OSCAR S. STRAUS: AN APPRECIATION

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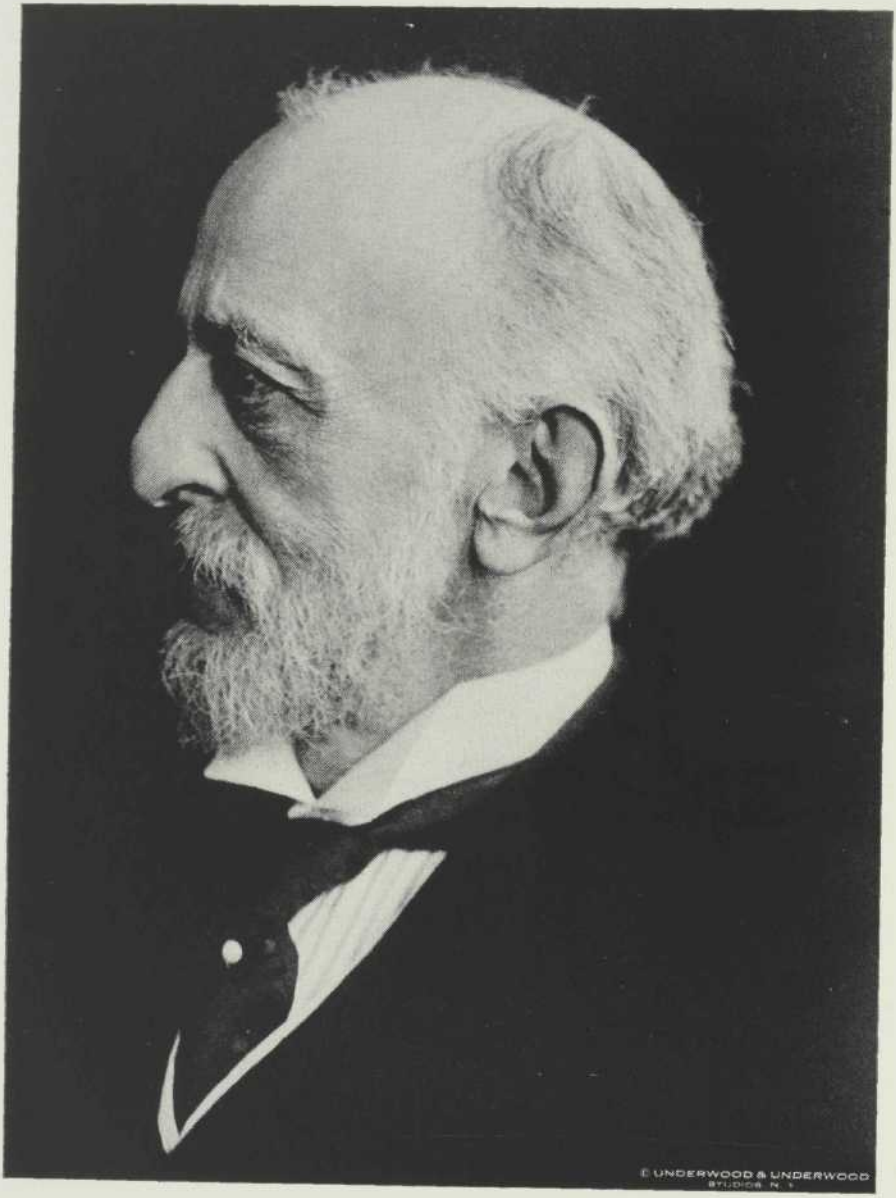

OSCAR S. STRAUS
1850–1926

OSCAR S. STRAUS: AN APPRECIATION*

By Lewis L. Strauss

A traveler in ancient days whose journeys included visits to the great capitals of antiquity — Rome, Athens, Alexandria, Jerusalem — would have noted at least one circumstance which differentiated the Holy City from all the rest. Search as he might along her streets and among her public buildings, there were no monuments to her great men. For the Jews erected no statues of Moses or the Prophets. Not even the captains and the kings were ever immortalized in bronze or marble, as was the habit in the countries round about the Holy Land. This custom beyond doubt had its origin in the prohibition in the second Commandment against the making of graven images since artistic ability was not wanting, and indeed was of a high order. The Jews remembered their great men without reliance upon tangible memorial or physical stimulus to memory. They remembered them for their words and deeds. "There be those," they sang, "who have passed away from the earth, yet whose names are sweet like honey in the mouth."

