammerslaugh to operate a store in Peoria, IL. According to records in Sangamon County, IL, Rosenwald bought out Hammerslaugh within six months and continued to operate the clothing store in Peoria until 1860. The Rosenwald family then moved to Talladega, AL, for a brief period. They eventually settled in Springfield, IL, where Samuel Rosenwald contracted with the Hammerslaugh Brothers to operate a clothing store on the west side of the town square. The business, which sold large numbers of uniforms to Union troops during the Civil War, remained in operation until the 1880s.

The town square in Springfield was a busy and important place. In 1837 Springfield became the Illinois state capital, and the capital building dominated the square. In addition, Abraham Lincoln’s law office, first with Stephen T. Logan, and then in turn with William Herndon, was on the west side of the square from 1843 until 1865. According to Roberts (2005), the Rosenwald home in Springfield was across the street from the Lincoln home. Both were within walking distance of the square.

Roberts (2005) stated that Julius, Samuel’s son, was an ambitious youth, “attending to customers in his father’s clothing business, carrying luggage for travelers, and pumping the organ at a local church” (Historic Roots Section ¶1).

Julius also was reported to have worked at the age of 12 selling a souvenir pamphlet titled “The Illustrated Description of the Lincoln Monument” at the dedication of the monument to Lincoln in Springfield in 1874 (Werner, p. 9 as cited in Roberts, 2005).

Rosenwald the Businessman

At the age of 17, Julius Rosenwald went to New York to apprentice with Hammerslaugh Brothers (his mother’s family business), a wholesale clothier operated by his uncle, Edward Hammerslaugh. While in New York, he established a friendship and roomed with Henry Goldman, who would later become a partner in Goldman, Sachs and Company, investment bankers. Soon afterward, Rosenwald and his cousin, Julius Weil, formed a small company to make lightweight men’s “summer suits.” The business was a success, and they relocated to Chicago in 1885. In 1894, Rosenwald left Rosenwald and Weil and formed a new company, Rosenwald and Company, making inexpensive men’s suits.

At about the same time, Richard Sears moved his small mail order company, which originally specialized in watches, from Minneapolis to Chicago. Sears shared the company with Alva Roebuck, a former watch repairman. Sears had a talent for marketing but was not as effective in completing orders. In fact, Ascoli (2003) reported that it was common practice during the early days of the firm’s existence to take large orders without having the inventory at hand. When Sears received overwhelming orders for men’s suits in response to advertisements in his catalog, he sought out Rosenwald and Company and commissioned 1,000 suits (Ascoli, 2003).

Mr. Roebuck may have thought that conducting business that way was too risky. In any event, he left the company. In looking for a new partner, Sears contacted Aaron Newsbaum. Newsbaum was an inventor who had made a great deal of money at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair and had recently become known in the pneumatic tube business. Sears offered Newsbaum one-half of Sears and Roebuck for \$75,000. Newsbaum did not want to enter the venture alone and contacted his brother-in-law, Julius Rosenwald. The two became partners in the fledgling firm, Sears and Roebuck (Ascoli, 2003).

While Sears excelled in marketing, Rosenwald excelled as a manager and organizer. He soon turned the mail-order operation into an efficient and effective organization. He even planned and built a new plant in 1905. The firm became the leading mail-order company in the world. There can be little doubt that its success was due to the popularity of the Sears Catalog, which Richard Sears developed. It could also be attributed to Rosenwald’s organizational abilities and the beginning of Rural Free Delivery, which the United States Post Office initiated in 1902. In 1901 Rosenwald bought out his brother-in-law, Newsbaum. Seven years later, in 1908, Sears left the company he had founded. Julius Rosenwald became the chief executive officer, and he eventually became chairman of the board. Rosenwald’s wealth increased until he was a multi-millionaire. Rosenwald wrote in an article titled, “*The Burdon of Wealth*,” which appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*, “Fortune smiled on me in a big way and no one was more surprised than I was myself” (Rosenwald & Tobenking, 1929, p. 12).

Personal Influences

Julius Rosenwald was generous and compassionate. A number of individuals influenced his conception of social justice, which led to his philanthropy. Rosenwald spent the first 17 years of his life in a small town where he had the opportunity to witness the dedication and work ethic that his father, Samuel, demonstrated. In Springfield, he also learned of the history and tradition of both sides of the family in the clothing industry. The family tradition included the Hammerslaugh family (his mother’s family) and his paternal grandfather, Buedix Rosenwald, who died in 1840 in Prussia and who was also a merchant.

