



OSCAR S. STRAUS

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A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

By CYRUS ADLER

OSCAR SOLOMON STRAUS, lawyer, merchant, diplomat, was born in Ottenberg, Rhenish Bavaria, on December 23, 1850.

His great-grandfather, Jacob Lazar, was one of the deputies to the Sanhedrin convened by Napoleon in 1806. After the reaction in Bavaria in 1848 his father, Lazarus Straus, decided to emigrate to America, landing in Philadelphia in the Spring of 1852. He settled in Talbotton, Georgia, whither he brought his family. This family, the only Jews in the little town, were received with kindness and hospitality. At the age of eleven, Oscar was sent to the Collinsworth Institute which was also attended by his brothers, Isidor and Nathan. In 1863 the family moved to Columbus, Georgia, where Oscar was sent to a private school. Two years later, they removed to New York, where the lad entered the Columbia Grammar School, and in 1867 he passed the examinations for Columbia College. Upon graduation he was honored with the "Class Poem", and in 1871 he entered the Columbia Law School from which he was graduated in 1873, when he entered the law offices of Wm. Jones and Whitehead, a prominent firm of New York attorneys. Later in the same year he formed a partnership with James A. Hudson under the firm name of Hudson & Straus. There were several changes in this firm, the most notable affiliation being that of Simon Sterne, who rapidly achieved a reputation as an authority on railways and railway legislation. So intense was Mr. Straus' devotion to the law that his health became impaired and he was obliged to give up this work. In 1881 he became a member of the firm of L. Straus & Sons, which had been established by his father and which was engaged in the manufacture and importations of china and glassware.

He made his first essay into politics in 1882, serving as Secretary of the Executive Committee of an independent

group favoring the re-election of Wm. R. Grace as Mayor of New York. He also took active part in the Cleveland-Blaine campaign of 1884, advocating the election of Grover Cleveland.

In 1887 he was appointed by President Cleveland as United States Minister to Turkey, largely upon the suggestion of Henry Ward Beecher. At that time one of the principal interests of the United States in Turkey was the protection of the American Mission Schools and of American Colleges. Mr. Straus, in the early part of his stay in Turkey, made a journey to Egypt, Palestine and Syria and inspected the schools. He defended American and also British agents who were engaged in the sale of the Bible, and gave his warm support to Robert College. When in Palestine, his attention was engaged by the discrimination practised there against the Jews. In all these matters he acted most energetically, and with such marked diplomatic success that he earned the rarely given praise of the Department of State.

It was while on his first mission in Constantinople, at the end of 1887, that he made the acquaintance of Baron Maurice de Hirsch. At that time Baron de Hirsch was in Turkey to adjust with the Turkish Government certain matters connected with his railroad construction. Baron de Hirsch had suggested that the French or the Austrian Ambassador should act as arbitrator in the matter, but neither was satisfactory to the Sultan, who then made the suggestion that Mr. Straus should act as arbitrator, and, by agreement, the two parties offered him an honorarium of one million francs. Mr. Straus refused this offer but acted privately as an intermediary in bringing about an understanding, and it was during the course of these discussions on business matters that philanthropic suggestions were also made and the plans which the Baron had in mind for the amelioration of the condition of Russian Jews were brought forward.

It was in 1888 that an expedition to Babylonia sent out by the University of Pennsylvania under the direction of Reverend Doctor John P. Peters was planned, and Mr. Straus took a leading part in securing the necessary *firman* and in arranging the details with the then distinguished Director of the Imperial Museum at Constantinople, Hamdy Bey.

As President Cleveland was not re-elected, Mr. Straus, in accordance with custom handed in his resignation as Minister, and he returned to New York where he re-entered business.

In 1891, with a Committee headed by Jesse Seligman and including Jacob H. Schiff and General Lewis Seansgood of Cincinnati, he waited on President Harrison and laid before him a description of the pitiable condition of the Jews in Russia. As a result of this interview, the President referred to that subject in his Annual Message to Congress.

