LOUIS EDWARD KIRSTEIN

1867–1942

By BENJAMIN M. SELEKMAN

THE man who becomes a leader in his community acquires a dimension larger than that yielded by his own personality. He takes on the depth and size of the whole people he represents, just because he crystallizes their aspirations and their vision of the good life. By the very measure in which he thus emerges a symbol, he transcends even his own notable individuality.

Louis Edward Kirstein was a distinguished man. He was also a distinguished American Jew. To those who knew him or worked with him no outline of the public figure could blur the memories of his warmly human qualities, his rugged strength, his stalwart integrity. Yet the memory of the man embraces the image of the leader; the footprints left by the leader bear the impress also of the man. The probity and insight that made him seek not only the immediately right but the ultimately righteous way through the problems he faced with his people belong to the unique human being. The ways he finally found could have been hewed out only by an American Jew who lived his full days within the stirring era between the Civil War to preserve the American Union, and the global war to preserve Western civilization.

When Louis E. Kirstein was born in Rochester, N. Y., on July 9, 1867, to Edward and Jeanette Leiter Kirstein, the America he grew to love so deeply had just been saved from the tragedy of disunion and cleansed of the shame of slavery. When he died in Boston on December 10, 1942, America and her allies had just reached the turning point on the hard road to victory over a foe who had first revealed the shape of his barbarism in attack upon the Jews. The life thus spanned by memorable events in the history of America

and Jewry tells in its course the saga of the American Jew. I have heard Louis Kirstein reminisce upon the adventurous days of his youth, and thought how typically American they were. I have heard him review the development of his business career, watched him hover lovingly over his books on Lincoln, and seen him answer the challenge to liberty and the call of democratic citizenship. I noted the essential American in the individual man. But I saw him also year after year give princely contributions to Jewish causes here and abroad; I watched him stir to the message of Zionism; I observed him shrink in initial unbelief, then rally in steady courage against the latest and most terrible pogrom visited upon his ancestral people. Invariably I found myself thinking, "There moves — every inch of him — an American and a Jew."

Yet which of the manifold strands in this full life really were woven by the American in Louis E. Kirstein, and which by the Jew? Was his devotion to learning Hebraic or American? Were the imagination and enterprise that made him an outstanding business man characteristically Yankee or Jewish? Was the good citizen of Boston a product of the Jewish tradition or that of America? Was the generous, far-seeing philanthropist a child of the people who wrote charity into their fundamental law or of the nation that made the voluntarily supported institution an instrument of democratic progress? Even by the answers Louis E. Kirstein wrote in his daily living, he becomes a symbol. For would not every American lay claim to such traits as typical possessions of his countrymen; would not every Jew equally recognize them as deeply-rooted fruits of his heritage? The truth has recurrently been rediscovered by the fine spirits of the marching generations. Both American and Jewish civilization have been fed from the same streams of cultural development. The prophets cried out for a brotherhood among men, a peace and freedom that, centuries later, the American fathers wrote with their blood into the law of their land. America stands forth as the most recent historic product of the Western civilization that is rooted in the intellectual and moral soil of Hellenism and Hebraism.

Thus, every characteristic episode in the life of a man like Louis E. Kirstein seems "typically" American or "funda-

mentally" Jewish until they all merge into an integral whole that is uniquely American and Jewish. Like many another American boy who later achieved success, he chafed under the routines of school life. Loving travel, eager to be on his own, he cut away from home ties when he was sixteen, despite his deep devotion to his mother, and his father's urgings that he complete his education. In later life he was always grateful for the family tradition — freedom and citizenship. His father had followed Carl Schurz from Germany with the other stalwart forty-eighters who would not make their peace with reaction. In Rochester he had won a place of high esteem in the community life. But, for the young Louis, at sixteen, these things could not outweigh the call of individual adventure. He had to test and prove himself.