Another factor that influenced Rosenwald was the model and message presented by his Rabbi, Emil Hirsch. Hirsch led Chicago’s Sinai Congregation from 1880 until his death in 1923, and he emphasized the responsibility of those with means to assist those without means. His teaching, combined with the traditional “tzedakah,” which is a word

most often used to mean charity but, according to Karesh and Hurvitz (2006), “literally means an act of righteousness or justice” (p. 529). Hirsh was among many to interpret this as “a commandment to act in ways that make the world a fairer place, or to do *tzedakah*. Thus, *tzedakah* is not selfless giving, but commanded righteousness” (Karesh & Hurvitz, p. 529).

Tzedakah is a central tenant of Judaism and influenced Rosenwald’s beliefs and actions significantly. The highest level of *tzedakah* suggests anonymous giving, which enables others to become self sufficient; however, Rosenwald expressed that the giver should be known in order to inspire others to give as well. Even so, Rosenwald took steps to ensure that his gifts were not mere memorials to himself.

Still another influence Rosenwald described as having a tremendous impact on his beliefs and actions was the receipt and subsequent reading of two books. The books were from a friend in New York, Paul Sachs, then partner with Henry Goldman in the firm of Goldman, Sachs, and Company. The books were *Up from Slavery*, the autobiography of Booker T. Washington (1901), and *An American Citizen: The Life of William H. Baldwin Jr.*, by John Graham Brooks (1910). The reading of both of these books had profound effects on Rosenwald.

Booker T. Washington was the eminent educator and advocate for African Americans who founded The Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, which was providing educators for many private schools for African Americans. Rosenwald experienced some degree of discrimination as a member of the Jewish community and no doubt observed blatant discrimination of Whites toward African Americans. He was also committed to social justice and to assisting those in need. Booker T. Washington had been born a slave just before the Civil War and had lifted himself up, with the help of many, to a position of influence. He used that position, however, to help provide a better future for others. Washington’s selflessness and his expression of hopefulness and the rewarding of merit were consistent with Rosenwald’s personal beliefs. Toward the end of his book, Washington (1901) wrote, “there was never a time when I felt more hopeful for the race than I do at the present. The great human law that in the end recognizes and rewards merit is everlasting and universal” (p. 318).

William Baldwin knew Booker T. Washington through his service on the Tuskegee Board, which Baldwin joined in 1894. He was a railroad man and was head of the Long Island Railway and the Southern Railway. Baldwin was also head of the General Education Board (GEB), which John D. Rockefeller established in 1903. The GEB had the improvement of education in the United States as its objective and proposed to do so “without distinction of race, sex, or creed” (Rockefeller Archive Center, n. d., Organizational History Section, ¶1). Rosenwald, who did not graduate from high school, valued education and often expressed admiration for individuals who had been able to receive a formal education. Baldwin was a graduate of Harvard. In addition, Baldwin was involved in many efforts to improve conditions for African Americans. Baldwin’s philanthropy and the openness of the GEB toward assisting those in need also appealed to Rosenwald’s sense of *tzedakah*.

After reading *Up from Slavery* and *An American Citizen: The Life of William H. Baldwin Jr.*, Rosenwald wrote to his daughters, Adell and Edith, who were attending school in Germany. He wrote, “I just finished *An American Citizen*, and it is glorious. A story of a man who really lead a life which is to my liking and whom I shall endeavor to imitate or follow as nearly as I can” (Rosenwald as cited in Ascoli, 2003, ¶3). Rosenwald valued education and seemed to regret his failure to complete high school and attend college. These feelings were evident in the next lines of his letter to his daughters “[Baldwin and I] have a great many views in common. But he, being college bred and much of a student, had powers of analysis of which I lack” (Rosenwald as cited in Ascoli, 2003, ¶3).

Julius Rosenwald was an industrious, charitable person who matured in the politically charged home town of Abraham Lincoln immediately following the Civil War. Rosenwald was a person for whom social justice and education were very important. Because he was Jewish, he had both observed and experienced discrimination against Jews. He had become a person of means with the belief that having means brought a responsibility to help those in need. These factors all came together with an opportunity that began a new chapter in Rosenwald’s life. This later phase of his life resulted in many significant experiences that have touched, and that continue to touch, millions of American citizens.