During the years of Harrison's administration and of the second incumbency of Grover Cleveland, Mr. Straus devoted himself to two literary efforts. As early as 1883-1884 he had delivered before the Young Men's Hebrew Association of New York a lecture on "The Origin of the Republican Form of Government of the United States of America", tracing the New England idea back to the Hebrew Commonwealth. This was published in book form in 1885, and has since been republished three times, and translated into French. He also wrote "Roger Williams, The Pioneer of Religious Liberty", which earned for him the degree of Litt.D. from Brown University, Providence, R. I.

Owing to the fact that the Democratic Party, with which Mr. Straus and all of his family had been affiliated, declared in 1896 for the free coinage of silver in terms which implied an abandonment of the gold standard for our coinage, Mr. Straus advocated the election of William McKinley, the Republican candidate for president in that year.

Dr. James B. Angell having resigned the post of Minister to Turkey, President McKinley on May 27, 1898, tendered this office to Mr. Straus, who promptly accepted it. The unusual fact that Mr. Straus had received the same office under both a Democratic and a Republican administration was regarded as a first step toward the establishment of a merit system in the diplomatic service. At that time Washington and Lee University honored him with the degree of Doctor of Laws.

In September, 1898, he proceeded for the second time to Constantinople by way of London, where he held a conference with John Hay, who was then Ambassador to the Court of St. James.

It was during the course of this his second mission to Turkey, that Mr. Straus was enabled, through the Sultan, to prevent an insurrection of the Mohammedans in the Philippine Islands, thus saving the United States twenty thousand soldiers in the field.

In 1899 he met the founder of Zionism, Dr. Herzl, in Vienna, and suggested to him that he should go in person to Constantinople to conduct negotiations instead of leaving them to unworthy intermediaries. He also pressed upon him the importance of considering Mesopotamia as a possible area for Jewish settlement. Upon Mr. Straus' return to the United States, the University of Pennsylvania conferred upon him the degree of Doctor of Laws. At the end of 1900 he resigned the mission to Turkey.

When Theodore Roosevelt succeeded to the Presidency, one of his first acts was to appoint Mr. Straus as a member of the Permanent Court of Arbitration at the Hague (1902), to which post he was reappointed in 1908 by Roosevelt, and in 1912 and 1920 by Woodrow Wilson.

In 1903 there was a great pogrom in Kishineff, Bessarabia, in which forty-seven Jews were killed, ninety-two severely injured and several hundred slightly injured. This act called forth great indignation and a mass-meeting was held in New York at Carnegie Hall at which ex-President Cleveland was one of the speakers.

Besides taking part with Messrs. Simon Wolf and Leo N. Levi in a conference with President Roosevelt at Oyster Bay, which resulted in the sending of the famous note to the Russian Government, Mr. Straus accepted the chairmanship of the Committee to collect funds to alleviate the distress resulting from these outrages.

In the course of the conference held at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in 1905, which resulted in a Treaty between Russia and Japan, terminating the Russo-Japanese War, Mr. Straus was one of a number of gentlemen invited by Count Sergius Witte to confer with him and Baron Rosen, Russian Ambassador to the United States, concerning the situation of the Jews in Russia.

Another important aspect of Mr. Straus' activities is the part that he took in the promotion of industrial peace. He early became a member of the National Civic Federation

which was at that time largely devoted to this end. He gave much attention to the work of this Federation, serving as Vice-President and taking an active part in all their work. In this he was in close relationship with Marcus A. Hanna, Andrew Carnegie and Samuel Gompers.

In 1915 he was appointed Chairman of the New York Public Service Commission by Governor Charles G. Whitman, and in this capacity he frequently adjusted and arbitrated labor difficulties, either settling or preventing over a dozen important strikes during the year and a half in which he held the chairmanship.