We have forgotten more men by far than we remember. Why, then, do we remember the few men whom we call great? I think there are four reasons. First, we are grateful in some way to them and, in a larger measure, to the Providence which provided them. Second, we are proud to derive some reflected benefit from their goodness or their greatness. Third, we admire their example and wish to hold it before the eyes of our children as something to emulate. Finally, we dimly realize that in the success of their lives, these men have somehow

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justified the existence of that humanity of which both they and we are part.

The memory of Oscar S. Straus, therefore, does not depend upon any memorial raised by hands. Even now, twenty-five years after his death, the purposes to which he devoted his life — purposes permanent, fundamental, and good — continue to shed their light upon his name.

Methodical, painstaking and precise, Mr. Straus left copious notes and diaries, for the most part in his own hand — a fine, erect chirography — which displays, in the perfection of its letters, the delight he took in the written language. These records fill many files in the Library of Congress and are a mother-lode of information on the important period covered by his long career. The facts in this essay are largely derived from this treasury, but stem chiefly from an autobiography of singular charm and continuous interest, *Under Four Administrations*, which he wrote in 1921 and published the following year. This autobiography is refreshingly different from those in which the author apologizes for the immodesty of a personal exegesis by saying that it is written to satisfy the importunities of friends or to edify and instruct the writer's children and grandchildren. Mr. Straus, on the contrary, freely admitted to the same motive as Benjamin Franklin, saying with him, "I may as well confess it, since my denial of it will be believed by nobody, perhaps I shall a good deal gratify my own vanity." As one who knew Mr. Straus and loved him, I should interpose here that no man was less vain, though false modesty he held in like disregard.

Born at Ottenberg in the Bavarian Palatinate a hundred years ago this year, Oscar Solomon Straus was of distinguished lineage. His great-grandfather was one of the deputies selected for the Great Sanhedrin convened by Napoleon I in 1806. This ancestor, Jacob Lazar, was a prominent member of that body, and his name appears frequently in its proceedings.

Mr. Straus' father, Lazarus Straus, like many another

German Jew, decided that the political events of 1848 made the German climate intolerable. Accordingly, he set out for the new world, landing in Philadelphia in 1852. Later, removing to Talbotton, Georgia, he engaged in business there, and soon was able to send for his family.

Young Oscar, his sister, and two older brothers, Nathan and Isidor, accompanied their mother to Georgia. Oscar's boyhood was enlivened by the simple delights of a small town with its adjacent fields and woods. His early adolescence, however, occurred against the grim background of the War Between the States which, for the South at any rate, was "total war" as we today understand it. The hardship and privation of that period deeply impressed the boy. All his life, in consequence, he abhorred waste, display, and extravagance.

His early schooling, although the best the region afforded, would today be called primitive. An omnivorous reader, young Oscar early mastered the classics — a fact reflected later in the clarity of his style and its agreeable freedom from the literary embellishments of the period. Yet he never had a high opinion of his own literary products. Much later in life, he noted in his diary that at this time, "I was occupied also with the writing of two books. I was not, of course, relying upon my pen for a living. I should not have survived long if I had."

In 1863 the family moved to Columbus, Georgia, where educational facilities were somewhat better. Upon the conclusion of the war, there was a final move to New York and there the young man seized upon the educational advantages of a great city, entered Columbia Grammar School and, at seventeen, passed his entrance examinations for Columbia College. Six years later he was graduated from both the College and the Law School. He then began to practice law, first as a clerk in one of the prominent firms of the period, and later with partners of his own.

