

CYRUS L. SULZBERGER

By MORRIS D. WALDMAN

In the brief biographical note that the late Cyrus Leopold Sulzberger was accustomed to contribute to the *Who's Who in America* he modestly described himself as "merchant." But the wide circle of his friends and colleagues would refuse to be content with that designation of his place in public life. To them he was not only a merchant, successful in the world of business; but even more, a man of wide intellectual range and extraordinary spiritual strength. In the seventy-three years of his life he distinguished himself in many ways: as public-spirited citizen, as a benevolent humanitarian, as a communal worker, as a philanthropist, as an educator; above all as one of profound social-mindedness. He was, too, possessed of a warmly sympathetic nature and of an intimate understanding of his fellowmen. So much so, that although he assiduously shunned the limelight of public life, he was able to exert an enormous influence over many who were themselves leaders in a multiplicity of social, philanthropic and communal efforts.

This gift of his: a persuasive characteristic of kindness, tolerance and insight, must always be remembered; for it expanded the range of achievements of his own career, crowded as that was with efforts for the public weal.

Cyrus L. Sulzberger was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on July 11th, 1858, the son of Leopold and Sophia Lindauer Sulzberger. He obtained a secular education in the grammar schools of his native city and in its Central High School. His Jewish education was derived from the famed Philadelphia Hebrew Education Society and from home and synagogue influences that left their mark upon him throughout his lifetime.

Upon graduation from high school he entered the business world, as bookkeeper, an occupation that he followed, when, at the age of 19, he came to settle in New York City. Here he joined the firm of N. Erlanger and Company. Later he was invited to become a partner in the firm; and still later, in 1903, became its president. He resigned this position in 1929 and thereafter, until his death, was chairman of the company's Board of Directors.

Mr. Sulzberger was a successful businessman; but his business was never permitted to monopolize his full time. On the contrary, from his very earliest years in New York, he exhibited an interest in the affairs of the metropolis and in every movement looking towards progressive government and civic betterment. While still young, he joined a political club of which he served as president on two occasions. In 1903 he was invited to become the Fusion candidate for the office of President of the Borough of Manhattan. He was not elected; but several years later he directed the campaign of George McAneny for that same office, and skillfully conducted the candidacy to victory at the polls.

I recall an interesting story in this connection, illustrative at once of his utter lack of pompousness, his *Gemütlichkeit*, his constant good sportsmanship.

On election day, when he was himself the candidate for the position of President of the Borough of Manhattan, his friends were gathered at his home in anticipation of celebrating his election. A festival cake had been prepared for the occasion with iced lettering on it, bearing the words: "Cyrus L. Sulzberger, Borough President." As the news came over the telephone, it soon appeared that Mr. Sulzberger's candidacy was lost. But the hero of the occasion was in no way ruffled. Quietly he went over to the cake and without a word lifted the letter "P" from the inscription.

Those were two periods of active campaigning; but they did not circumscribe his civic activities. On several occasions he was invited by city and state officials to participate in the work of important commissions. Governor Charles E. Hughes appointed him a member of a State Commission on Congestion of Population. Governors Sulzer and Glynn named him to membership on the Board of Managers of the Reformatory for Misdemeanants. Mayor John Purroy

Mitchel drafted him for service on the Committee on Unemployment. In each case he distinguished himself, winning the admiration and respect of his colleagues and the public at large.

In the main, however, Mr. Sulzberger's public life was occupied with the economic, communal and educational problems of his Jewish fellow-citizens. To these concerns, he gave unstintingly of his time, his money, and his devotion. The influence of the great scholar, Sabato Morais, whom he knew in his boyhood days in Philadelphia, was strongly marked upon him.

Years before he attained his majority, he was active in the Philadelphia Young Men's Hebrew Association, where he published, along with Dr. Solomon Solis-Cohen, the *Association Review* as the organ of the associate members. He was among the first to sponsor a Young Men's Hebrew Association in New York and to help coordinate the work of all these groups in the *American Hebrew*, of which publication he was the first president.