THE adventures he found in the course of seven years would still fire a true American youth. His baseball ventures, among the many stirring experiences of this period, have received most attention. To the youth of the half-century following, men with whom young Louis Kirstein was associated would bring excitement. He hired John McGraw, for instance, to play baseball for him in a small Florida town; he paid the future "Little Napoleon" of the New York Giants $50 per month. It was the Rochester Ball Club that brought the traveling baseball magnate back to his home city, when he had saved up sufficient funds to buy its franchise. There followed tumultuous times with the fighting players of the ball leagues in their lusty, rough-and-tumble days. But Louis Kirstein won from them more than the insights into human behavior and the spice they yielded. Insisting steadfastly upon navigation on his own, he had to steer his club through many a financial storm — and thus received good grounding in the intricacies of business economics. He even obtained from these days a first contact with trade unionism, when he had to deal with the Brotherhood of Baseball Players. To the end of his busy life, Kirstein retained his typically American love of sports.

But when he was in his early twenties, he left baseball and embarked upon what was to become his lifework — merchandising. In his first engagements he indulged his

youthful zest for travel by taking to the road to sell the goods of various concerns: men's shirts, his father's optical supplies, and — after a brief experiment with the retail and manufacturing branches of the optical business — Stein-Bloch clothing. His traveling had brought him recurrently to Boston. In 1894, he had become associated in that city with the retail optical concern of Andrew J. Lloyd and, during this relatively short sojourn, he had made the acquaintance of Lincoln and Edward Filene. In 1896, he married Rose Stein, daughter of Nathan Stein, senior executive of the Stein-Bloch Company. As he returned to the clothing industry his many contacts with Lincoln Filene developed both personal friendship and a keen interest in the pioneering techniques of organization and function which that store had launched. In 1912, this interest and friendship — a friendship which was to endure and deepen with the years — led to Kirstein's joining the Filene Company as vice president. He was thus forty-five years old when he finally struck his roots in the city which, for the three decades that followed, became his center for a widely radiating accomplishment as businessman, citizen, American and Jew.

By the very laws of its accelerating inner growth, modern business has constituted the core of our highly dynamic society. Whatever may be the future of industrial man, it is business enterprise that has generated the creative impulses which have built our amazing economy. But it was after the Civil War, particularly during the decades when Louis Kirstein pursued the career of his maturity, that the business leader became the dominant figure in American community life. During the first epoch of our national development, our great men turned to politics for creative opportunities. After 1870 the names of our important builders appear in business. In Jewish life, too, the successful businessman emerged to communal leadership. Thus, during the decades when Louis Kirstein played his part, both in American life generally and in Jewish life specifically, business constituted a prime source of communal authority.

Merchandising, his particular calling, also came to maturity during the years of his adult career. As we review the history of business enterprise in the United States, we can

see that different periods witnessed the progress of the economy as a whole by advances along specific sectors. It was during the first decades of the twentieth century that modern retail distribution emerged. And in that episode of American development, Louis Kirstein, attracted to Filene's by the courage, imagination and deep sense of human responsibility of its founders, played a leading part.

It was in 1881 that William Filene opened a small specialty shop on Winter Street in Boston. He had a pioneering background in the expanding drygoods business that went back to 1856, and successful ventures in Salem and Lynn, Massachusetts, and in Bath, Maine. When he turned the Boston store over to his sons in 1901, it could boast of a sound and steady growth. By 1912, when Louis Kirstein joined the newly incorporated organization, the business was housed in its present eight-story structure, designed by Daniel H. Burnham, and considered "the finest example of store architecture in Boston."

As the store thus entered upon the fullness of its career, the challenge confronting business statesmanship changed somewhat from that of the first decades of sheer growth. It was an arresting challenge, and one that particularly interested men of the caliber of Kirstein and his associates. For now problems of business ethics, fair practice, relationships between each store and its employees, customers, competitors, and the general community had come to the fore. Not that the traditional objectives of business had lost any of their basic importance. On the contrary, these aspects of their total job certainly never lost any of their compelling interest for Kirstein or his associates. They recognized consistently that in our society profits remained the measure of competence, and the title to pioneering in such functional fields as personnel practice, publicity, merchandising policy and communal relationships. Interested always in the philosophy crystallizing out of their daily tasks, they framed their working principles of store management about this central tenet. They frankly articulated the aim to build an enduring institution that would "make money" by sound and responsible merchandising, which would yield dividends for customers, workers and community, as well as for management.

