
American Jewish Personalities

Julius Rosenwald and World War I

Miriam Joyce

Prior to America's entry into the Great War, Julius Rosenwald, noted Chicago philanthropist and president of Sears, Roebuck & Company, sometimes called the world's greatest retail merchant, was an outspoken advocate of a U.S. military buildup. During the presidential election campaign of 1916, he supported Woodrow Wilson's opponent, Charles Evans Hughes, who ran on a platform calling for the country to prepare for war. Later that year, after winning reelection, Wilson, a Democrat, appointed Rosenwald, a Republican, to the Advisory Commission of the Council of National Defense, and subsequently he became chairman of its Committee on Supplies.

Before his appointment to the National Council, Rosenwald, the son of German-Jewish immigrants, had donated \$30,000 to a Chicago-based fund devoted to the promotion of universal military training. Rosenwald explained:

I feel that if the public continues in its present state of apathy towards means of defense and towards a higher national idealism, our children will live to see a different form of government rule these United States. The time is here for mobilization of our strength. There should be no age limit exemption clause. No man is so old that he cannot do something for his country or so old that there is not some able capacity in which he can serve it and give something out of his life to this country from which he has received so many benefits.'

The Need for Austerity

After the United States entered the war in April 1917, Washington wanted the public to refrain from spending money on unnecessary purchases and to buy Liberty Bonds or War Saving Stamps. Speaking in his official capacity as a member of the Council of National Defense, Rosenwald proclaimed that thrift was essential; if Americans were extravagant and did not immediately reduce consumption, he said, they would be aiding the kaiser.²



Julius Rosenwald
(1862–1932)

The renowned businessman emphasized that the American people had to finance the war. Mobilization of men was not enough; armies had to be equipped, fed, and transported overseas. In order to pay the enormous cost, Americans would have to forgo luxuries and concentrate on the war effort. According to Rosenwald:

The nation is now mobilizing its industrial resources in order to put behind our armies a great productive machine. The output of this machine must be increased as the army is increased, and we are beginning to realize how great an army we must raise before there can be an end to this struggle.³

An editorial in the *New York Times* praised Rosenwald, saying that unlike other businessmen the Chicago merchant understood that in the final analysis not money but material and labor would win the war.⁴

Citizens throughout the country responded to Rosenwald's message. In April 1917, when F. J. Hagenbarth, the president of the National Wool Growers Association, warned him about a possible shortage of wool as the result of friction in the West between the wool interests and the Democratic Party, Rosenwald wrote to the governors of several western states asking cooperation.⁵ He told Utah's governor, Simon Bamberger, that the country was short of wool, and that it was Utah's responsibility, since the state was a heavy producer, to work toward even greater production; he asked Bamberger to urge his people to produce more wool and more mutton. The Utah State Council of Defense named a special committee to comply with Rosenwald's request.⁶

Chicagoans were especially proud to have one of their own men serving on the National Council of Defense, and many offered their services or advice. No issue appeared too trivial. David L. Stern, for instance, wrote to deplore the use of egg shampoo. While visiting his small neighborhood barber shop, he explained, he had realized that on the average, five dozen eggs a week were being used for shampoo. He had told his barber that eggs should no longer be applied to the hair and wanted Rosenwald to investigate this form of waste.⁷

Chicago's Grand Opera, also eager to contribute to the war effort, asked the Council of National Defense to rule on the pro-

priety of supporting opera during the war. The Council responded that it was "wise and desirable that, so far as is consistent with the national, military and industrial needs, all activities pertaining to the arts and to legitimate entertainment and amusement be maintained."⁸ Opera performances continued, but management decided to reduce the cost of boxes for the duration of hostilities; according to the trustees, during wartime "big burdens have fallen on big men," the men who sit in boxes. "And consequently, this is where the price reduction really belongs." Prior to the announced reduction Mrs. Rosenwald had reserved a box; her husband's secretary wrote to request a refund. The request was quickly honored.⁹

Prevention of Profiteering

Rosenwald, who had turned over the running of Sears, Roebuck to the company's vice-president, Albert Loeb, devoted all his time and talent to the war effort. Together with his colleagues on the National Council of Defense, he was paid a salary of one dollar a year. Some members of Congress suggested that merchants who worked closely with the Council were taking advantage of the national emergency to earn large profits supplying goods to the military. Before the war the government had purchased supplies on the open market from the lowest bidder, but now government officials and manufacturers sat down together, jointly calculated the cost of raw materials and labor, added a small profit, and fixed the price.