At about the period that Mr. Sulzberger arrived in New York there began the great tide of Jewish immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. Their poverty and the oppression from which they were escaping stirred him deeply. At the same time, he saw that this flow of hundreds of thousands of newcomers provoked a complexity of problems. The immigrants had to be assisted in their economic and cultural readjustment. They had to be integrated into their new life in such a way as to permit them to make the greatest possible contribution to their own welfare and to the country that had so hospitably received them. Their problems, therefore, became his tasks, to which he devoted himself without pause the greater part of his lifetime.

One of his outstanding activities in this field of endeavor was as President of the Industrial Removal Office and as treasurer of the Galveston movement which attempted to direct the flow of Jewish immigration away from too heavy a concentration in the large cities of the Atlantic seaboard. The task was a gigantic one, requiring enormous funds of energy and perseverance as well as constructive vision of a high order. How effective its work was, can now be appraised

by consulting a copy of the *American Jewish Year Book*; here it will be seen that the distribution of Jews has been stimulated to such an extent that there are now close to 2,000 communities, extending into every state of the Union, where Jews have established themselves. In a study of the place of the Jew in American life, this achievement can hardly be over-estimated.

Mr. Sulzberger's concern with the problems of immigration was not exhausted by this effort. In his association with the work of the American Jewish Committee (to which we shall have occasion to refer later) he frequently took up the current questions relating to immigration and naturalization. When he went abroad on a vacation he made a careful study of the situation in Roumania, a country from which many Jews were emigrating in large numbers. Oscar S. Straus, one-time United States Ambassador to Turkey and member of President Theodore Roosevelt's cabinet, regarded Mr. Sulzberger as an authority on this subject and advised those who wished to study and report on the immigration question to consult with him before drawing up their conclusions.

The enormous tide of immigrants also led Mr. Sulzberger, as one of the active American Jewish leaders, to grapple with the problem of their Americanization, and with the other questions involving their cultural well-being. Furthermore, it emphasized the urgency for providing in some measure for the need to safeguard their religious and civil rights.

Partly in recognition of the importance of offering to the immigrant an Americanizing influence, Mr. Sulzberger joined a group of associates in launching the *American Hebrew*, a publication that he helped guide to perhaps the greatest period of its usefulness and prestige. He was at that time barely past his majority. "Truth tells its own story," Mr. Sulzberger set as his own motto and as the beacon light of his editorial policy.

This ideal he sought to express in the carefully edited columns of his publication. "We were animated," he told many years later, "by our zeal, our ardor, our devotion to Judaism." Fortunately this zeal was shared by the rest of the group of young, enthusiastic associates; fortunately

too, Mr. Sulzberger was gifted with a lucid pen that he did not hesitate to use at all times to advance the ideals of his religion and his country.

How capable he was in its use may be judged from the article expressive of his genuinely religious nature and deep feeling, that he wrote some years before his death and which he entitled "For Our Children's Children: A Layman's Faith."

"What chance has Judaism as a rule of life?" he inquired; and then proceeded to answer his question with the thoughtful, enlightened idealism that constituted his life's principles:

"Throughout the ages," he wrote, "there has run through Jewish history a single living thread which has served to unite those of each present generation with its predecessors; which has enabled its martyrs to die, and the greater glory of which is, that it has enabled its myriads to live. This continuous thread in Jewry, surviving until now, and, properly understood, capable of surviving forever, is the belief in One God—the God of Righteousness and Holiness. 'Be Holy, for I your God, am Holy!' is still the only eternal sanction for right conduct..."

"If it be realized that our individual conduct bears on the well-being of the world, that rightdoing advances and wrongdoing retards the advent of that righteousness for which the Power, not ourselves, is working, if we consciously feel that our every act has thus a significance to the whole moral world, we get an appreciation of what it means to Be Holy because God is Holy."