From the start, therefore, the merchandising function, of which Kirstein became the chief executive, was assigned a focal role in the total store program. All who worked with him testify to the superb mastery with which he handled it. If the first era of his youthful physical growth had been left behind by 1912, the years ahead were to bring more than their normal harvest of fresh economic problems. The first World War; the shock of the depression of 1920–21 that froze war-swollen inventories; the emergence of "hand-to-mouth buying"; the spreading automobile with its effects upon suburban living, and the decay of traffic-congested central urban districts which generally held the large store; the depression of the thirties; the social reforms of the New Deal; the world drift to total war; finally war itself — it is hardly necessary to elaborate upon these major forces impinging upon retail merchandising to prove that even true business statesmen like Louis Kirstein and his partners had to grapple with the daily problems of constant adjustment. They met each development with an astute realism that never permitted the exigencies of the moment to undermine their fundamental tenets of business ethics and communal responsibility. Many of their innovations and experiments proved technically interesting — and valuable. Indeed the very shape and size of general organization proved a fertile experiment in merchandising. For Filene's has not been strictly a department store. It is instead a departmental specialty shop, offering a more restricted range of goods and services than the standard department store. As Filene's became the largest single apparel store in the world, this famous local institution built, as the automobile forced it to spread, branches through New England: year-round specialty shops in larger cities and suburban towns; college-year specialty shops in college towns; summer specialty shops in beach resorts.

Always proud of Filene's reputation and accomplishment, Kirstein lived in its future even as his own life drew to a close. Those who knew him intimately always gained fresh insights when we heard him speculate upon what lay ahead for business. In 1942, as Allied victory at last took on the firm contours of certainty, Kirstein began to project Filene's into the postwar world. He related it not only to

possible economic conditions; he saw also the inter-connecting communal tissues that bound it to widening social insurance, secure employment, organized peace, international trade, decent, civilized group relationships.

THESE larger forces indeed always held their place among the realistic daily concerns of Louis Kirstein and his associates. Their social philosophy found its first proving ground in their own store; from there it proliferated into the local, national — and world — community. They had made personnel welfare a distinct store function when this constituted pioneering indeed. They had subjected their advertising and service to severe, rigorous, self-imposed standards of responsibility. As early as 1898 an employee organization, the Filene Cooperative Association, the first of its kind, rose to speak for the employees in dealings with management. Kirstein enjoyed the complete confidence of the Association's members. When he died, it was recalled that, when they were unable to agree upon an arbitrator to compose differences with the management, they had asked him to serve in that capacity.

Such incidents may well stand as a symbol of the confidence he had won from union workers generally. His position as a leading businessman in the house of organized labor was unique. All seemed to regard him as eminently fair — what Americans approve as a "square shooter." But here again it is interesting to observe how his closest contacts and most fruitful influence were exercised among those unions whose achievements have been credited by students to their Jewish leadership. In the needle trades, where Louis D. Brandeis, Louis Marshall, and other outstanding Jewish communal leaders worked with the Jewish unions to give these onetime sweatshop trades the characteristic constitutional structure that was to underlie significant steps toward industrial citizenship, Louis E. Kirstein also contributed much. Union spokesmen like Sidney Hillman and David Dubinsky pay tribute to the help he furnished from his business position in winning over other businessmen to that basic acceptance of organization among their workers that is prerequisite to all peaceful, collaborative progress.