His law practice proved at once successful. But so intense was his devotion to his profession that his health became impaired and, on the advice of his physician and family, he retired from practice. After a holiday to regain his health, he became a member of the firm founded by his father and elder brothers, which manufactured and imported china and glassware.

His interests, however, ranged afield. Early in 1883, he delivered a lecture before the Young Men's Hebrew Association of New York on *The Origin of the Republican Form of Government in the United States of America.* In it he traced the connection of the New England Commonwealth back to the Hebrew Commonwealth.

The lecture occasioned far more interest than the young man could have anticipated. Since its original publication in book form in 1885, it has been republished three times and translated into foreign languages. Mr. Straus' interest in New England, and particularly in the Biblical origin of many of the local laws and customs of that region, led him naturally to the study of the life of Roger Williams. He became passionately attached to the memory of this great exponent of personal and religious freedom, and he wrote and spoke of him frequently and with ardor. His monograph, *Roger Williams, the Pioneer of Religious Liberty,* earned for him the degree of Doctor of Literature from Brown University and, despite his comparative youth, brought him to the attention of many of the distinguished figures of the day.

His lifelong feeling about Roger Williams is again expressed in a paper entitled "Religious Liberty in the United States" which Mr. Straus delivered before the University of Georgia many years later at its centennial celebration in 1901. In it he said, "This Pilgrim, the first true type of an American freeman, a trusted and trustworthy friend of the savage Indian, the benefactor of all mankind, was Roger Williams, who accomplished what no one before this has ever had the courage

and wisdom, combined with the conviction of the broadest liberty, even to attempt — to found a purely secular state 'as a shelter for the poor and the persecuted according to their several persuasions.' "

Largely at the suggestion of well-known persons attracted by Mr. Straus' scholarship, the young man was brought to the attention of President Grover Cleveland. Among these influential figures was Henry Ward Beecher, whose letter recommending Mr. Straus to the President has been preserved. President Cleveland in 1887 appointed Mr. Straus, then only thirty-seven years old, to be United States Minister to Turkey.

One of the principal concerns of the United States in Turkey at that time and for a number of years prior thereto, had been the protection of the American Mission Schools and the American College. Mr. Straus distinguished himself in this task to such an extent that he won the gratitude of the Christian Missions and the respect and admiration of the Sultan and his ministers. The Secretary of State recognized his diplomatic successes by letter — a rarely accorded accolade.

An incident of this period is especially indicative of Mr. Straus' courage and resolve. While in this office, he travelled to Jerusalem and there discovered that several hundred Jews had been imprisoned and were about to be deported for no proper cause. Instead of paying the customary courtesy call on the Turkish local official, or vali, on his arrival Mr. Straus dispatched a note to him through the Consul. The note demanded the immediate release of the imprisoned, stated that they had been imprisoned contrary to the treaties between Turkey and the great powers, and added that Mr. Straus would not only decline to call upon him until the prisoners were released, but further, unless his request was promptly complied with, he would appeal to the Sultan for the removal of the vali forthwith. Within twenty-four hours, all the prisoners were free.

It was also on this first mission to Constantinople that Mr.

Straus made the acquaintance of Baron Maurice de Hirsch, the great European philanthropist, who was negotiating with the Turkish Government on claims resulting from certain railroad construction which de Hirsch's interests had completed in the Ottoman Empire — claims aggregating 132 million francs. Baron de Hirsch and the Sublime Porte had reached an impasse and de Hirsch had suggested that the French or the Austrian Ambassador act as an arbitrator in the matter.

The Sultan made the counter suggestion that the American Minister, Mr. Straus, act as arbitrator and that the two parties should offer him an honorarium of one million francs. The offer was made. Mr. Straus declined to serve as a paid arbitrator although the Sultan had obtained the consent of the American Secretary of State in advance. But Mr. Straus, acting privately as a mediator, without fee, brought about an understanding and made a lifelong friend of both the Sultan and the Baron.