Rosenwald, the YMCA, and a Chance Meeting

In 1905 Rosenwald had a new plant built for Sears and Roebuck. The plant included many new conveniences including conveyor belts and escalators. Rosenwald's intent was to streamline processing of mail orders, which was 100% of Sears and Roebuck's business at the time. He also wanted to have excellent working conditions for his employees. Rosenwald's concern for employees' working conditions was revealed by Peter Ascoli through a story about Rosenwald as CEO of Sears and Roebuck. Rosenwald's colleagues purchased a Persian rug for his office, thinking that the office was too plain to be the office of the CEO of a major firm. After several weeks of seeing it still rolled up and standing in the corner, they asked him about the rug. Rosenwald asked them to return it, stating that his employees did not have Persian rugs to work on, and he did not need one either (Ascoli, 2004).

His concern for employees also led him to conversations with local YMCA officials. Rosenwald had supported the YMCA near his home but also asked to have one built near the new Sears and Roebuck plant so that his workers could have access to recreational facilities. Shortly after their conversations, Rosenwald hosted a lunch meeting with some of the leaders of the area YMCA organization. With them came Jesse Moreland, an African American who was with the International Division of the YMCA. During the meeting, Rosenwald was asked to assist in funding a YMCA for African Americans in Chicago that would be part recreational facility and part lodging. The need was great as there were no fitness or recreational facilities that would accept African Americans, not even existing YMCAs. There were also few hotels for African Americans who were coming to Chicago to find work. Rosenwald listened and then astonished his guests by offering to donate \$25,000 to any YMCA in the United States that could raise \$75,000 on its own. With that offer, the concept of the challenge grant was born. According to Ascoli, the room became silent leaving it to Rosenwald to break the silence by saying, "Well, I guess you can't build more than one a month, but I hope you can" (Ascoli, 2003). As a result of this innovative donation program, 25 YMCAs and 2 YWCAs were built between 1913 and 1933 in Chicago (Ascoli, 2003). All of those facilities were for African Americans. The first one completed was the Wabash Avenue YMCA on 37th Street, which eventually became the birthplace of the Harlem Globetrotters (Siegel, 2001). The dignitaries invited to participate in the opening of that YMCA included Booker T. Washington.

When Rosenwald spoke at the opening of the YMCA he paraphrased Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. He said, "We should here dedicate more than this building. We should dedicate ourselves to the unfinished work, to the great task before us of removing race hatred of which unfortunately so much exists and of bringing about a universal acceptance that it is the individual and not the race that counts" (Rosenwald as cited in Ascoli, 2003, ¶3).

Rosenwald and Booker T. Washington met several times during Washington's visit to Chicago. Being an excellent fundraiser, Washington asked Rosenwald if he would like to serve on the board of The Tuskegee Institute. After a carefully planned trip with Rabbi Hirsch and others from Chicago through Nashville, TN, where they visited the campuses of Fisk University, Vanderbilt University, and Meharry Medical School, Rosenwald and his party arrived at Tuskegee Institute. Rosenwald was impressed with the campus and the programs he found in place and agreed to become a member of the board.

Schools for African Americans

Julius Rosenwald celebrated his 50th birthday in 1912 by donating \$687,500 to various causes. Of that amount, \$25,000 went directly to Tuskegee for the construction of private schools for African American students. Many of those students later attended the Tuskegee Institute and became teachers. Washington had another construction project in mind. He wanted to facilitate and provide impetus for the establishment of additional *public schools* for African Americans. Washington asked Julius Rosenwald to set aside \$2,500 for that project. Rosenwald agreed but with the stipulation that the community in which the school was to be located raise funds as well and/or provide "sweat equity" and materials for the schools. The first six schools funded by this program were built in Alabama. According to Smith (1950),

While all of these six experimental schools were completed in the spring of 1914, the Loachopoka School in Lee County, Alabama, happened to be the “First Rosenwald School.” It was a one-teacher frame building costing \$942. Of this amount the Negroes raised in pennies, dimes, and dollars, \$150 to buy two acres of land required for the site and gave \$132 in labor. Their White friends gave \$360 and Mr. Rosenwald contributed \$300. (p. 64)

By 1915, African American communities in three states had established more than 80 public schools. These events marked the beginning of Rosenwald’s participation in providing schools for African American students.

According to Ascoli (2003) Rosenwald began receiving complaints early in 1919 that some schools built through the Tuskegee Institute with Rosenwald’s funds were poorly built. Hoffschwelle (1998) wrote that one of the problems with schools built by the Tuskegee initiative was that some white builders and educators did not participate comfortably in a program that was operated by African Americans. Because Rosenwald was concerned about the financial records and the lack of Tuskegee personnel’s supervision of the actual construction of the facilities, he hired Fletcher B. Dresslar of Peabody College in Nashville, TN, to inspect the schools. The staff of Peabody College had already been involved with the General Education Board’s efforts to provide schools in the southern states through the Peabody Education Fund and the Anna T. Jeanes Foundation. Dresslar inspected a number of schools and, sadly, confirmed the charges. He concluded that many schools were poorly built. He also concluded that little or no on-site supervision had been provided by the staff of the Tuskegee Institute (Hoffschwelle, 1998).

