



## **BOOK NEWS**

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### **CHRONICLE OF LIFE & ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF FORGOTTEN 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY PHILANTHROPIST**

#### ***JULIUS ROSENWALD: THE MAN WHO BUILT SEARS, ROEBUCK AND ADVANCED THE CAUSE OF BLACK EDUCATION IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH***

*By Peter Ascoli*

One of the richest men in America in the 1920s, Julius Rosenwald (1862–1932) — or JR, as his friends called him — amassed a fortune of over \$200 million during his lifetime. As CEO of Sears, Roebuck, JR was largely responsible for expanding the company into the world’s leading mail order firm, and was hailed as a pioneer in business management, praised by numerous leaders of the time for his unique approach to both business and life. The son of German Jewish immigrants, Rosenwald also was one of America’s first great philanthropists. His singular acts of generosity exemplified his life-long commitment to social justice, including his commitment to the welfare of African-Americans, a cause not popular among other whites of his generation.

**JULIUS ROSENWALD: The Man Who Built Sears, Roebuck and Advanced the Cause of Black Education in the American South**, by historian Peter Ascoli (June 15, 2006; Indiana University Press), is the first biography of Rosenwald to be published in over half a century. Ascoli, who is Rosenwald’s grandson, draws from never-before-discovered family papers, as well as numerous other primary sources, to paint a compelling portrait of an extraordinary man. Twelve years in the writing, Ascoli’s detailed account will introduce this pioneering humanitarian to a new generation.

During his lifetime and after his death, JR gave away over \$60 million of his own wealth (equal to over \$1 billion in today's dollars) to an astonishing variety of causes. Among other remarkable deeds, Rosenwald helped to build more than 5,000 schools for African-Americans in 15 states in the rural South; made a historically unprecedented \$1 million dollar challenge grant to aid Jewish victims of World War I; and established the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. He was a friend of presidents and progressives, including such notables as Presidents Hoover, Wilson, and Taft, Booker T. Washington, and Jane Addams. His demonstrated commitment to racial justice and his impact on African-American life were so profound that many black homes in the rural South displayed portraits of two white men on their walls — Abraham Lincoln and Julius Rosenwald.

Through his friendship with Booker T. Washington, Rosenwald learned that despite efforts to improve education for African-Americans immediately following the Civil War, those efforts waned as Reconstruction went on, leaving African-Americans in the rural South with virtually no access to education. Understanding the importance of education to social mobility and success in the U.S., Rosenwald was determined to make available an education system that would serve these children. And, indeed, generations of African-American children in the rural South got their only chance at an education thanks to the Rosenwald schools, shops and teachers' homes that were built to fill this void.

### From Middle Class to Millionaire

The son of first-generation German-Jewish immigrants, Julius Rosenwald grew up in Springfield, Illinois, where his father's business in uniforms for the Union soldiers during the Civil War quickly landed the family comfortably in the middle class. In 1879, after just two years of high school, JR left for New York to apprentice with his uncles, who had risen from owners of clothing stores to join the ranks of the major manufacturers of men's clothing in the city. Through his work as a salesman of men's clothing, Rosenwald would make his fateful encounter with Sears, Roebuck, ultimately purchasing a quarter share of the company for \$37,500 in 1895. Within a few short years, he would transform the company into a retail and

mail order powerhouse. In this compelling biography, Ascoli provides a fascinating account of Rosenwald's meteoric rise in business, chronicling as well his lifelong devotion to philanthropy — an American story of hard work and success, and of giving back to the nation in which he prospered.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

**Peter Ascoli** is on the faculty of Spertus College in Chicago. He has taught history at Utah State University and later served as director of development for the Chicago Opera Theater and Steppenwolf Theater Company, and has worked as a fundraiser for both the University of Chicago and the University of Illinois at Chicago. His articles and reviews have appeared in *Journal of Illinois History*, *Reviews in European History*, *Sixteenth Century Journal*, *American Historical Review*, *Journal of Modern History*, and *French Historical Review*. He holds degrees from the University of California, Berkeley (Ph.D.), Northwestern University (Master of Management), the University of Chicago (B.A.) and St. Catherine's College in Oxford, England (B.A.). **JULIUS ROSENWALD** is his first book to be published in English.

**JULIUS ROSENWALD: The Man Who Built Sears, Roebuck and Advanced the Cause of Black Education in the American South**

By Peter Ascoli

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