



## **Rosenwald Schools in Kentucky: Tzedakah, A Force for Change**

Julius Rosenwald was born in 1863 during the Civil War in Springfield, Illinois to a family of German Jewish immigrants. Moving to Springfield in 1860 just a block away from their friend Abraham Lincoln, his parents made quality uniforms for the Union Army and were sympathetic to the Union cause, especially the abolishment of slavery. His father was known for the first successful cash-on-delivery price clothier store, an enterprise that would later serve the younger Julius in organizing mail-order business on a large scale. After the President's death, the Rosenwald family helped raise funds to erect the Springfield Lincoln Monument in 1874.

Julius Rosenwald grew up in the family's clothing business where he became a prolific manager and entrepreneur that was known for his honest and fair treatment of people. In 1895 through business in Chicago and New York, Mr. Rosenwald and his brother-in-law, became a partner with a client, Mr. Richard Sears. After purchasing one-quarter of the stock for \$37,500 in 1896, he became Vice-President of Sears Roebuck and Company. With Sears revolutionizing the marketing through the mail order catalog, Rosenwald developed the operations for a 24-hour turnaround on orders. The fledgling company grew in sales from \$750,000 to over \$50 million over the next 12 years. Upon the resignation of Sears in 1908, Rosenwald became president of the company until 1924, stepping down to serve as Chairman of the Board until he died in 1932. After the First World War, Rosenwald rescued the corporation with \$21 million of his private fortune. By 1924 Sears sales had grown to over \$200 million. During his tenure, he established the famous Sears slogan "satisfaction guaranteed or your money back" and being a mail order business shaped the company to serve the needs of farmers and people in rural areas.

### **Tzedakah:**

While amassing an enormous fortune and growing a family of five children, Rosenwald nurtured a well-balanced life centered on faith and family values. His wife Augusta was well known for her generosity, especially for disadvantaged people, and supported and urged her husband to do likewise. Though not a common practice in Springfield, the Rosenwald family often hired African American workers, and African American children frequented the Rosenwald home to play with their children.

Through the teachings of his Rabbi, he committed to sharing his great wealth through a lifetime of philanthropy focused on change and social justice. It is common for Traditional Jews to give at least ten percent of their net income to charity. Early in his career Rosenwald once said that his goal was to make \$15,000 per year, where one-third went to his family, one-third went to savings, and one-third went to what the Jewish faith term "Tzedakah".

The Hebrew word “Tzedakah” is derived from the Hebrew root TzadeiDalet-Qof, meaning righteousness, justice, or fairness. It is similar to the English word “charity” or voluntary acts giving aid, assistance, and money to the poor and needy, and other worthy causes. However, the nature of Tzedakah is different from charity which suggests benevolence and generosity. In Judaism, giving to the poor is believed to be an obligation to do what is right and just; the performance of a duty, giving the poor their due. Some sages have said that the Obligation of Tzedakah is the highest of commandments, and combined with repentance (teshuvah), and prayer (tefilih) is the pathway to the forgiveness of sin. The most meritorious act of Tzedakah is one that “enables the recipient to become self-reliant”. It is also believed that one must take whatever work is available (no matter how humble), to avoid needing Tzedakah. These fundamental beliefs helped shape Rosenwald’s commitment, philanthropic processes, and financial models for bringing about social change.

#### Booker T Washington and the Tuskegee Institute:

Rosenwald had many influential friends including Henry Goldman, Henry Morgenthau, and Frank Lloyd Wright. Another contemporary was Paul Sachs who introduced Rosenwald to William Baldwin Jr. (President of the Long Island Railroad) who had established the Urban League, seeking to provide economic aid and development opportunities to African Americans.

Baldwin and his father were associates of Booker T. Washington who had established the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Rosenwald read “An American Citizen, The Life of William Baldwin”, and Booker T. Washington’s “Up From Slavery”; two books that changed the direction of his life. He became an advocate for changing the inequitable plight of African Americans.