During the Presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, Mr. Straus was frequently called upon by the President to give advice on diplomatic and political subjects. In 1906, President Roosevelt told Mr. Straus that he wished him to become a member of his Cabinet. In conveying this information the President said to him: "I have a very high estimate of your judgment, and your ability, and I want you for personal reasons. There is still a further reason: I want to show Russia and some other countries what we think of the Jews in this country." His nomination was made in September and on December 17 he took the oath of office as Secretary of the Department of Commerce and Labor.

While he held this office, he resided with Mrs. Straus at 2600 16th St., in a charming residence, which became one of the social centers of Washington. One of the subjects which constantly engaged his attention in his official capacity was that of immigration, and, since the Secretary had a large measure of personal responsibility in the final decision as to exclusion and deportation, he took this matter most seriously and reviewed each individual case before deciding it.

Questions of Japanese immigration and of the attitude of California towards the Japanese aliens were rife and caused him much anxiety, and, the better to inform himself on the situation, he made an official visit to San Francisco and Hawaii during the term of his secretaryship.

After March 4, 1909, when the Taft administration went in, Mr. Straus again returned to private life but this time he did not re-enter business, devoting himself to semi-public activities at his own leisure. But retirement was not

long to be his. In April, 1909, Secretary of State, Philander C. Knox, on behalf of the President, tendered to Mr. Straus the post of Ambassador to Turkey. Heretofore the mission to Turkey had been a legation, and this was the first time that Mr. Straus had the title of Ambassador. He accepted the offer after considerable urging. In Constantinople, he met a new Sultan and a new regime, the young Turks having come into power and established a quasi-parliamentary form of government. Economic life commenced to stir in that country. Meanwhile Mr. Roosevelt, who had spent a year in Africa in making collections, which afterwards went to the Smithsonian Institution, was returning to Egypt, and Mr. Straus went to Cairo to meet his former chief upon his return from Africa.

This is not the occasion to discuss the differences in the Republican Party which resulted in the creation of the Progressive Party under the leadership of Mr. Roosevelt in 1912. Mr. Strauss enthusiastically supported Mr. Roosevelt and the Progressive Party, and he was nominated for the governorship of New York on that ticket. The entire ticket was defeated, both in the nation and in the state of New York, but, in spite of the great popularity of Roosevelt, Mr. Straus ran ahead of Roosevelt in the New York campaign.

Through his long experience and the extreme sensitiveness and clarity of his mind Mr. Straus was an extraordinarily good politician in the best sense of that term. Many people thought that he had a sort of uncanny insight. It is, however, more than likely that in spite of his unusual career, which is but faintly outlined here, his name will be longest remembered in connection with diplomatic and international matters and his intense desire for peace all over the world.

During his third mission to Turkey, Mr. Straus specially devoted his attention to securing the legal status and rights of American institutions under the new regime. A law was promulgated placing all such institutions under the direct authority of the Ottoman Government, both in its civil and judicial branches, including the power so to impede the work of these institutions as to prevent them from functioning. Mr. Straus succeeded in getting a decision from the Council of Ministers, exempting from these provisions foreign institutions of religious, educational or benevolent character.

American institutions had also been denied the right to hold property in their own name. This condition too Mr. Straus had corrected in favor of the American colleges in Syria and Constantinople.

In the autumn of 1910, Mr. Straus returned on leave to America, and, realizing that the differences between the Taft administration and Mr. Roosevelt had become acute, and being wholly committed to the Roosevelt policies, he asked permission to lay down his mission to Turkey for the third time.

He was closely connected with various peace societies and with the American Society of International Law and, as has already been said, with the International Tribunal at the Hague. He urged upon our Government not only that the Hague treaty should be strengthened but that it should be made incumbent upon powers not in dispute also to tender their good offices, and this he especially proposed in the war between Italy and Turkey in 1911.