At issue in 1917 was the question of contracts for shoes. The military wanted 8 million pairs of shoes. Rosenwald researched the availability of leather and production costs. A price was set for the finished product. Production was divided among 200 manufacturers who agreed to the set price. Rosenwald defended the Council's procedure, saying, "I want particularly to reemphasize that the members of the Shoe and Leather Committee had absolutely nothing to do, directly or indirectly with the award of contract: they made no recommendations regarding such awards."¹⁰

Rosenwald was angry at his critics in Congress. He insisted that if not for the work of his committee the United States would have

been unable in such a brief time to provide supplies for millions of soldiers, and to do it without the slightest suspicion of graft." The *Chicago Tribune* supported Rosenwald, saying that it was inevitable that charges such as those refuted by the Chicago merchant would be made. The government's demand for material was so great that ordinary methods of meeting it would have led to wild fluctuations of markets. And, asked the *Tribune*, if men who represented firms doing a large part of the nation's manufacturing were excluded from participation in government business, where would the government get supplies?¹²

Rosenwald Goes to France

In the summer of 1918 Rosenwald assumed an additional responsibility. Secretary of War Newton D. Baker asked the fifty-six-year-old patriot to go to France to visit the support troops, the men who supplied the front lines. In his addresses to "our boys," Baker instructed, Rosenwald was to tell the soldiers that after they had completed the task of destroying the "menace of militarism" they could look forward to a rosy future. According to Baker, "the blessings and rewards of a finer civilization will be especially theirs to enjoy since they have so greatly contributed to their preservation." After the war former servicemen would have splendid opportunities to build business and professional careers. The secretary of war wanted Rosenwald to discuss his own experience, "the opportunities of American life as you have observed them in your own successful business career."¹³

At the same time Washington wanted to utilize Rosenwald's popularity as an advocate of opportunity for African-Americans. For some time the philanthropist had been involved in various projects to improve conditions for blacks, including the building throughout the country of YMCAs that served them.¹⁴ Before Rosenwald's departure for Europe the special assistant to Secretary Baker, Emmett Scott, wrote to him saying that Washington did not want to call public attention to his trip until he arrived safely in Europe, but then the department wanted to publish a short statement, "A Word to the Colored People of the

United States," for publication in "Colored" newspapers.¹⁵

Throughout his travels Rosenwald illustrated his concern for African-Americans. In the French port of Saint-Nazaire, for instance, he visited the YMCA branch set up for "Colored" stevedores and presented the director with a gift of 1,000 francs. The money was later used for a "Rosenwald" evening where the men received cigars, cigarettes, and chocolates.¹⁶

Before leaving for France Rosenwald had obtained letters of introduction to men in a position to facilitate his mission. He wrote to the vice-president of the *Chicago Tribune*, William W. Field, to ask for a letter of introduction to *Tribune* correspondents working in Europe. Field fulfilled his request with some reservations, saying that since the *Tribune's* correspondents were all Chicago men, a letter introducing Rosenwald would insult their intelligence; "no letter from me would be necessary to bring you courtesy and attention from them."¹⁷

Rosenwald sailed on the troopship S.S. *Aquitania* carrying with him letters of appreciation from the governors of all forty-eight states, and numerous boxes containing Sears, Roebuck catalogues to distribute in hospitals—not to promote his company, he claimed, but to comfort the men with the sight of familiar articles.¹⁸

After Rosenwald sailed, his brother-in-law Joseph Eisendrath wrote telling him how proud the entire family was that he had been called upon to render such a special service to the nation. Eisendrath assured Rosenwald that his mother was in good health. "Please God that she may remain well until you return so that she can share with you the honor and glory of the sacrifice which you are now making for your country's sake."¹⁹

Over There

Writing to his family from France, Rosenwald addressed his letters to "My Own Dear Ones," promising to describe the details of his adventure after he returned to Chicago and they all gathered "at your feet Grandma dear with our loved ones about us." (Rosenwald here referred to his mother as grandma.)

