

THE OSCAR S. STRAUS MEMORIAL

Washington, D.C.

by Dr. Catherine Millard, copyright 2005.

Introduction:

Theodore Roosevelt, the intimate friend and great admirer of Oscar Straus once said that:

"Every great nation owes to the men whose lives have formed part of its greatness not merely the material effect of what they did, not merely the laws they placed upon the statute books or the victories they won over armed foes, but also the immense but indefinable moral influence produced by their deeds and words themselves upon the national character...It is not only the country which these men helped to make and helped to save that is ours by inheritance; we inherit also all that is best and highest in their character and in their lives."

This is so true and important that its force should not be lost while considering the contributions of Oscar Straus. The passing years bring us new problems, new responsibilities and new memories. The past with its heart tugs and fading horizons gets crowded out of our lives so frequently that it seems fitting here to present a glimpse of the man as the contemporaneous great saw him.

Oscar Straus demonstrated to his co-religionists that a life of public service, of high position was open to them.

It has been said that no member of his race in our nation's history has performed so many and such varied patriotic services, played such an active and useful role in the unfolding drama of our country's development, or held so many exalted public positions of honor and trust as did Oscar S. Straus.

President Cleveland was favorably impressed with the qualifications of the 37-year-old Oscar S. Straus, for minister to Turkey. But he hesitated making the appointment because, as he stated, our chief concern in Turkey was the protection of American missionary interests.

He was fearful of opposition from missionary boards if he sent one of Mr. Straus' race to represent us at Constantinople because most of our difficulties with Turkey arose from her persecution of Christians.

Letter from Henry Ward Beecher to Grover Cleveland

Henry Ward Beecher wrote Cleveland the following letter, and great letter, urging the appointment:

July 12, 1887
Brooklyn, N.Y.

Grover Cleveland
Dear Mr. President:

Some of our best citizens are solicitous for the appointment of Oscar Straus, as Minister to Turkey. Of his fitness there is a general consent that he is personally, and in attainments, eminently excellent.

But I am interested in another quality – the fact that he is a Hebrew. The bitter prejudice against Jews, which obtains in many parts of Europe, ought not to receive any countenance in America. It is because he is a Jew that I would urge his appointment as a fit recognition of this remarkable people, who are becoming large contributors to American prosperity, and whose intelligence, morality, and large liberality in all public measures for the welfare of society, deserve and should receive from the hands of our government some such recognition.

We reject no man because he is a Frenchman. Why should we not make a crowning testimony to the genius of our people, by sending a Hebrew to Turkey?

The ignorance and superstition of mediaeval Europe may account for the prejudices of that dark age. But how a Christian in our day, can turn from a Jew, I cannot imagine. Christianity itself suckled at the bosom of Judaism.

Our roots are in the Old Testament. We are Jews ourselves gone to blossom and fruit. Christianity is Judaism in evolution, and it would seem strange for the seed to turn against the stock on which it was grown.

Henry Ward Beecher



The *Oscar S. Straus Memorial* in the nation's capital. A damsel with clasped hands in prayer, leans her right elbow upon a tableau of *The Ten Commandments*. The sculptor's theme for his masterpiece sculpture is *Freedom of Religion*.

Oscar S. Straus' Accomplishments

It is a matter of record that no predecessor of Oscar Straus to the post at Constantinople ever accomplished so many permanently helpful things for the missionary bodies operating in Turkey. He became the Christians' most able advocate; securing rights to travel and operation for their missionaries and property and building rights for their educational institutions establishing precedents which have been a boon ever since to members of all religions who live in Turkey.

U.S. Presidents' Trust of Oscar Straus

The golden thread of loftiness of purpose and high conception of citizenship is present at all times in the pattern of his life. Its presence made possible his being able to win and hold the confidence and high regard of Presidents so diverse in nature as the rugged Cleveland, the kindly McKinley, the vigorous and decisive Roosevelt; the high purposed Taft, the idealistic and determined Wilson, the easy-going Harding and the incisive and clear-thinking Coolidge. While Hoover became President after his death, Hoover, too, knew him, trusted him and held him in high regard.

The great of the world pass in review in the files of his correspondence. Letters from presidents and cabinet members, prime ministers and ambassadors reveal startling information, but none carries the injunction that it was sent in confidence. His discretion, unfailing good judgment and dependability made such an injunction superfluous.

His active labors on behalf of the relief of the Jewish people abroad in their misfortunes were praised by President Harry Truman, who praised his achievements.

President Theodore Roosevelt stated of him: "I have had from Mr. Straus aid that I cannot over-estimate, for which I cannot too much express my gratitude, in so much of the diplomatic work that has arisen in this administration – aid by suggestion, aid by actual work in helping me to carry out the suggestions."

He earned his high position – it was not given to him. He held it and strengthened it because of his qualities of high idealism, sound common sense, rare diplomatic ability, personal popularity and by the force, persistence, persuasiveness and incorruptibility of his character. These rare and precious traits of character inspired and sustained his contribution to his race, his nation and mankind. The memorial that has been erected in the nation's capital is to honor and perpetuate them and the man who personified them.

Selection of Oscar S. Straus for Statue and Memorial

In a nationwide survey, Mr. Straus was selected because of his service to America, as a great Jewish figure who most deserved to be honored with a statue and memorial in Washington, D.C. The sculpture is the work of Adolph A. Weinman, (sculptor of **The Ten Commandments** – with Roman numerals, I – V to the left, and VI – X to the right – directly above the U.S. Supreme Court Bench. *The Oscar S. Straus Memorial* consists of a circular fountain flanked by two

pedestals supporting figures cast in bronze. The left-hand group consists of a damsel with clasped hands in prayer, leaning her right elbow upon **The Ten Commandments** (with identical Roman numerals, I – V to the left, and VI – X to the right). A child is to her left. The sculptor's theme is *Freedom of Religion*.

Interestingly enough, Adolph A. Weinman's masterpiece sculpture directly above the U.S. Supreme Court Bench, of **The Ten Commandments**, is flanked to the left by a powerful and confident, seated figure, "*The Majesty of the Law*," whose left elbow leans dependently upon a tableau of **The Ten Commandments**.