The incident also serves to illustrate Mr. Straus' consistent principle of declining any gifts or honoraria for his personal use while serving as his country's Minister or Ambassador — a standard of conduct which unfortunately seems to have passed out of public life. The valuable presents given Mr. Straus when he left Turkey for the last time at the end of his third tour of duty, were presented by him to the Smithsonian Institution for the people of the United States.

Mr. Straus' friendship with Baron de Hirsch later brought about the formation of the Baron de Hirsch Fund, the Jewish Agricultural Society, the Clara de Hirsch Home for Girls, and other large beneficences in the Western Hemisphere which are estimated to have represented a total of $62,000,000 of gifts from the Baron. Mr. Straus repeatedly declined any credit for directing these beneficences. "Neither my wife nor I," he used to say, "wish to claim any credit for the de Hirsch benevolent institutions. We were simply the medium through

which these came into being. We never even suggested the nature of them. We only gave the information regarding the need for such institutions as the Baron requested."

Following President Cleveland's defeat by Harrison in 1888, Mr. Straus, in accordance with custom, presented his resignation as Minister to Turkey and returned to New York to rejoin his brothers in business. His interest in public affairs, however, continued unabated, as did his concern for his unfortunate coreligionists, and indeed for the unfortunate of all races and creeds wherever they might be found. For example, on hearing of the pitiable condition of the Jews in Russia, he joined a Committee headed by Jesse Seligman and including Jacob H. Schiff and General Lewis Seasongood, which laid the matter before President Harrison. The Committee's views so impressed the President that he incorporated a reference to the subject in his annual message to the Congress on the State of the Union.

Mr. Straus remained politically independent throughout his life. An early evidence of this was when the Democratic party, with which he had previously been affiliated, declared for the free coinage of silver in 1896 and, at least by implication, abandoned the gold standard. Mr. Straus thereupon espoused the candidacy of William McKinley and actively engaged in the campaign for his election.

Following the resignation of Dr. James B. Angell as Minister to Turkey, President McKinley in 1898 tendered the post to Mr. Straus. This was the first time that an individual had received the same appointive diplomatic office under both a Democratic and a Republican administration, and this occurrence has been held to be an early step toward the establishment of a merit system in the diplomatic service.

Before his second mission to Turkey, Mr. Straus has recorded that there was considerable clamor that the United States send warships into the Bosphorus "to rattle the windows of the Sultan." Of this, Mr. Straus entirely disapproved

and so told the President. Mr. Straus wrote that President McKinley answered, "I shall be guided by you. I shall support you. I have confidence in your ability and foresight. No vessels will be sent to Turkey unless you demand them and then only will they be sent, and when you get to London, I wish you to see Ambassador Hay and tell him that I have not only constituted you Minister to Turkey but Secretary of State for Turkey and that both he and I will be guided entirely by your judgment and advice."

The second mission to Turkey, while not so eventful as the first, did result in a diplomatic victory thousands of miles removed. An uprising of Philippine natives professing the Mohammedan religion was imminent. Mr. Straus' intervention, which quelled this insurrection, saved the lives of an estimated twenty thousand United States soldiers which was the calculated loss that would have been sustained in the suppression of this rebellion.

Resigning the mission to Turkey in 1900, Mr. Straus was invited on his return to the United States to address a wide variety of audiences. He was enthusiastically received, and honored by degrees conferred by Washington and Lee University in Virginia and by the University of Pennsylvania.

Following the succession of Theodore Roosevelt to the presidency after the assassination of President McKinley, one of the first acts of the new President was to appoint Mr. Straus a member of the permanent Court of Arbitration at the Hague. Mr. Straus was reappointed to this post by President Roosevelt in 1908 and by President Wilson both in 1912 and 1920.

