

# SOUTHERN JEWISH HISTORY

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## Film Review

**Rosenwald.** Directed, produced, and written by Aviva Kempner. Ciesla Foundation, 2015. 100 minutes.

Julius Rosenwald is best known as the leading executive of Sears, Roebuck & Company from 1895 to 1924, when he retired as its president. During these years, he guided the department-store chain as it became the greatest mail-order business of its time. His Chicago philanthropic efforts are legendary to that city's residents. Less well known to white America is his extraordinary generosity to black Americans. He instigated construction of YMCAs and YWCAs for African Americans, led the effort to build 5,357 Rosenwald schools for black children in the rural South, and created the Julius Rosenwald Fund. One question animating *Rosenwald*, Aviva Kempner's recent documentary, is why a northern Jewish business magnate would try to help African Americans.

The answer in a nutshell is *tikun olam*, the Jewish principle of repairing the world. Aviva Kempner's fast-paced, witty, illuminating film covers a great deal of biographical ground as it traces the career of Julius Rosenwald, the son of a German-Jewish émigré, who became one of the greatest philanthropists of his era. The film's structure closely follows grandson/biographer Peter Ascoli's excellent 2015 book, *Julius Rosenwald: The Man Who Built Sears, Roebuck and Advanced the Cause of Black Education in the American South*. As Julian Bond says in the film, "It's a wonderful story of cooperation between this philanthropist, who did not have to care about black people but who did, and who expended his considerable wealth in ensuring that they got their fair shake in America."

Julius R. Rosenwald, or J. R. as his closest friends and family called him, was born in 1862, eleven years after his father, Samuel Rosenwald,

immigrated to Baltimore, embarked on a career of peddling, and eventually married. (Kempner chooses some lively clips from Gene Wilder's 1979 film *The Frisco Kid* for this section, as well as a hilarious scene from the 1960s television series *Rawhide* in which Clint Eastwood's Rowdy Yates is asked by a traveling Jewish peddler if he knows what a *shlimazel* is.) J. R. grew up in a house just across the street from Abraham Lincoln's in Springfield, Illinois, and was greatly inspired by the sixteenth president. After a sojourn in New York in the clothing business, in 1885 J. R. opened his own concern in Chicago. He began working with Sears, Roebuck, supplying in record time a thousand ten-dollar suits after Richard Sears, the impulsive marketing genius, advertised them just to gauge consumer demand. Richard Sears and J. R. made a winning team until Rosenwald bought Sears out in 1908.

Richard Sears had a marvelous knack for sales, improving on the concept and design of rival Montgomery Ward's mail-order catalog. In the film, two observers note that the Sears, Roebuck & Company catalog was the equivalent of both the traveling peddler's outspread blanket of wares and today's Amazon.com. Georgia congressman John Lewis, the civil rights activist, recalls ordering baby chicks for his family's farm from that catalog, the "wish book" that inspired him to get an education so he could become a happy American consumer. To illustrate rural America's enthusiasm for ordering from the Sears catalog, Kempner provides an excerpt from *The Music Man*, with residents of River City singing "The Wells Fargo Wagon."

By contrast, J. R. possessed a strong, less flashy management style and strong personal financial ties, as evidenced by his ability to organize Sears's chaotic order-fulfillment operations. Goldman Sachs's Henry Goldman, for example, underwrote an initial public offering to help the chain-store operation build its manufacturing plants.

Although J. R. admired Lincoln, he credited Chicago rabbi Emil G. Hirsch as his greatest influence. The rabbi consistently preached about social justice and improving the lives of the poor. In 1912, on his fiftieth birthday, J. R. adopted a public "Give While You Live" campaign, donating seven-hundred thousand dollars to charity, the equivalent today of sixteen million dollars. Seeing a parallel between Russian Jews killed in pogroms and America's oppression of African Americans, J. R. felt

*Ridgeley Rosenwald School, Capitol Heights, Maryland, following its completed restoration in 2011. (Courtesy of Preservation Maryland.)*

compelled to act. He funded early planning meetings leading to the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

The third greatest influence on J. R.'s thinking after Lincoln and Hirsch was educator Booker T. Washington. After reading Washington's 1901 book *Up From Slavery*, J. R. began the Progressive Era's finest chapter in Jewish-black collaboration. Although initially giving outright, J. R. preferred to use challenge funds to construct YMCAs across the country: he contributed twenty-five thousand dollars but insisted that local white and black communities match it with seventy-five thousand. Everyone had to have skin in the game. If Jewish paternalism was a powerful engine, it would be combined with community efforts.

This proved a winning formula. Between 1913 and 1932, twenty-seven YMCAs were built from Atlanta to Los Angeles, Detroit to Dallas. Washington D.C.'s black community raised twenty-seven thousand dollars in just one month. At the dedication of the Chicago branch, J. R. announced, "This enterprise we are dedicating today evidences a contact of the white and the Negro races which should lead to a better understanding of each other."