He summarized the doctrine "for our children's children" thus: "They are not alone the children of their parents. They are the children of centuries of Jewish religion and culture, religion and culture always having gone hand in hand. In all the past ages, the philosophy of Judaism was in harmony with the best thought of those ages. For this day and generation a like harmony is demanded and can be obtained."

Mr. Sulzberger was not a lone enthusiast; the contagion of his own idealism and zeal infected others. As president of the publishing company issuing the *American Hebrew* he was a bulwark of strength to its editor, the late Dr. Joseph

Jacobs. Many a scholar and writer whom he befriended has testified to the inspiration of his personality and influence. The tribute of Dr. H. Pereira Mendes contains a striking recollection of the days of his association with the *American Hebrew*: "From the very first moment of our meetings, Cyrus Sulzberger showed himself distinguished by a remarkable trait of character that was always to the front. I refer to his uncompromising, unflinching loyalty to the loftiest interests of American Jewry. His breadth of view, his remarkable power of psychological analysis, his terse and forceful language, his command of English, his love for the highest literary style, his sympathetic mind and his generous heart soon made him one of the leading spirits of that band of youthful editors."

Philip Cowen, one of the founders of the *American Hebrew*, has related in his book, "Memories of an American Jew," one episode (of many) when Mr. Sulzberger came to the defense of the good name of the Jew:

"In November, 1884, there appeared in the *Century Magazine* a chapter of "The Rise of Silas Lapham," by William Dean Howells, wherein one of the characters spoke of the decline of values in real estate that followed the entrance of Jews in the neighborhood. Sulzberger, wrote to Mr. Howells concerning the injustice of his statement and its likelihood to encourage race prejudice. In the course of the story the following conversation was given:

'Why, Silas Lapham,' said his wife, 'do you mean to tell me that this house is worth less than we gave for it?'

'It is worth a good deal less. You see *they* have got in—and pretty thick too,—it's no use denying it. And when they get in, they send down the price of property. Of course, there ain't any sense in it. *I* think it dumn foolishness. It's cruel and folks ought to be ashamed. But there it is. You tell folks that the Saviour himself was one, and the twelve apostles, and all the prophets, and I don't know but Adam was—guess he *was*—and it don't make a bit of difference. They send down the price of real estate. Prices begin to shade when the first one gets in.'

'Mrs. Lapham thought the facts over a few moments. 'Well, what do we care, so long as we're comfortable in our

home? 'And they're just as nice and as good neighbors as can be.'

"Under date of July 12, 1885, Mr. Sulzberger wrote to Mr. Howells, in part as follows:

"Dear Sir: As *The Rise of Silas Lapham* is about approaching completion, and will, I presume, soon appear in book form, I beg to call to your notice a slur (in Chapter II) upon a number of your readers and admirers—a slur as unmerited by the Jewish people as it is unworthy of the author. It is not alone upon the ignorant and uncultured of the Jews that you reflect, for neither the 'Saviour himself' nor the twelve apostles, nor the prophets, nor even Adam, were, so far as the records show, of that class which depreciated the value of property when they 'got in.' . . . The statement is violently dragged in for no other ascertainable reason than to pander to a prejudice against which all educated and cultured Jews must battle. The literary leaders of a country have so great a power in fomenting or in repressing popular prejudice, that I make bold to hope that in the permanent form in which '*Silas Lapham*' will no doubt soon appear, these objectionable lines will be omitted.

CYRUS L. SULZBERGER."

"Mr. Howells replied from Old Orchard, Me., as follows under date of July 17, 1885:

'My dear Sir: I thank you for your frank and manly letter. I supposed that I was writing in reprobation of the prejudice of which you justly complain, but my irony seems to have fallen short of the mark—so far short that you are not the first Hebrew to accuse me of pandering to the stupid and cruel feeling against your race and religion. I will not ask you to read again, in the light of this statement, the passage of my story which you object to, for I have already struck it out of my book, and it will not re-appear. In that passage I merely recognized to rebuke it, the existence of a feeling which

civilized men should be ashamed of. But perhaps it is better not to recognize all the facts.