The civilized world, not then numbed as it is today by the repeated spectacle of human ferocity, was appropriately outraged by the pogrom in Kishineff in 1903. In this massacre, forty-seven Jews were killed, ninety-two severely injured, and hundreds injured. A meeting of protest was held in New York at Carnegie Hall, at which ex-President Cleveland

was one of the speakers. Mr. Straus thereupon accepted the chairmanship of a committee organized to collect funds for the survivors. Following a conference of the committee with President Roosevelt at Oyster Bay, the President dispatched his famous note to the Russian Government condemning the outrages and the official indifference of the Russian Government. At the close of the Russo-Japanese war three years later, the peace conference held at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, afforded Mr. Straus an opportunity of negotiating with the principal Russian delegate, Count Sergius Witte, in an attempt to ameliorate the deplorable situation of the Jews in Russia.

In the years that followed, Mr. Straus' interests included the promotion of industrial peace as well as peace among nations. He became a member of the National Civic Federation, largely devoted to this end, and served as vice-president of that body, working closely with Andrew Carnegie, Samuel Gompers, and other leading figures of the day.

Governor Whitman of New York appointed Mr. Straus Chairman of the New York Public Service Commission in 1915. In this capacity he adjusted and arbitrated many labor difficulties, and either settled or prevented more than a dozen important strikes during the year and a half of his incumbency.

President Roosevelt frequently called him to Oyster Bay or to Washington to ask his advice on diplomatic or political subjects. In 1906, he advised Mr. Straus that he intended to invite him to become a member of his Cabinet. Mr. Straus recorded that the President said, "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." In December of that year, Mr. Straus took the oath of office as Secretary of the Department of Commerce and Labor, as it was then known.

Mr. Straus now removed to Washington with Mrs. Straus. He had married Sarah Lavanburg, the only daughter of Louis and Hannah Lavanburg, in 1882. She was an extraordinarily beautiful young woman whose photographs and portraits reveal her as tall, graceful and dignified. She was fond of riding and all outdoor sports, was well read, liked people of all ranks and stations, and elicited affection from all. She was a perfect wife for an Ambassador or a Cabinet officer. She had already borne Mr. Straus three children — two daughters and a son. The Straus home in Washington was the center of a busy, wholesome social life which revolved around Mrs. Straus and which provided a continuous and refreshing foil for Mr. Straus' public activities.

The Department of Commerce and Labor prospered under the attention and interest of its new Secretary. Hardships and injustices attending the arrival of immigrants in this country — a matter then under the supervision of his Department — aroused Mr. Straus' concern. He devoted much time to the improvement of regulations governing the arrival of newcomers to the United States.

An interesting anecdote connected with this period was told the present writer by Dr. Cyrus Adler, Mr. Straus' close friend of many years and his successor as the second President of the American Jewish Historical Society. The story concerns an interview which Dr. Adler had with Mr. Straus at his home in Washington. A wealthy Jew by the name of Moses Aaron Dropsie had died in Philadelphia in 1905. He had been born there in 1821 and had become a successful attorney, one of the pioneers of the street railway system, and he left his entire estate, a considerable sum, to found a college in the city of Philadelphia for the study of Hebrew and cognate learning, open to students without restriction of creed, color or sex, with tuition free. He named in his will, among the life governors of this college, Mr. Straus and Dr. Adler. Dr. Adler had been rather inclined to give the college some general name,

using as a sub-title "Founded by Moses Aaron Dropsie," rather than naming it after its benefactor. When he expressed this opinion to Mr. Straus, the latter said, "Did this man leave any children?" Adler replied, "No." "Did he leave his entire estate to us?" Adler replied, "Yes." "Well," said Mr. Straus, "by God, the college ought to be named after him whatever the disadvantage of the name." And so it became the Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning.