The Rosenwald Fund

A difficult task now faced Rosenwald who, as a businessman first, was intent that the job be done correctly. Booker T. Washington had died in 1915, and his successors apparently had not maintained the program as intended. Rosenwald informed Mrs. Washington, Mr. Washington’s son, and Dr. Robert R. Moton, the new president of the Tuskegee Institute, that the program would be placed under the direct supervision of Rosenwald’s recently formed foundation. Furthermore, Julius Rosenwald had employed Samuel L. Smith, formerly Superintendent of Negro Education for the State of Tennessee, to direct his foundation’s school building program. The Southern Office of the Rosenwald Fund was set up in Nashville, TN. Needless to say, members of the staff of the Tuskegee Institute were not initially pleased. They even hinted of racism, as S. L. Smith was a White man. However, Dresslar’s report to Julius Rosenwald indicated the need for having a White man in charge of oversight because many White construction workers and educators would not accept direction from African American project supervisors.

Smith used the excellent plans that had been developed by personnel at Tuskegee and revised them. Schools were built according to strict specifications. The revisions included plans for one-room schools, two-room schools, and schools with up to twelve classrooms as well as teachers’ houses, wood shops for boys, and home economics areas for girls. The new plans had special emphasis on “properly enclosed foundations, functional floor plans, adequate lighting, and sanitary facilities” (Hoffschwelle, 1998, p 69). These steps eased the hurt initially felt by the Tuskegee personnel. Additionally, they were consistent with Booker T. Washington’s goal that schools be efficient, that students learn skills that could be used immediately, and that students learn skills that could “lift them up” from poverty. True to his agreement with Booker T. Washington, Rosenwald provided only partial funding. He required that the community, African American and White citizens, contribute the remainder of the funds. The schools became centers not only of education but also of community pride. Julius Rosenwald’s measures also appeased those White community members who feared that African Americans would move to cities in search of jobs, thus weakening the local labor force. Rosenwald’s objective was to improve education and race relations simultaneously (Hoffschwelle, 1998).

Schools built during the beginning of the twentieth century had large windows in order to maximize the use of sunlight and provide maximum ventilation during an era in which electricity was not available to many communities. Specific wall colors improved lighting and minimized glare. Movable partitions between large classroom areas enabled the use of the schools for large gatherings. Centrally located heaters provided efficient heat. Many schools included small stages or rooms with special access for community use. Privies addressed health and hygiene concerns, and school grounds were large enough for many activities. In fact, a minimum requirement of two acres for each school allowed space for

teaching gardens and playground space. In addition to the many features of the buildings, a major change brought by Rosenwald Fund oversight was that the funds were not delivered until the school had been inspected, and it was certified that the construction was according to plan and that the facility was soundly built (Hoffschwelle, n.d.).

The programs that Julius Rosenwald sponsored provided better schools for African American students. They also helped school systems document that they were addressing the requirements of “separate but equal” facilities, which were required by a recent court decision (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896). Reed (2004) wrote, “The *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision barred blacks in Brevard [NC], as well as in other communities, from equal educational opportunities ... the Rosenwald experiment opened an alternative avenue of acquiring a formal education for several decades” (p. 32).

Rosenwald did not allow his name to be attached to schools. Instead, he required that each school take the name of the community in which it was built. The schools, however, were immediately, and are still today, referred to as “Rosenwald Schools.” The Rosenwald Fund school project was no small project. The breadth of the program was revealed in a document published by the Rosenwald Schools Initiative (2002) of the National Trust for Historic Preservation:

By 1928, one in every five rural schools for black students in the South was a Rosenwald school, and these schools housed one third of the region’s rural black schoolchildren and teachers. At the program’s conclusion in 1932, it had produced 4,977 new schools, 217 teachers’ homes, and 163 shop buildings, constructed at a total cost of \$28,408,520 to serve 663,615 students in 883 counties of 15 states. (The Rosenwald Rural School Building Program Section, ¶1)

During the period from 1913 to 1932, Rosenwald contributed \$4.4 million dollars to the building program. However, he was quick to point out that African American communities raised or contributed \$4.7 million during the same period. A large number of Rosenwald schools remained in operation until desegregation began. Since many were no longer used, they were eventually destroyed. Those remaining today are in use as community centers, museums, and, in a few cases, as private homes. Restoration efforts are underway in many states. As a result, a good number of the schools are being saved. The restoration of these important facilities received national attention and much needed support when, in 2002, the National Trust for Historic Preservation declared Rosenwald Schools among the “America’s Eleven Most Endangered Historic Places” (National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2006).