'Perhaps, also, you owe me an apology for making an unjust accusation. I leave that to you.

Very truly yours,

W. D. HOWELLS.'

"This interesting correspondence, which was printed in the *Evening Post* as well as in the *American Hebrew*, was brought to a close by the following letter from Mr. Sulzberger to Mr. Howells:

'To Mr. W. D. Howells,
Old Orchard, Me.

'My dear Sir: Certainly in view of your kind note of 17 inst., I do owe you an apology. Still, in justification of my own stupidity in missing the point of your irony, I may say that Silas' admission that "they" do depreciate the value of property when they get in—a fact concerning the financial accuracy of which I have some doubts—seemed to me rather an endorsement than a rebuke of what you truly called the "stupid and cruel feeling" against us.

I am glad indeed to have your assurance that the passage will not appear in the book, and still more pleased to know that the author whom I have so much admired is not to be counted among the number—unfortunately too large—of Jew-haters in America.

CYRUS L. SULZBERGER.' "

In many ways Mr. Sulzberger showed how highly he prized the educational forces in American Jewish life. Shortly after his arrival in New York he became president of the Talmud Torah of the Congregation Adereth El. He was a director of the Jewish Publication Society; a chairman of the Executive Committee of the Bureau of Jewish Social Research. He helped found the Kehilla, the organization that attempted to co-ordinate the religious and cultural activities of the Jewish community of New

York, and of the Bureau of Jewish Education. His intellectual inclinations led to his active work in the Judeans society. More recently, another cultural effort, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, engaged his sympathetic interest. For many years he was actively interested in promoting the cause of a Jewish homeland in Palestine. But his disillusionment with the passions engendered in the World War turned him against every emphasis on nationalism, so that in the latter part of his life he disassociated himself from the national elements in that movement.

The changing complexion of American Jewish life, resulting from the mass immigration movement led to still another of Mr. Sulzberger's communal activities; his interest in philanthropic enterprises. This work took many forms. There were problems to be solved of immediate immigrant aid. There were larger problems involving the economic regeneration of Jews on a wider scale. There were the calamities requiring special charitable effort: the pogroms and the tragic collapse of the Eastern European communities as a result of the World War. All of these efforts obtained Mr. Sulzberger's generous cooperation. A full report of the many organizations with which he was associated and of his work for each of them would far exceed the limits of this brief biographical article. But even a listing of the organizations that obtained his personal interest will throw some light on the large variety of his communal enterprises and the catholicity of his interests in Jewish life:

Mr. Sulzberger was for a number of years President of the United Hebrew Charities, of New York City, now known as the Jewish Social Service Association. He was one of the first outstanding advocates of "Federation" of Jewish philanthropic institutions, and in association with the late Nathan Bijur, Morris Loeb and Lee K. Frankel, helped to promote the idea in New York City and eventually to bring about its realization; and was a trustee of the New York Federation for the Support of the Jewish Philanthropic Societies. He was also a President of the Jewish Agricultural Aid Society; a secretary of the American Jewish Relief Committee; a member of the Executive Committee of the Joint Distribution Committee; a president of the New

York City Conference on Charities and Correction; a president of the National Conference of Jewish Charities; and a supporter of the Jewish Territorial Organization (ITO) movement headed by Israel Zangwill.