In 1911 he met Mr. Washington at the Blackstone Hotel in Chicago where he was invited to join the Tuskegee Board of Directors. That fall, after visiting Tuskegee with his Rabbi, he made good on the invitation. The acceptance of the position began a lifelong friendship and the shared effort to build needed school projects supporting the education of disadvantaged Black and White students in the South. One of the first projects was to build a facility for the Young Men’s Christian Association in Chicago to among other things serve as a hotel and dormitory for African Americans visiting the city (since there were no such facilities). The Rosenwald Foundation provided \$25,000 and the YMCA raised \$75,000.

Rosenwald’s financial strategy for the foundation was to provide seed funds (generally a quarter to one-third of the project) to leverage the foundation’s capacity and develop local ownership and commitment to sustain the operations. As part of the project, Washington also asked Rosenwald to take 10% of the YMCA pledge to similarly seek matching funds to build 6 rural public schools near the Tuskegee Institute. The 6 schools would serve African Americans focusing partly on vocational education, and were constructed using the same financial model with matching funds. The school’s construction and educational philosophy continued the work started by the General Education Board (GEB), a foundation supported by John D. Rockefeller. Washington convinced Rosenwald that education would have the greatest effect on equalizing opportunities for African Americans. Once completed, Washington and Tuskegee reported on the success of the schools. It was the beginning of an enterprise that would cause almost 5,000

schools to be built in the rural areas in the South for African Americans, covering 883 counties in 15 states from Maryland to Florida, and as far west as Texas, including 158 in Kentucky in 63 counties. From 1913 to 1932 Rosenwald schools would serve over 600,000 African American students. By the last project in 1937, the total effort would generate over \$28 million to the cause including over \$4 million directly from the Rosenwald Fund. (one source indicated he once also gave 20,000 shares of Sears Roebuck valued at \$20 million).

School facility standards and model architectural plans were initially developed by the Tuskegee Institute and later refined in 1920, utilizing the national expertise of Dr. Fletcher Dresslar of Peabody College. Dr. Dresslar had been recommended to Rosenwald by the GEB.

Plans were simply based on a school's student enrollment and the number of teachers. Model architectural plans including required acreage, toilets, equipment, and operational standards were also developed to ensure a relative level of quality and (ultimately) equity. Regardless of the community (and even the state), the schools were built to the Rosenwald plans and standards. In some cases, funds were provided for transportation, extending the school year, and other administrative support activities.

The school plans were practical and organized, using natural light and ventilation. Upon request, plans were provided (at no charge) to build similar schools for White children. (it is estimated by the National Trust for Historic Places that there were about 15,000 schools built for white children with plans from the Southern Rosenwald Office but without other financial support).

The finance model required the seed funds managed initially by Tuskegee (and later by the Southern Rosenwald Office) to be matched by funds from the black and white communities, and sometimes by local and state governments.

When Washington died in 1915, Rosenwald donated an endowment to Tuskegee in Washington's name and committed himself to his friend's goals of developing educational opportunities for African Americans and constructing schools. By this time their collaboration had resulted in the building of 85 schools in Alabama, Tennessee, and Georgia.

#### Rosenwald Fellowship Foundation:

Despite the work of Booker T. Washington and Julius Rosenwald, there were critics of their educational model of opportunities offered to Black Americans. W. E. B. Dubois though thankful and generally supportive of their work, saw the "vocational direction" of Black education (part of Washington's philosophy) as still not equal nor integrated into the college and university opportunities available to Whites.

Washington's (perhaps) more pragmatic model believed in incremental steps toward equity. Some saw this compromise in the short term as "directing" the course of Black education toward trades, with an underlying (albeit unintentional) discrimination, carrying out the similar concepts of the General Education Board. On the other hand at some point, something was

better than nothing, and even critics like Dubois recognized the benefit of the Rosenwald schools. They were a change in the right direction.

Long after Washington died, the Rosenwald Fund continued to promote Black education in the South. Rosenwald's educational vision for change was moved to a higher platform by the establishment of Rosenwald Fellowships from 1929 to 1940. Edwin Embree president of the Fund and later the Fellowship program convinced Rosenwald to focus on the individual talents of African Americans (and some Whites) by selecting students of excellence to receive \$1,000 grants to further their educations.