In the spring of 1913 he undertook with Mrs. Straus what he calls a delightful holiday. He motored through Algiers and Tunis, then went to Sicily and travelled across the Continent of Europe. It is the record of this journey which indicates the great position that he had attained among the distinguished people of the world. He was received by the Mayor of Rome, Ernesto Nathan. He had an audience with Victor Emanuel III, King of Italy; he met Luigi Luzzatti, who recently died; he was received by the great Cardinals Rampolla and Falconio. In England he talked with such diverse personalities as William Watson, Lloyd George, John Burns and Earl Grey, and he accepted an invitation of Andrew Carnegie to stay at Skibo Castle.

In the spring of 1914 Mr. Straus, with his wife, went to Europe and met Theodore Roosevelt and his family. Together they went to Madrid, where Mr. Straus had many interesting experiences. He had always been much interested in Spain and Spanish Jewish history. It was at his suggestion that Doctor Meyer Kayserling of Budapest, the distinguished Jewish historian, went to Spain and as a result of his studies produced the book "Christopher Columbus," a thoroughly documented account of the connection of Jews with the discovery of America. On this last visit, he

discussed with various scholars there the theory which had been advanced that Columbus was of Spanish Jewish origin.

At the end of July, 1914, came the beginnings of the great world war. On August 2 Mr. Straus and his family left Paris for London, where many Americans had assembled, panic-stricken, because of the difficulties in securing money and transportation to America. A committee, to aid these men and women to return to their homes, was formed, with Ambassador Page, as Honorary Chairman, and Mr. Straus as Chairman. In this capacity, he took an active part in straightening out difficulties and frequently worked far into the night. At that time he had intimate talks with many of the distinguished statesmen in England. At the end of August, he and Mrs. Straus left England and arrived in New York. He had many interviews during this period with President Wilson, with the British Ambassador, with the French Ambassador and with Secretary Bryan. He endeavored to bring about some form of arbitration which would put an end to what many already realized would become one of the most unfortunate wars in history; but all this to no avail.

After the United States entered the war, there was an impression current in some quarters that the Jews of America were anti-Ally. After careful investigation of the subject, Mr. Straus wrote to the British and French Ambassadors that the impression was unfounded.

There had been founded an organization known as the "League to Enforce Peace" and this League, of which Mr. Taft was the head, was endeavoring to coöperate with President Wilson and organizations in Europe to bring into existence a League of Nations. At the conclusion of the War, when the conference was called in Paris to consider the terms of peace, Mr. Taft suggested that Mr. Straus could render a great service in helping to secure an effective League of Nations. Mr. Straus pointed out to Mr. Taft that Mr. Roosevelt had been the first to emphasize the subject in his Nobel Peace Prize address. Mr. Straus first went to London and consulted there with various statesmen. His associate in this representative capacity was Mr. Hamilton Holt, and during the entire period of the treaty negotiations, Mr. Straus was most active and helpful in aiding President Wil-

son to secure this portion of the treaty. At one time the plan for the League of Nations was in such difficulty that it was feared that it would be entirely shipwrecked and it was largely through Mr. Straus's persuasive powers that the French delegates were induced to take a more favorable view.

It is not possible, of course, to follow a subject of this kind in detail, but, as I had the opportunity of being in Paris during the greater part of this period and was in frequent conference with Mr. Straus, I can personally testify to the very great aid which he rendered in having the Covenant of the League of Nations written into the Treaty of Versailles. He records the fact that the term "Covenant" was used because the connotation of that word was more exalted and sacred than that of the ordinary terms "Treaty" or "Convention." Possibly his service in connection with the League of Nations is best appraised in the brief note which President Wilson wrote him on May 1, 1919:

My dear Mr. Straus:

Thank you with all my heart for your generous letter of the 29th. It has given me the greatest pleasure and encouragement, and I want to take the opportunity to say how valuable in every way your own support of and enthusiasm for the League of Nations has been. It is a real pleasure to receive your unqualified approbation.

Cordially and sincerely yours

WOODROW WILSON

During this period there was hardly an important statesman in the galaxy that was represented in Paris with whom he did not come in contact, not only in conferences, but also in social centers, especially at the Cercle Interallié, where many important conversations took place.