Thus, in this work, as in all his widening interests, the Filene store served always as his embarkation point. Indeed, Boston, his local community, furnished the first circle of his spreading activity. When Mr. Kirstein died, the response to the sad news made it unmistakably clear that his fellow townsmen mourned the passing of one they had come to cherish. He had won secure hold on their affections, and secure rank among the first citizens of New England's metropolis. Two features of this position make it noteworthy beyond its own intrinsic achievement — the conditions under which it had been accorded him, and the accomplishments by which he had won it.

Boston does not readily confer its accolade upon its adopted sons. Its critics may call this provincialism, but fundamentally its jealous wish to restrict local leadership to those who were born on its soil springs from a reverence for one's own group roots. New England has given its unique gifts to our whole land, and there can be no question among those who watch them in their social behavior, that the present descendants carrying on the fine old names carry on also the fine old sense of civic duty. To be sure, snobbery and decadence often exist among the avid trailers of genealogy. But those who perceive nothing more in New England traditionalism miss the true richness of historic continuity. Kirstein always appreciated these inner qualities of the New England he made his home. He remained in fact an adopted son — an "immigrant" from Rochester, and also a Jew. The "fact" nonetheless became the non-essential element of the relationship. Boston acclaimed Louis E. Kirstein "one of us."

The newer groups, like the older, gave him their trust, their respect, their affection. Boston's Irish for many decades now have left behind them the early burdens of rejected "outsiders," the sufferings and bewilderments of a century ago when Beacon Hill turned startled eyes upon these aliens teeming in new slums. Today Boston's Irish are among the important and influential sections of her people. The spokesmen for the Irish recognized Kirstein as a fellow; he had friends among their leaders, their middle classes, their workers. In the same way among his own people, he became the German Jew, held over from a passing era of

communal life, to lead the Russian and other East European Jews who have been assuming increasingly the management of Jewish communal life.

Boston bestowed upon him all her most venerated honors, and he took on central responsibilities for her welfare. With no completed formal education, he made himself a widely-read, penetrating citizen of his time and place. Harvard University is a New England, an American, a world institution of learning. From Harvard he received in 1933 an honorary degree of Master of Arts; from the Graduate School of Business Administration he received responsible office and association. He was appointed also a member of the Visiting Committee of the Semitic Museum. In his honor a group of his friends established a fellowship in the Harvard Medical School. Boston University made him an honorary Doctor of Commercial Science. Boston's Public Library claimed him too; he first became a trustee in 1919, and five times served as president of the Board of Trustees. The Business Library he presented to the city four years later as a memorial to his father, has established itself as one of the most useful institutions in the downtown commercial district. When, during the first months of the depression, in 1930, Boston's port problems were casting particularly disturbing shadows upon her economic life, Kirstein was elected president of the Port Authority. The various business and social agencies in which he participated make up a significant roster of public trust and public service.

And always this service he undertook reflected not only the public esteem of Kirstein, but also his own outlook upon life. The public library stood for democracy's faith in the self-development and education of all its people. The Harvard Business School embodied his conviction that business must become increasingly a profession, if businessmen are to be entrusted with the custodianship of economic institutions in a civilization where life, work and the pursuit of happiness are inextricably interwoven. The Greater Boston Community Fund, which absorbed him from its start, represented the good society in his own home town. The Associated Jewish Philanthropies and the Beth Israel

Hospital symbolized his loyalty to his own kinship group. I had worked closely with Mr. Kirstein for thirteen years before his death. I had repeated opportunities to note how other communal leaders, other Bostonians, felt toward him. I know how deeply they admired him as a businessman, an American, a citizen. But I am also convinced that they had first approached him as a leading citizen of their city because he was a representative Jew. They looked to him to interpret to them what Jews might feel, or want, or do on any given problem; they looked to him also to interpret to the Jews what the general community at any given time might require of them. He became the creative channel of communication between his Jewish group and the larger urban society of which they were a constituent part.