The disastrous pogroms in Russia that stirred the American public to a rare display of sympathy and good will, led to the formation, first, of the National Committee for the Relief of the Sufferers by the Russian Massacres in which Mr. Sulzberger played an active part; and, indirectly, to the formation of the American Jewish Committee, established in 1906. On this body he served, as a member of its executive committee, until his passing. His special concern were subjects relating to immigration and to naturalization; and he was ever watchful for the interests of the frequently attacked alien. He was one of a group of four delegates (the others being Dr. Cyrus Adler, Louis Marshall and Harry Cutler) representing the Committee, who appeared before the Committee of Immigration and Naturalization of the U. S. House of Representatives in 1910. On this occasion he prepared a carefully documented statement disproving the variety of charges and allegations made against the immigrant, and reporting in some detail how they had contributed to the economic life of their new homeland. His testimony at that time was hailed as an achievement of special effectiveness.

At one time he cleverly confounded immigrant baiters by quoting from an article by Mark Sullivan about an Anglo-Saxon community in western Pennsylvania, a community consisting almost wholly of natives, which was exposed as reeking of graft and corruption.

In general, the minutes of the American Jewish Committee meetings bear ample testimony to his active participation in its deliberations, and to the services he rendered towards the fulfillment of its work.

A word about his private life.

Several years after Mr. Sulzberger settled in New York, he met and married Rachel Hays, a descendant of one of the oldest American Jewish families, related to the famous

Peixottos and Cardozos. They had three sons, Leo, Arthur and David, of whom the last two, along with his widow, survived Mr. Sulzberger.

The biographer of a man like Cyrus Leopold Sulzberger is always at a disadvantage. At most, he can record the variety of his achievements, the organizations he established or helped, his liberality with time and money, and devotion to one cause or another. With another man that might be enough; but it is inadequate in describing the life of Mr. Sulzberger who gave, in addition, a share of his rich and high-minded personality. His keen, but genial sense of humor, his earnestness, his openmindedness and lack of personal vanity, his mental alertness and resourcefulness, his warm sympathy—all had their share in shaping events and in influencing men of ability and distinction to undertake tasks of constructive public usefulness.

The tribute paid to him by Rabbi David de Sola Pool, at his funeral services, beautifully expressed the esteem in which Sulzberger was held by those who knew him. It is noted here in part:

“It is a rare thing to find—a heart of wisdom, but Cyrus L. Sulzberger was that rare combination summed up in the vivid biblical phrase. One must search far to find united in such perfect harmony as did Cyrus L. Sulzberger the brilliant mind and great heart in one richly endowed personality.

“It is hard to think that his strong and vigorous mind is stilled. So unusual were his intellectual gifts, so unusual his powers of analysis, his forcefulness and directness of expression, so clear his vision, that, in the words of one dear friend, ‘he could have made a success of anything that he undertook.’

“Yet with all that strength, with all that wealth of mental vigor, there was nothing of the overbearing, forbidding, metallic quality which one sometimes finds in men of forceful mentality. There was always a sense of humor, a sweetly illuminating smile, a glint of humanity in the handsome, understanding, powerful eyes, that gave so distinguished a quality of alluring friendliness to his humane wisdom.

“But there was more than high intelligence, penetrating depth of mind, cosmopolitan culture, urbanity and refinement. His was the understanding heart, the heart of wisdom; the combination of the Hellene and the Hebrew. He had the Greek’s love of beauty, of truth and of wisdom, and he had also the greatest gift of humanity—the moral fervor and the passion of the heart of the Jew.

“We need men like Cyrus L. Sulzberger—those rare men who, like him, can stand up for the truth with courage and wisdom; with the Jewish love for his fellow men which he gave without thought of self, without thought of reward, with all the warmth of a loving heart.

“His public work was marked by a selflessness that was rare. Some men give themselves to public service, but stoop to cheap and tawdry tricks of self-advertisement and hope for political preferment. He abhorred such tactics. His was the self-effacing work of one who loved his fellow-men. He retired early from business that he might give himself to philanthropy.

“Cyrus L. Sulzberger was a man of superlative integrity. His heart beat true. His was a heart of wisdom, and he loved the wisdom of his ancient people. He was an intensely religious man, a man in whom religion was neither a cult nor an occasional profession of faith. It was the very fibre of his living.”