Nevertheless, Rosenwald's letters contain considerable information. Traveling between Paris and Troyes in a comfortable Pierce-

Arrow car driven by an experienced driver, he described German prisoners working on the roads and in the fields, and American soldiers putting up telegraph lines while some of their buddies sat around doing nothing at all. At Troyes Rosenwald visited General Pershing's headquarters, where he did not meet the general, but was well received by Pershing's officers, who arranged suitable accommodations for the visiting member of the National Council of Defense. An active supporter of the Young Men's Christian Association. Rosenwald spent his first evening in Troyes visiting the enlisted men's YMCA.²⁰

Several Jewish soldiers sought out their coreligionist. Rosenwald was pleased to note that these young men "seemed to mix splendidly." He was delighted, too, that Jewish soldiers were accommodated at the YMCA, which provided a room for Friday-night religious services and advertised the services. Among the men who impressed Rosenwald was a Russian Jew, Captain Goldstein, who before the war had worked in Sears' grocery department. According to Rosenwald his former employee had "a wonderful genius in securing articles which are difficult to obtain." Goldstein explained to the delighted merchant that he used the system he had learned at Sears, Roebuck.²¹

Rosenwald was also pleased to have the opportunity to ride in a tank, which he described as a marvelous contrivance that "run[s] through the thickest kind of brush and over fair size trees, knocking them down and climbing over the trunk and branches." He also admired the thousands of carrier pigeons raised by the army and carried to the front to relay messages. He called the birds the fastest and most reliable available messengers.

There were, of course, inconveniences. One evening, arriving in Meaux, where he was scheduled to spend the night, Rosenwald could not find a room. He was rescued by *Chicago Tribune* reporter Frederick A. Smith, who woke up the manager of a second-rate hotel and persuaded him to provide accommodation.

Far worse, there was the visible destruction left by four years of fighting on French soil. Leaving Meaux Rosenwald passed through a town where every house was shattered. French families were living in the rubble. He noted the large cathedral at Chateau-

Thierry, "all shot to pieces." Rosenwald selected two German helmets from a rubbish heap to keep as souvenirs.²²

Wearing the uniform of an American officer, but without rank or title, the short, heavy businessman with grey hair and a ruddy face continued traveling from base to base. Correspondent Smith, at the end of August, accompanied Rosenwald on a visit to the Vesle front. According to Smith, at chateau headquarters the industrialist was studying war maps showing the day's action when German planes appeared. Unfazed, Rosenwald continued inspecting the maps.²³

At every base Rosenwald spoke to the men. Lieutenant Russell C. Gates, stationed in Issondum, sent a letter to his parents describing his reaction to one Rosenwald speech.

As I listened I was soon deeply impressed by what he was saying. He was an artist in touching just the right chord in the fellows and he talked in such a personal way so whole-heartedly mixing in a few good stories now and then that he took the boys by storm. I turned to a mechanic next to me and said, "who is he?" "Dam fine, the fellows call him Rosy; he is a big bug from Chicago on the National Defense."²⁴

After hearing a Rosenwald speech Corporal Sol W. Marx, who had been employed by a friend of Rosenwald's, wrote to his former employer. Marx said that in the course of Rosenwald's remarks he often referred to Chicago and this had irritated a captain in the audience who protested that there were other places besides Chicago. Rosenwald earned cheers from the crowd with his reply. "Don't misunderstand me, I have never failed to admit that if one cannot come from Chicago, there are other places almost as good."²⁵

Private Harry W. Emme also enjoyed Rosenwald's visit. Emme was homesick and liked to be reminded of Chicago. The French weather in the autumn of 1918 cooperated. "Had a little taste of French wind and rain today, and reminded me much of the corner of Jackson and Michigan Blvd., when a good wind is blowing from the lake mixed with rain."²⁶