When President Taft was inaugurated on March 4, 1909, Mr. Straus again tendered his resignation, in accordance with custom, and returned to private life. Instead of re-entering business with his brothers, however, he devoted himself to activities in the public interest. But the pleasures of retirement were not his for long. Within a few months, Secretary of State Knox, on behalf of President Taft, offered Mr. Straus a third opportunity to serve in Turkey, this time with the rank of Ambassador, Constantinople hitherto having been a legation post. Mr. Straus accepted with great reluctance and only upon the urging of those who realized the importance of our relations with Turkey at the moment. There was a new Sultan and a regime with which he was not acquainted. He allowed himself to be persuaded, however, and returned to Turkey with his family.

Ex-President Roosevelt, who was at that time on an expedition for the Smithsonian Institution in Africa, arranged for Mr. Straus to meet him in Cairo a little later and a series of events resulted in the formation of the Progressive Party under the leadership of ex-President Roosevelt in 1912. Following the Cairo conference, in the autumn of 1910, Mr. Straus returned to the United States on leave of absence. Observing that the breach between President Taft and ex-President Roosevelt had become irreparable, and being committed to Mr. Roosevelt's policies, Mr. Straus requested that he might be relieved of his mission.

Returning to New York, Mr. Straus enthusiastically backed

Mr. Roosevelt, and was himself nominated for the Governorship of New York on the Progressive ticket. Although the ticket was defeated both nationally and locally, Mr. Straus polled a greater number of votes in New York than Mr. Roosevelt, despite the great popularity of the latter.

After this campaign, and before the outbreak of the first World War, Mr. and Mrs. Straus travelled widely in Europe, part of the time in company with ex-President Roosevelt and his family. The Straus papers in the Library of Congress are filled with the records of the experiences of these journeys and of Mr. Straus' impressions of the important personalities of the day. During his travels, Mr. Straus had occasion to pursue his interest in Jewish history, which was early evidenced in the founding of this Society.

Dr. Cyrus Adler has recorded Mr. Straus' interest in Spain and Spanish Jewish history. It was at Mr. Straus' suggestion that Dr. Meyer Kayserling of Budapest, the distinguished Jewish historian, went to Spain and produced his book on Christopher Columbus, with its thoroughly documented account of the connection of the Jews with the discovery of America. On his last visit to Spain, Mr. Straus explored with various scholars the evidence which appeared to indicate that Columbus himself was of Spanish-Jewish origin.

Of Mr. Straus' warm love for Jewish tradition, Dr. Adler has said, "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 of those who thought at any time that his public career demanded severance from his Jewish traditions. 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 Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning. He resented at all times attacks upon the Jewish people. Dearly as he prized his 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 if that particular circular was not withdrawn or modified, he would resign as a member of the Cabinet."

On the other hand, Mr. Straus himself possessed the same tolerance which he expected from others. In an essay on American Judaism to be found in his book, *The American Spirit,* he wrote, "I do not wish to be misunderstood as claiming any special merit for the Jews as American citizens which is not equally possessed by the Americans of other creeds. They have the good as well as the bad among them, the noble and the ignoble, the worthy and the unworthy. They have the qualities as well as the defects of their fellow citizens. In a word, they are not any less patriotic Americans because they are Jews, nor any less loyal Jews because they are primarily patriotic Americans.

"A Jew is neither a newcomer nor an alien in this country nor on this continent; his Americanism is as original and ancient as that of any race or people with the exception of the American Indian and other aborigines. He came in the caravels of Columbus and he knocked at the gates of New Amsterdam only thirty-five years after the Pilgrim Fathers stepped ashore on Plymouth Rock."

When the first World War broke out in the summer of 1914, Mr. Straus and his family arrived in London from Paris to find many hundreds of panic-stricken Americans without means to obtain return passage to the United States because

of the collapse of foreign exchange. A committee which was formed to aid these people to return home by advancing funds to them, without any security whatever, entirely out of the private means of a few individuals, brought together Ambassador Walter Hines Page, Mr. Straus and, for the first time, Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Hoover.

This was the beginning of the enduring friendship between Mr. Straus and Mr. Hoover. Mr. Straus became one of the earliest members of the Commission for Relief in Belgium, which was the first of Mr. Hoover's great public services.