Throughout the Fellowships, just about every gifted African American artist, writer, scientist, and thinker received Rosenwald Fellowships. Rosenwald Fellows included: in the arts, Jacob Lawrence, Charles Alston, and Elizabeth Catlett; writers, W.E.B. Dubois, Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, William Grant Still; composer (and opera singer), Marion Anderson; pianist, Margaret Bonds; sculptor, Augustus Savage; and dancer, Katherine Dunham.

Another priority of the Rosenwald Fellowship fund was to help qualified African Americans seek academic opportunities in major universities. Allison Davis was initially hired as an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago but had no real chance of advancement because of his color. At the reluctance of the University president and the intervention of the Rosenwald Fund to pay the first two years of his contract, he became the first African American appointed to the faculty of a major research institution. The hire opened the door for other African American scholars to be appointed to university faculty positions.

Kinshasha Conwill from the National Museum of African American History (and daughter of a Rosenwald Fellow, Carl Holman) noted "It is hard to over-emphasize the impact of the Rosenwald Fellowships. It was a way to make the statement clearly and objectively, that these human beings (that just a few generations ago had been shadow slaves), were equal participants in American life." She also noted that it was important to remember that the Rosenwald Fund and especially its work to launch the careers of some of the greatest African Americans occurred during times of lawful segregation.

Peter Ascoli, grandson of Julius Rosenwald provided this perspective: "I think that the fellowships gave a feeling of accomplishment and self-worth to an enormous number of African American young people who were on the cusp of their careers. Not everybody who received a Rosenwald Fellowship achieved success, but the number of people who did achieve success is so astonishing, and the number of careers that were launched as a result of this is so amazing, that truly marks the Rosenwald Fund as something unique in its time."

#### Interstate School Building Service:

Beginning in 1910 with the appointment of a "State Agent for Negro Education" in the Virginia State Department of Education, the Peabody Education Fund moved to support "state agents for negro schools" in most of the southern states. When the Peabody Education Fund liquidated its assets and closed in 1914, the General Education Board (GEB) took over the support of these

agents. After the six Rosenwald pilot schools were built near Tuskegee in 1912, state agents outside Alabama requested similar support to build schools for African Americans.

“In August of 1917, at the request of P.P. Claxton, the U.S. Commissioner of Education, a conference was held in Washington D.C. of state agents and their respective chief state school officers to discuss the status of Negro education”. The conference was underwritten by the GEB. Rosenwald attended the conference and authorized the group to appoint a committee to consider school-building requests from the southern state agents. The outcome was the official incorporation of the Julius Rosenwald Fund on October 30, 1917, whose purpose was “the well-being of mankind.”

Upon the advice of the GEB Rosenwald employed Dr. Fletcher Dressler of Peabody College (perhaps the foremost national authority on rural schools and hygiene) to make a study of the current Rosenwald schools. The report was presented in 1919 whereby Rosenwald announced the opening of the Southern offices of the Fund in Nashville under the direction of S. L. Smith, once State Agent for Negro Education in Tennessee (and student of Dresslar). The report caused Rosenwald School plans to be dramatically improved and projects were managed by the Southern Office by national experts.

“The state agents became convinced that there was a great need for trained state directors of schoolhouse planning and school hygiene, to guide the expanding program of rural school construction for both Whites and Negroes”. At the meeting of the chief state school officers and their state agents sponsored by the GEB in January of 1925, the group requested that either the GEB or the Rosenwald Fund support the establishment of divisions of schoolhouse planning in southern state departments of education.

Since Rosenwald was supporting school construction, the GEB agreed to take applications from the southern states to support a division of schoolhouse planning in each state for five years. It was also agreed that school facility directors would be selected with great care and sent to Peabody College for at least one year of graduate study of school plant issues under Dr. Dresslar. S.L. Smith was asked to assist in the search and screening of applicants. Scholarships by the GEB and the Rosenwald Fund equaled or exceeded the state department of education salaries.

The cadre of trained men in the southern states would dominate the newly formed (1921) National Council of Schoolhouse Construction (NCSC). From 1925 until Dresslar died in 1930, the South was by far the largest block of contiguous states having school plant divisions in their departments of education. Of the 21 active members of the NCSC, 13 were from southern states supported by the GEB and the Rosenwald Fund.