Rosenwald, of course, did not allow the weather to interfere with his mission. Despite difficult traveling conditions caused by heavy rain, he reached approximately forty different audiences composed of groups as large as 7,000.²⁷

Rosenwald continued to correspond with his family in Chicago reporting his experiences. Yes, he talked about economic opportunity, but he had another message as well: brotherhood. He called the treatment of America's blacks a disgrace and asked for an end to prejudice, a postwar world that offered a "square deal" to members of all racial and ethnic groups.²⁸

After each speech men lined up to shake Rosenwald's hand. He made lists of the names and addresses of everyone, whether officer or enlisted man, who wanted him to send a personal message to a relative or friend at home. He took a special interest in men from Illinois and in Sears employees or relatives of employees. He regularly wrote to his secretary, William Graves, enclosing names. On one occasion he instructed Graves:

I am enclosing a list of Chicago boys whom I have seen with Colonel Davis' Regiment. Please write a letter to the family of each of these boys, and tell them that I have seen him, and that he is looking and feeling well and happy. Frame the letters. Say that I have written to you requesting that you let them know. There may be some special notes on some of them which you can include in the letter. Please be careful to see that this is done because where anything is noted it has special significance.²⁹

Most of the letters were similar to the one written to the mother of Captain W. E. Kendall. He informed Mrs. Kendall that he had spent three days with the officers of Chicago Colonel Abel Davis's regiment, the regiment in which Captain Kendall served, and thus he knew that her son was thinking about her, that he had a good appetite and plenty of food "of excellent quality."³⁰ Family and friends wrote to Rosenwald expressing gratitude for these letters, but on some occasions what Rosenwald in France considered good news appeared to be bad news in Illinois. In Paris Rosenwald visited a hospital caring for American wounded, and after visiting with a Chicago soldier, Victor Trumball, wrote to his mother that her son was getting along very well.³¹ Rosenwald's letter shocked Mrs. Trumball, who before receiving it did not know that her son had been wounded.³² And the unfortunate Mrs. Minnie Stine, in Paxton, Illinois, received word from Rosenwald that her son Ralph was in good health the very same day she was notified that he had been killed in action.³³

Home Again

After more than a month of tramping through French mud, sometimes crossing terrain where the water reached his knees, an exhausted Rosenwald became ill with pneumonia and was hospitalized in Tours. His family, his large circle of friends, the public, and Washington followed the course of his illness with concern.³⁴ Fortunately, he recovered quickly.

Rosenwald returned to a grateful city. The director of the Chicago Opera Association, Cleofonte Campani, wrote to him saying that Chicagoans were proud "of your wonderful achievements in the greatest cause mankind has known."³⁵ Rosenwald's friend attorney David Levy wrote: "You have had the pleasure of a wonderful experience and the added satisfaction of having served your country in every way that it was possible for you to serve."³⁶

The Sisters of the Good Shepherd, who ran the Illinois Technical School for Colored Girls in Chicago, had been anxious about Rosenwald's health. They welcomed him home confident that he had accomplished much good for the cause of liberty. The sisters assured Rosenwald that "our prayers, and the prayers of the little ones whom your kind charity enables us to care for, have attended you and will continue."³⁷ Mrs. Martin Barbe, the president of the Temple Sinai Sisterhood, welcomed Rosenwald home on behalf of her organization and then wrote, "I can imagine your saying what does she want now?" Mrs. Barbe wanted Rosenwald to speak to the ladies of the sisterhood about his recent experiences in Europe.³⁸

Chicago's Rosenwald had served the nation, and now, home again, he returned to Sears and to his numerous charitable activities. In the postwar period he assisted in the restoration of Germany, giving \$100,00 to a campaign to feed the German people, and using his influence in Chicago to raise additional money for that purpose. In the ensuing decade Rosenwald supported numerous German charities. So great was his attachment to the people he had helped to defeat that he was undisturbed by growing signs of German anti-Semitism. Rosenwald's generosity was acknowledged by the president of the Weimar Republic, Otto von

Hindenburg, who three years later would appoint Adolf Hitler chancellor. In February 1930 Hindenburg sent Rosenwald a letter of appreciation and a vase made in the Staatlichen porcelain works. To mark the occasion the German consul in Chicago gave a luncheon at the Union League Club in the philanthropist's honor.³⁹

Miriam Joyce teaches in the Department of Columet History and Political Science, Purdue University. She recently completed a study of Chicago Jewry.