Upon his return to the United States in the late summer of 1914, Mr. Straus endeavored to bring about some form of arbitration that would end what could be plainly seen would be one of the most destructive wars in all history. For this purpose, he had a number of interviews with President Wilson, Secretary of State Bryan, and the British and French Ambassadors. His efforts and all others, as we know, were unavailing.

Despite this first seeming failure, Mr. Straus' continued efforts in behalf of peace bore some fruit. An organization known as the "League to Enforce Peace," of which ex-President William Howard Taft was the chairman, had been formed during the war for the purpose of co-operating with President Wilson and organizations overseas in an endeavor to bring into existence a League of Nations. When the war ended and the Peace Conference convened in Paris, Mr. Straus was requested by Mr. Taft to represent the League to Enforce Peace at the Peace Conference.

During this period, the last of Mr. Straus' great public-spirited missions, the present writer had the opportunity to live under his rooftree and to observe at first hand his diplomatic skill, the profound respect in which he was held by the representatives of all nations, and his unequalled ability as a mediator and arbitrator.

On several occasions the League of Nations was in jeopardy,

and on one occasion I recall that its existence was despaired of. Largely through the persuasive efforts of Mr. Straus and the confidence in his integrity felt by Bourgeois and other French delegates, the French Government was induced to recede from its theretofore intransigent position.

In this connection, it is interesting to recall that Mr. Straus suggested the term "covenant" to describe the agreement of the League of Nations because the connotation of that word was "more exalted and sacred" than the ordinary terms "treaty" or "convention." President Wilson wrote to him in May of 1919 to thank him "with all my heart and to say how valuable in every way your own support and enthusiasm for the League of Nations has been." Mr. Straus would undoubtedly have felt that the United Nations was the heir of the League of Nations, and his assistance and his support would have been as freely and as generously accorded to it.

Although his visit to Paris was in connection with the general interest of his country, Mr. Straus obeyed the scriptural injunction not to hide himself from his own flesh and blood, that is to say, he did not shut himself off from those who came to see him for assistance in safeguarding the interests of oppressed Jewish minorities in backward countries of Europe. By reason of his experience and his personality, his quiet work in this direction was most effective. The representatives of the Jewish Welfare Board, the Joint Distribution Committee, and others met in his home frequently. When the news reached him there of the massacre at Pinsk, he instructed me concerning the proper methods of applying pressure on the Polish Government to bring the guilty to account and, more importantly, to prevent a continuation of the tragedy.

Following his return to the United States, Mr. Straus did all he could to assist President Wilson in his tragically unsuccessful effort to secure favorable action on the Peace Treaties and the ratification of the covenant of the League of Nations by the Senate. Although suffering from a serious illness which

necessitated a painful surgical operation, he recovered sufficiently to accept the Chairmanship of a committee to welcome foreign visitors to the Sesquicentennial Exposition at Philadelphia. He celebrated his seventy-fifth birthday in December, 1925, surrounded by his children and grandchildren. His health gradually declined, however, and on May 3, 1926, he passed to his eternal rest.

In his first great essay on Roger Williams, which I have cited, Mr. Straus wrote, "We call those great who have devoted their lives to some noble cause and have thereby influenced for the better the course of events." Measured by these words — by his own standard — Oscar S. Straus occupies a high place in the history of his country. Like his admired Roger Williams, he early dedicated his life and fortunes to the principles which Williams, Jefferson, and the Prophets of old had proclaimed and guarded. It is meritorious to die for an ideal but hardly less an act of faith to live for one.—That is what Oscar S. Straus did. The ideal was Human Freedom and Religious Liberty. He did not separate them. The distinction is probably artificial in any case.

If a man be measured by the sublimity and the universality of the ideal for which he stands and to which he unselfishly devotes himself, then here is a figure every cubit a man. Here is a man who needs no monument more enduring than his own acts and words. The memory of his name will long be sweet like honey in all mouths.