When the NCSC met in Raleigh, North Carolina in October of 1928, Haskell Pruett, Oklahoma’s director of schoolhouse planning (and national expert on rural schools and co-author and friend to Dr. Dressler on several school building publications) read a paper from the minutes entitled “Interstate Service in Schoolhouse Planning”. In it he proposed “the state facility directors affiliate in the exchange of ideas, design, and drawings for mutual support and programs.” Pruett proposed a motion adopted by the executive committee, but due to schedule was not

voted upon. The southern state directors, however, held a private caucus, which in agreement with the Rosenwald Fund created the Interstate School Building Service (ISBS) supported by grants from the Rosenwald Fund and the GEB until 1950.

Its annual meeting was to be “at the same time and place and in cooperation with the annual meeting of the NCSC”. Unfortunately, the formal relationship between the ISBS and the NCSC ended 2 years later, although Smith from the Rosenwald Southern Office continued to hold a joint breakfast for some years. Nonetheless, ISBS continued to meet annually. The last grant-funded meeting of the Interstate School Building Service was in Nashville in 1950 where members agreed to “continue to meet annually with states bearing their expenses”. The last meeting of the Interstate School Building Service was held in the summer of 1996 in New Orleans, Louisiana. Kentucky attended as one of the original charter members.

The strong partnership between the NCSC, the ISBS, and the expertise from the Rosenwald Southern Office helped create standards and design criteria for all schools in America. Before becoming the Council for Educational Facilities Planners International (CEFPI) in 1965, the National Council for School Construction (NCSC) published comprehensive standards for schools from 1949 to 1964.

Currently, CEFPI is the largest organization serving educational facility leaders and designers with over 3500 members worldwide. CEFPI sponsors a meeting each year (one day before their conference) for state directors to collaborate and discuss school facility matters. Kentucky and South Carolina Representatives were instrumental in reinstating that important annual meeting which was seeded in the process of the ISBS.

The original school standards and designs that were initialized at Tuskegee and refined by the Rosenwald Southern Office and the work of the GEB and Rosenwald Fund to develop Schoolhouse planning expertise, helped shape organizations that continue to support the design and construction of schools today. “Rosenwald Schools influenced public school architecture for Black and White schools for four decades” (Middle Tennessee State University journal: 1995:1). It seems fitting that the principals of social justice and fairness stewarded by Rosenwald are also embedded in educational reform through concepts of equity and adequacy.

#### The Rosenwald Legacy:

There are several publications on Rosenwald Schools in Kentucky including Alicestyne Adams (2007) and one by the Kentucky Heritage Council that provide a list of all the schools with county locations and references. The existing Rosenwald schools and the ones now gone tell many stories, mostly about the people’s lives that were changed through education.

Peter Ascoli said his grandfather believed that “each generation should give away its own money to the causes in which it believes”. In essence, each generation must find the capacity to sustain the causes it needs to fulfill. Causes change. New causes emerge. Rosenwald insisted that upon a fixed period after his death, the work of the foundation would end. The last Rosenwald School was built in 1937. The Fellowship program ended in 1940 and the Fund was closed in 1948. The Rosenwald Foundation was not about legacy.

And yet the work to lift up people, to help change our values, to organize educational systems, to build leadership, and ultimately to teach us about the best qualities of human beings; to do all of that humbly with grace, without a need for gratitude, taking on some of the most difficult challenges of the time, is a remarkable legacy in itself.

The life and work of Julius Rosenwald were a force for educational and social change and a model for American leaders, entrepreneurs, communities, educators, and philanthropists. His strong faith, sense of duty, disciplined success in business, and unfaltering resolve helped seed a bold and courageous effort to change the dynamic of the American people.

His inclusive partnering helped build schools and education opportunities. He also helped build relationships, communities, social equity, and human value.

Julius Rosenwald never finished high school and did not attend college, (something he always regretted) but his impact on American education is a matter of history. Although only 3% of the total Rosenwald School building effort was in Kentucky, like most of the southern states, the impact of the program was a force for changing the education of African Americans in the Commonwealth. The lives affected, and the schoolhouse buildings should remind us of the commitment, strategies, and beliefs that Julius Rosenwald embodied and utilized on behalf of Americans and humanity.

We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give. -*Winston Churchill*