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BOOKS

Man of the people

Julius Rosenwald's grandson misses some details but gets to the heart of Chicago businessman's philanthropy

“Way before his time on issues of race, Rosenwald financed the building of private schools for African Americans in Southern states.”

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JULIUS ROSENWALD

THE MAN WHO BUILT SEARS ROEBUCK AND ADVANCED THE CAUSE OF BLACK EDUCATION IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

BY PETER M. ASCOLI
Indiana University Press. 444 pages. \$35.



BY CAROL FELSENTHAL

Julius Rosenwald deserves a serious biography. He was the Sears Roebuck chief and Chicago philanthropist whose millions built the Museum of Science and Industry — but insisted it not carry his name. “If no name is used,” he said, “it will belong to the people the same as the Art Institute.”

The only other biography of “J.R.” appeared in 1939, seven years after his death. Ten years in the writing by his grandson Peter Ascoli, a Chicagoan, this one is serious, but also seemingly unedited. Why didn’t his editor tell Ascoli that “more than” and “over” are not interchangeable, and that writers should avoid reusing in close proximity the same word or phrase? Aside from redundancies of content, Ascoli takes 400 pages to accomplish what should have required just 300.

Rosenwald’s father, a German Jewish immigrant, alighted in Baltimore with \$20 in his pocket and became a peddler. He later ran his in-laws’ stores in Peoria and then Springfield, where Julius was born in 1862, one block from the home of his lifelong idol Abraham Lincoln. Leaving high school unfinished and skipping college, Julius headed to New York to apprentice at \$4 a week for his uncles, who manufactured men’s clothes. After a store he opened there failed, he saw opportunity in Chicago and opened a store in 1885 specializing in lightweight men’s suits. Five years later, J.R. married Gussie Nusbaum, one of seven daughters of a German-Jewish immigrant.

Ascoli knew neither grandparent, and the reader will find too few of the personal details readers of biography relish. Ascoli writes, for example, that little is known about J.R.’s mother, the person to whom he was closest. Does Ascoli not realize that it’s a biographer’s job to dig until he finds more? J.R.’s father advanced him money and came to Chicago to help his son launch his store, but relations between father and son were chilly. Ascoli never satisfactorily explains why.

Still, Ascoli is excellent on

Rosenwald’s determination to give away his money and his tireless tapping of others — he went on regular “schnorrng expeditions” — to follow suit. “By 1912, Ascoli writes, “philanthropy rather than business was becoming the true ... passion of his life.”

Way before his time on issues of race, Rosenwald financed the building of private schools for African Americans in Southern states — he would eventually build 5,300 of them — many of them in all-black communities that lacked public schools. In 1929, J.R. invested heavily in the Michigan Boulevard Garden Apartments in the Bronzeville community on the South Side. Designed to resemble a University of Chicago quadrangle with meticulously tended lawns and gardens, the complex included an on-site nursery and such tenants as Joe Louis and Gwendolyn Brooks. J.R. also gave money to build YMCAs for blacks; institutions that became centers of community life. “I doubt if there is any single gift,” said Rosenwald’s friend, Booker T. Washington, “... that has brought a greater return to the community ... all the more interesting because it is the gift of a Jew to a Christian religious institution.”

J.R. differed from other businessmen/philanthropists, such as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, both in temperament and in that he began to give away his fortune while he was still active in business. Although he was hardheaded, J.R. was not a bully. J.R. created the Julius Rosenwald Fund in 1917 and it went out of business, as he intended, 16 years after his death.

Speculating that J.R. ordered his papers from his years at Sears destroyed “because he wanted to be remembered primarily as a philanthropist,” Ascoli still manages a lively ac-

count of the history of the company, and a colorful portrait of Richard Sears. A “marketing genius,” Sears started by selling watches by catalog and ended up with a 1,000-page “Wish Book,” full of “folksy” chatter that enticed even the most unsophisticated to order.

Sears and his partner, Alvah P. Roebuck, needed cash. Roebuck wanted out, and, in 1895, J.R., then 33, and a supplier of cheap men’s suits to Sears, bought a quarter interest for \$37,500. That investment, writes Ascoli, “would eventually be seen as one of the most brilliant decisions in business history.” J.R.’s timing was impeccable. He invested as the economy began to boom and as the U.S. Postal Service offered free delivery to even the most remote rural areas. (Sears customers were mostly farmers whose only shopping option was the local general store.)

By 1906, Sears, under Rosenwald’s direction, had a new 40-acre headquarters on Chicago’s West Side, and was receiving 27,000 orders per hour. By 1908, 8,000 people worked there. That year, Sears resigned and J.R. became president.

With the departure of Sears and his “fertile imagination,” J.R. introduced “truth in advertising,” demanded testing of products and cleansed from the catalog patent medicines. J.R. did not like unions, but he offered profit sharing; by 1919, 96.7 percent of eligible employees had signed on.

J.R. hired the best people without worry that they might outshine him. General Robert E. Wood, who had worked for competitor Montgomery Ward, persuaded J.R. that the company must open retail stores. Wood was an undisguised anti-Semite, but J.R. selected him over his own son. The move to retail stores had to be made and J.R. knew that he could not do it.

J.R. insisted the Sears catalog contain no mention of his name lest any customer be turned off by a Jewish owner. Yet he was proud to be Jewish, active in the reformed Chicago Sinai Congregation and a booster of its progressive rabbi, Emil G. Hirsch, who invited Jane Addams to speak. J.R. was impressed and soon became a director of Hull House. Likewise Booker T. Washington, whom Hirsch called “a second Moses,” spoke at Temple Sinai. Unlike some of his German brethren who were embarrassed by the Eastern European Jews crowding into America’s cities, J.R. gave generously to help them acclimate.

Some liberals branded Rosenwald, a loyal Republican and an overnight White House guest of President Taft and Hoover, a hypocrite because his schools in the South were segregated, as were his Chicago apartments. “J.R. wanted results,” Ascoli explains, “and he knew full well the prejudices of his day. ... That does not mean that he liked segregation.” Ascoli quotes from W.E.B. DuBois’ tribute to Rosenwald: “Seeing ... that the white South did not propose to build decent schoolhouses for most colored children, Rosenwald ... offered to help pay for such schoolhouses. ... The South accepted his gift effusively, and never ... grasped the failure of democracy which permitted an individual of a despised race to do for the sovereign states ... that which they had neither the decency nor justice to do for themselves.”

“You are the least timid rich man I have ever known,” said one colleague of Rosenwald’s, succinctly summing up this most unusual man.

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