The “Last” Rosenwald School

The Eleanor Roosevelt Rosenwald School in Warm Springs, GA, was the “last” Rosenwald School. It was dedicated on March 18, 1937, by President and Mrs. Roosevelt. Roosevelt had been involved in the Warm Springs, GA, project since 1929, when he was governor of New York. He and Mrs. Roosevelt worked to see the process through even though the Rosenwald school building program officially ended in 1932. Smith (1950) described the effect Roosevelt’s involvement in the project had on future policies:

The project furnished him a background basis for his later decisions in allocating finally about a billion dollars in federal monies toward the building of more than two billion dollars worth of educational buildings in the United States from 1935 to 1940 — an average of \$65 increase in school plant facilities for every child of school age in the nation. (p 84)

In that way, the *last* Rosenwald school became the *first* of many schools that would serve countless children and communities throughout the United States.

Rosenwald on Philanthropy

Rosenwald set up his school building fund so that it would be terminated 25 years after his death. He stated “the fortunes which men have made in this day and age should be employed by them in the support of such educational, benevolent or humanitarian enterprises as will benefit their contemporaries—them and their children, no more” (Rosenwald, 1929, p. 12). Fearing that foundations set up in perpetuity would discourage philanthropy in the future, he placed limits on ways funds could be used.

Other Contributions to American Life

Julius Rosenwald’s partnerships resulted in the establishment of the YMCAs for African Americans in Chicago and the 5,000 plus schools and other facilities in fifteen states. Those initiatives are overwhelming by themselves. However, Rosenwald engaged in many other important and rewarding projects. He created the Michigan Avenue Garden Apartments, which were the first public housing for African Americans in Chicago. He brought together Jewish communities on the brink of chaos by founding the Jewish Federation of Chicago. He founded and funded the development of the Chicago Museum of Science and Industry. In addition, he provided scholarships through the *Rosenwald Fellows Program* for talented African Americans. Recipients included diplomat Ralph Bunche; writers Langston Hughes, W.E.B. DuBois, Zora Neale Hurston and Ralph Ellison (who wrote *The Invisible Man* while on a Rosenwald fellowship); opera star Marian Anderson; sculptor Augusta Savage; dancer Catherine Dunham; historian John Hope Franklin; and artist Jacob Lawrence.

A Special Moment

The National Trust for Historic Preservation sponsors conferences and events to raise awareness of and interest in saving Rosenwald Schools. As a result, progress has been made. The Rosenwald Archive is maintained at Fisk University in Nashville, TN. In 2004 the National Trust sponsored a conference at Fisk University at which Peter Ascoli and Alice Rosenwald, grandchildren of Julius Rosenwald, made presentations. The conference included a trip to two restored Rosenwald schools in Middle Tennessee. The visit was Alice Rosenwald’s first visit to an actual Rosenwald school. She expressed pleasure at the feeling of community pride that was demonstrated by the community members hosting the visit and she both enjoyed and appreciated the well maintained pastoral settings of the schools.

The first school visited was a one-room school with a small community room. The school now serves as a community center. Upon entering the building, Alice Rosenwald saw a large portrait of Abraham Lincoln above the pocket doors that opened to the community room. When she turned around, however, she saw a similarly sized portrait of Julius Rosenwald still hanging opposite Lincoln’s over the door she had just entered. It was a fitting tribute.

A Life Well Lived

The events in the life of Julius Rosenwald came together in a masterful combination of person, time, and place. Rosenwald was influenced by his times and was inspired by a variety of individuals and experiences throughout his life. He demonstrated a willingness to accept both opportunities and responsibilities. He demonstrated respect for the dignity of all people. He developed partnerships through which all partners benefited.

Julius Rosenwald lived in ways that touched, and continue to touch, millions of American citizens. His impact is multiplied every time one person reaches out to understand or help another. Julius Rosenwald lived during a time in which people were in great need of social justice. We, too, live in such a time. Hopefully, the sharing of this fragment of the life and works of Julius Rosenwald will encourage and empower others to create partnerships that will benefit all people.

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