While standing in Paris for a general interest, Mr. Straus was in constant communication with those persons who had come to safeguard the interests of the Jewish people, and by the very reason of his experience and personality his quiet work was most effective in this direction. Nor was he unmindful of the more immediate interests of his people. Both the Jewish Welfare Board and the Joint Distribution Committee had his constant help in their work during those days. It was in his own apartments in Paris that the horrifying news first came of the murder of a considerable number of

Jews at Pinsk, and no one was more prompt than he in urging steps to be taken to protest against this outrage.

After the completion of the draft of the Treaty of Peace, which included the Covenant of the League of Nations, Mr. Straus felt that his work in Paris was at an end, and as he had not been in very good health he decided to take a cure. While this cure was in progress, Colonel Edward M. House suggested to him that it would be most helpful if he returned to America at as early a date as possible, and he accordingly sailed on June 3, 1919. During the succeeding months he did what he could to aid President Wilson in securing favorable action on the peace treaties by the United States Senate but without avail.

Soon after, he was overtaken by a serious malady from which he suffered very greatly. A surgical operation partially restored him. He occasionally went about and received his friends and, in 1925, he accepted the chairmanship of the Committee to welcome foreign visitors at the Sesqui-centennial Exposition in Philadelphia. He appeared at several public occasions and even made a speech which showed a great deal of his old fire and strength. On December 23, 1925, he celebrated his seventy-fifth birthday and he was in sufficiently good health on that day to receive some friends in his library, and later to see his grandchildren and take a family dinner with his beloved ones, but his health gradually declined, and on May 3, 1926 he passed to his eternal rest.

This narrative is probably a little unusual in that it is almost his autobiography. In his work entitled "Under Four Administrations" published, in 1922, by the Houghton Mifflin Company, Mr. Straus wrote his autobiography, not completely by any means, for there were many important documents and papers omitted; but in preparing this sketch for THE AMERICAN JEWISH YEAR BOOK I felt that I could do nothing so useful for the readers of this book as to condense into a few pages his volume of over four hundred pages. It is to be hoped that many readers of this sketch will be moved to read the larger work .

For THE AMERICAN JEWISH YEAR BOOK, a further word should be added. No Jew in America ever had so full and rounded out a public life as Oscar Straus and naturally much of this was spent in the larger world, but he was not

one of those who felt at any time that his public career demanded severance from his Jewish tradition. He was a loyal member of the Synagogue to which his people were attached; he was actively engaged in the work of the administration of one of the largest Jewish charities of New York, the Hebrew Orphan Asylum. He was intensely interested in the American Jewish Historical Society, of which he was President, from its foundation in 1892 to 1898, and devoted time and thought and active work to its development. He was a Trustee and member of the Publication Committee of the Jewish Publication Society of America, a member of the Executive Committee of the American Jewish Committee, and a Governor of the Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning. He resented, at all times, attacks upon the Jewish people. Dearly as he prized the position in the Cabinet of Theodore Roosevelt, he was so perturbed about a circular issued by a department of the Government during Roosevelt's administration, which appeared to countenance discrimination against the Jews that he informed the President that if that particular circular was not withdrawn or modified, he would resign as a member of the Cabinet.

His active labors on behalf of the relief of the Jewish people abroad in their misfortunes have already been recorded. He had a sentimental and romantic interest in minor Jewish customs which had passed out of the observance of most of the people in the congregation to which he belonged. He used frequently to go to the house of a friend late on Saturday afternoons in order that he might witness the charming ceremony of the *Habdalah*. When he came to Washington as a member of the Cabinet and took up his abode in the beautiful Venetian palace which he rented, he came as on a serious matter of consultation to a friend and said: "Every time I moved into a house my father placed the *mezuzah* on the door-post." He asked, now that his father was gone, whether it would not be appropriate to invite an old friend to take his father's place. This little story may fittingly characterize Oscar Straus's attitude as a Jew. Wherever he was, he nailed his flag to the mast and he never lowered it.