Notes

1. Quoted in M. R. Werner, *Julius Rosenwald* (New York: Harper's, 1939), p. 178.
2. *New York Times*, May 8, 1918, p. 9.
3. *Ibid.*, May 26, 1918, p. 7.
4. *Ibid.*, May 28, 1918, p. 15.
5. Hagenbarth to Rosenwald, April 27, 1917, Box 43, Julius Rosenwald Papers, University of Chicago.
6. Rosenwald-Bamberger correspondence, Julius Rosenwald Papers.
7. Stern to Graves, Chicago, April 23, 1917, Box 43, *ibid.*
8. Pam to Rosenwald, October 30, 1918, Box 6, *ibid.*
9. Robinson to Rosenwald, Chicago, October 28, 1918, *ibid.*
10. *New York Evening Sun*, July 21, 1917, Council of National Defense, Newspaper Clippings File, National Archives, Suitland, Md.
11. *Boston Evenings Globe*, July 2, 1917, *ibid.*
12. *Chicago Tribune*, August 5, 1917, *ibid.*
13. Baker to Rosenwald, Washington, July 29, 1918, Box 43, Julius Rosenwald Papers.
14. See Nina Mjagkij, "A Peculiar Alliance: Julius Rosenwald, the YMCA, and African-Americans," *American Jewish Archives* 44, no. 2 (Fall-Winter 1992): 585-605.
15. Scott to Rosenwald, Washington, August 1, 1918, Box 42, Julius Rosenwald Papers.
16. Ferguson to Rosenwald, Louisville, April 1, 1919, Box 43, *ibid.*
17. Field to Rosenwald, Chicago, August 2, 1918, *ibid.*
18. Werner, *Julius Rosenwald*, p. 211.
19. Eisendrath to Rosenwald, Chicago, August 5, 1918, Julius Rosenwald Papers.
20. Rosenwald to My Own Dear Ones, Paris, August 24, 1918, p. 1. Lessing Rosenwald Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
23. *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 24, 1918, p. 7.
24. F. Gates to Mrs. Rosenwald, Montclair, N.J., September 28, 1918, Julius Rosenwald Papers.
25. Marx to Rosenthal, Somewhere in France, September 2, 1918. Box 42, *ibid.* Marx also wrote that it was a wonderful privilege to serve his country "in the hour of national peril."
26. Emme to Mr. & Mrs. Emme, Somewhere in France, September 10, 1918, Box 42, *ibid.*
27. *Chicago Herald-Examiner*, September 10, 1918, *ibid.*
28. Newspaper clippings, no place, no date, *ibid.*
29. Rosenwald to Graves, Somewhere in France, September 15, 1918, Box 43, *ibid.*
30. Secretary of Rosenwald to Kendall, Chicago, October 14, 1918, *ibid.*
31. Rosenwald to Mrs. Trumbull, Paris, August 25, 1918, Box 42, *ibid.*
32. McDonald to Graves, Chicago, September 28, 1918, Box 42, *ibid.*
33. Stine to Rosenwald, Paxton, Ill., October 31, 1918, Box 42, *ibid.*
34. *Chicago Herald-Examiner*, September 28, 1918, Box 43, *ibid.*
35. Campanini to Rosenwald, Chicago, October 14, 1918, Box 42, *ibid.*
36. Levy to Rosenwald, Chicago, October 16, 1918, Box 42, *ibid.*
37. Sr. St. Julitta to Rosenwald, Chicago, October 26, 1918, Box 42, *ibid.*
38. Barbe to Rosenwald, Chicago, October 17, 1918, Box 42, *ibid.*
39. Werner, *Julius Rosenwald*, p. 255.