*Julius Rosenwald in 1918.*  
(*Wikimedia Commons.*)

*Booker T. Washington, c. 1905.*  
(*Library of Congress.*)

After meeting Washington in 1911, J. R., along with Hirsch and an entourage of friends and family, visited the educator's Tuskegee Institute in Alabama to inspect the premises. This was their first encounter with southern black life. The thirty-four student-built buildings, the school's self-sufficiency ethos (since the white South surrounding them offered little or no help), the beautiful campus, and the wide array of student skills being taught impressed the business titan. He thereupon joined the institute's board. On the final night of their visit, J. R. and his friends were especially moved to hear students sing the black spiritual "I Want to Be Ready." As historian Stephanie Deutsch says in the documentary, J. R. realized that Washington, like him, was a man of action.

When asked, Washington informed J. R. that southern blacks' most pressing need was for new schools in rural communities. He urged J. R. to take \$2,800 out of his \$25,000-dollar donation to Tuskegee and construct six schools near the campus. Rosenwald agreed and was bowled over by the photographs that Washington, a superb marketer in his own right, sent him. But when Washington returned to ask for more funds for more schools, J. R. revived the challenge-grant scheme: he would supply one-third of the funds, Tuskegee would raise another third, and the white community (largely the education board of a state or school dis-



trict) would provide the remainder. One significant detail is recounted here: when J. R. suggested that the schools be built from prefabricated homes sold in the Sears catalogue, Washington reminded him of the essential requirement that local black residents build the schools, thereby improving their own skills and benefitting local businesses and workers.

The 5,357 Rosenwald schools built across the South meant that over several decades, until the 1954 *Brown v. the Board of Education* ruling made them obsolete, more than one-third of all black children in the South attended a Rosenwald school. (The Rosenwald Fund covered a third of the NAACP's litigation costs in the *Brown* case.) Although J. R. died in 1932, his legacy continued. He established the pilot-training program that ultimately sent 450 black pilots—the Tuskegee Airmen—to the European theater during World War II. Meanwhile the Rosenwald Fund supported the work and studies of W. E. B. DuBois, Ralph Bunche, John Hope Franklin, dancer Katherine Dunham, painter Jacob Lawrence, Langston Hughes, Zora Neal Hurston, Marian Anderson, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Gordon Parks, and many more. Poet Laureate and Pulitzer Prize winner Rita Dove calls the Rosenwald Fund “the single most important funding agency for African American culture in the twentieth century.” The fund ended its operations in 1948, per J. R.'s wishes.

*Rosenwald* is the award-winning filmmaker Aviva Kempner's third documentary about the lives of little-known or barely remembered outstanding Jewish Americans. Her breakthrough film, *The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg* (1998), provided a compelling portrait of the Jewish baseball slugging star who battled antisemitism before becoming the first American League player to enlist for World War II. Her *Yoo-hoo, Mrs. Goldberg* (2009) profiled American actress, screenwriter, and producer Gertrude Berg, a pioneer of radio and television sitcoms, who portrayed an immigrant Jewish mother, wife, and neighbor.

As in her earlier films, Kempner weaves together a rich array of historical photos and footage as well as interviews with prominent personalities (Maya Angelou, theater director George C. Wolfe, biographers, grandchildren, school presidents, historians, and school alumni) to bring Rosenwald's legacy to life. The historical footage of Rosenwald schools under construction and in use are particularly powerful, given that they were built in defiance of the South's effort to stamp out education efforts

in order to keep blacks illiterate and subservient. There is a great deal of moving testimony from those who attended Rosenwald schools on the importance of having a clean and bright place as a haven in their lives. Kempner deploys music to great effect, evoking the film's period, for example with ragtime piano tunes. *Rosenwald* is bookended with a children's choir singing "Lift Every Voice and Sing," accompanied by footage of black children entering and studying at Rosenwald schools, and a revamped choral rendition of the traditional spiritual "I'm Building Me a Home" as "I'm Building Me a School." This seems appropriate given the way southern spirituals inspired J. R. into action.

After watching the film, one might wonder what impact, if any, J. R. had on other Jewish philanthropists of the period in the South or elsewhere. Some viewers may find monotonous the length of Kempner's segment near the end of the film listing the honor roll of Rosenwald Fund recipients. Yet these are quibbles in the face of Kempner's achievement here. Learning about Julius Rosenwald's remarkable efforts and impact in *Rosenwald* is enlightening, inspiring, and deeply moving. The self-effacing J. R. takes his place alongside his better-known contemporaries like the Rockefellers and especially Andrew Carnegie, who funded numerous public libraries. This highly informative and entertaining film serves as an outstanding educational tool for anyone interested in learning why and how one Jewish philanthropist changed the landscape of life in the South for so many.

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