Certainly his identification with his people had in it the strong pull of deep-rooted feeling and, also, of a maturely acquired philosophy of life. Mr. Kirstein considered himself fortunate in the friends he had made at home and abroad; he paid constant tribute to the influence of Louis D. Brandeis upon his development. In business, in communal affairs, in Jewish life, he garnered much from the wisdom of his chosen mentor. From Brandeis he accepted the rule that activity begins in your own home soil — your city, your group, your organization. In 1919, after the first World War, he became president of the Federated Jewish Charities, parent organization of the present Associated Jewish Philanthropies. Though he held office only for the legal term then established, he continued a potent informal, or unofficial, leadership. In 1929, when the Wall Street crash seemed to shake social agencies as profoundly as, if not more than, other institutions, he was again called to take formal leadership. That post he held until his death. During the terrible crises and exacting demands of the thirties, he helped steer the organization to secure growth and foundation.

But in Jewish affairs, as in business, and in American citizenship, Boston became not only his original fulcrum, but his link with wider responsibility. The Jewish tragedy opened by the rise of Hitler to power hit him like a heavy personal blow. Like so many others, he had blood relatives caught in the clutches of Nazi barbarism; time and again he, too, said, "There but for the grace of God go I." But his pain went deeper than that, far deeper than any sense of

personal fear and outrage. Like many acute minds and fine spirits among Jews and non-Jews alike, he saw the drift of events that made the Jews merely the first, if most helpless, victims on the Nazi timetable. But he also saw in this most recent horror the whole tragic history of his people. To the fierce determination he shared with all decent men that this war must be the last, he added the specific fire of the Jew's determination that somehow this must be the last martyrdom of his people. Certainly sheer survival, sheer physical rescue, constituted our first duty to Europe's most helpless, its Jews. Kirstein gave of his heart and his substance to Jewish relief; he served as vice president and later as chairman of the General Committee of the American Jewish Committee, and was anxious that it work out a sound rapprochement between Zionist and non-Zionist groups. For he looked beyond the emergency. Following in the footsteps of his revered friend, Louis D. Brandeis, he drew from the events of his last decade of life a passionate concern for the potentialities of this resurrected ancestral homeland. Whether Zionism could furnish the complete answer to Jewish need, he had his serious doubts. But he was convinced that it must constitute a central part of any finally effective answer. As his Jewishness thus widened and deepened, it maintained for him its true perspective as an integral part of upstanding, integrated Americanism. He came to feel that no man can be a worthy American who denies his fathers in this land built by the refugees of three centuries. And his interest in things of the Jewish mind and spirit was exemplified by his honorary vice-presidency of The Jewish Publication Society of America.

THUS a survey of his accomplishments must end as it began, with the man who remains an intensely human individual, yet transcends individuality by the symbol he can offer other perplexed men. Certainly in every area of activity the quality of his individuality exerted strong influence. For all his rugged simplicity, Mr. Kirstein was exacting. He was fastidious as to men as well as to things. He could always forgive those who were weak, but never those who were shoddy. He understood human frailty, but despised human cant. He could lend a hand to men who

occasionally faltered, but he could not tolerate those who shirked. Those he admired were the men and women who gave themselves unstintingly, without thought of self.

These personality traits found fertile place in the many fields of leadership which his time, his country and his people opened to him. Certainly Mr. Kirstein was a businessman — if you will, a Jewish businessman, but one whom his fellow Americans chose to follow. A founder of the American Retail Federation, he was chairman of its board of trustees. During the first World War, his country turned to him to assume responsibility for the purchase of all army uniforms. During the critical years of the depression the calls upon him, from the experimental days of NRA on, were many. It was death that ended his service to his country during the present war; despite his seventy-five years, the nation still had uses for Louis E. Kirstein. From President Franklin D. Roosevelt down through the ranks of official Washington, his talents, his integrity, and his self-respecting Jewishness, had won him secure place as active co-worker. In Boston, men of all groups, all walks of life, all classes, hailed him as one of their great citizens. Yet, if the Jews claim him for their especial own, their fellow-Americans and fellow-Bostonians, who also worked with him, will be the first to understand.