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Mark K. Bauman, *Editor*

Rachel Heimovics Braun, *Managing Editor*

Dana M. Greene, *Book Review Editor*

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REVIEW ESSAY

Measuring Julius Rosenwald's Legacy

by

Stuart Rockoff

Julius Rosenwald: The Man Who Built Sears, Roebuck and Advanced the Cause of Black Education in the American South. By Peter Ascoli. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006. 453 pages.

The Rosenwald Schools of the American South. By Mary S. Hoffschwelle. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006. 401 pages.

As two new books reveal, the Jew who had the greatest impact on life in the South never lived in the region. Julius Rosenwald is a name familiar to many students of southern and American Jewish history. The longtime president of Sears, Roebuck, Rosenwald became the great benefactor of black education in the South. From his home in Chicago, Illinois, Rosenwald helped transform the physical and educational landscape of the South through his financial support of the construction of black schools.

In the biography *Julius Rosenwald: The Man Who Built Sears, Roebuck and Advanced the Cause of Black Education in the American South*, the subject's grandson, historian Peter Ascoli, presents an engaging account of Rosenwald's business career and wide-ranging philanthropy. The school building project was just a relatively small part of Rosenwald's giving, which also focused on the University of Chicago and several Jewish causes. Rosenwald was one of the country's most prominent funders of Jewish charities, donating \$1 million to an American Jewish Committee campaign to help European Jews during World War I. An anti-Zionist, Rosenwald pledged \$5 million to an ill-conceived plan to create Jewish agricultural colonies in the Soviet Union in the 1920s.

Since his death in 1932, Rosenwald has been remembered mainly for his support of black school construction in the South. In *The Rosenwald Schools of the American South*, historian Mary S. Hoffschwelle gives a nuts and bolts description of how the school program worked and offers a compelling argument of how it transformed black communities in the region. Hoffschwelle divides her book into three sections, each focusing on a key component of the project. The first looks at Rosenwald and his foundation; the second examines the work of state and county officials, usually white, who worked with the Rosenwald Fund to build schools for blacks; the final section looks at local black communities who organized and raised money to win matching funds from the Rosenwald project. This multi-tiered approach offers a more comprehensive, if less readable, description of the project than Ascoli's focus on Rosenwald and the fund's administrators.

Rosenwald was drawn into the area of black education by Booker T. Washington, who convinced the successful businessman to join the board of his Tuskegee Institute. Rosenwald had been profoundly affected by reading Washington's memoir, *Up From Slavery*, and followed Washington's suggestion that he support a school building program in the rural counties around Tuskegee. From this small pilot project grew the major initiative of the Rosenwald Fund, which helped build over five thousand schools for African Americans in the South. At the time of the program's end in 1932, about one-third of the South's black schoolchildren attended a Rosenwald School. Washington and Rosenwald were committed to the idea that local communities and governments be invested partners in this project, requiring each to raise matching funds to pay for the schools. No Rosenwald funds were released until the match had been raised.

During his lifetime, Rosenwald largely avoided significant criticism of his work, which, after all, consisted of building segregated schools. While W. E. B. DuBois frequently criticized Booker T. Washington for accommodating segregation, the editor of the *Crisis* praised Rosenwald after his death as a "subtle stinging critic of our racial democracy." Rosenwald was also a modest financial

supporter of the NAACP. Later, after the civil rights movement ended de jure school segregation, scholars suggested that Rosenwald's school project only supported the status quo and allowed white officials to further short-change black education. Black communities had to pay twice, in a sense, for their schools: their taxes were used to build white schools, and they had to raise additional money themselves to get a Rosenwald school.

Ascoli defends his grandfather from these charges, though sometimes he overlooks important issues. A major turning point occurred when Rosenwald pulled the project from Tuskegee's administration and created the Rosenwald Fund to run it. Ascoli defends this decision as a reasonable response to poor management by Tuskegee officials, which it likely was. Yet, Hoffschwelle digs deeper to explore the implications of removing black management and replacing it with an exclusively white staff. She stresses the essential paternalism of the project, from its white leadership to its insistence on manual, "industrial education."

By focusing exclusively on Rosenwald and the managers of his charities, Ascoli also misses the most crucial ways in which the Rosenwald schools undermined white supremacy. Hoffschwelle extensively examines the architecture of the schools, which were seen as models of modern Progressive ideas about education and environment. In many cases, their designs were more advanced than local white schools. According to Hoffschwelle, Rosenwald schools were an "implicit visual challenge to white supremacy" (246). More importantly, the local matching funds required by the Rosenwald Fund served to empower local black communities and give them a strong sense of ownership in these schools, which gained far greater significance than just a place of instruction. She writes that local people were the essential component in the success of the project and that "a Rosenwald school was a recognizable African American space of pride and achievement" (4).

In many ways, this sense of pride and ownership was the most important legacy of the Rosenwald Fund. Although most of the schools were abandoned after integration and left as a faded remnant of Jim Crow, in recent years, African American groups

have sought to reclaim their Rosenwald schools, hoping that restoring these buildings will help bring their communities together. As Ascoli notes, Rosenwald was a strong believer that foundations should not be permanent, and that future philanthropists should be the ones to deal with the problems of the future. Because of this, Rosenwald's impact has been largely confined to history. Yet as these restoration efforts reveal, the meaning and symbolism of these structures continue to resonate in the twenty-first century.