

PIERRE EPSTEIN

Abraham  
**Epstein**

*The Forgotten Father  
of Social Security*

Abraham —  
Epstein



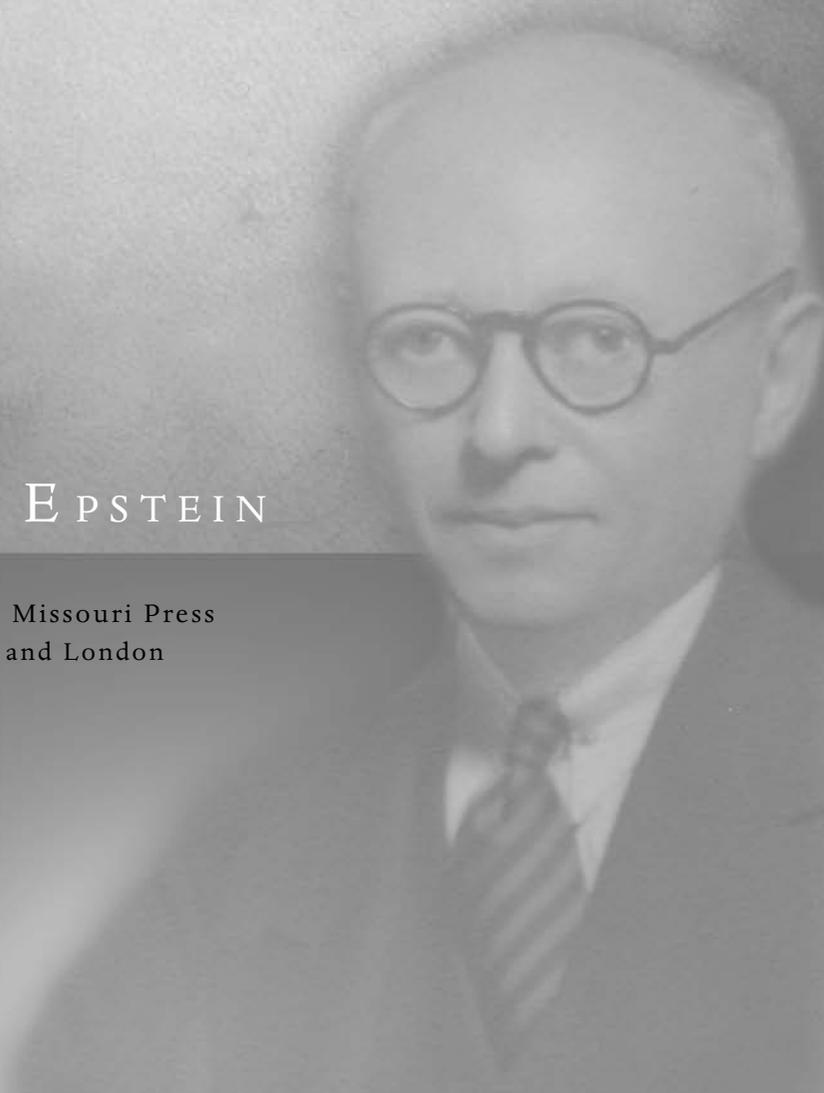
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For Suzanne and Marc  
Clara, Anya, and Jacob  
Grandchildren and Great-Grandchildren of Abe

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*May His Legacy Be An Inspiration*

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Abraham\_\_\_\_  
Epstein

“Abraham Epstein . . . was a tireless social reformer of a type too seldom seen. His vision lives on in Social Security, the single most effective social program in our history.”

—Daniel P. Moynihan, Senator from New York

“Abraham Epstein was one of the most extraordinary men I ever met. He was a rare combination of the Jewish scholar, the Madison Avenue publicist, the Broadway showman, the missionary social reformer, and the determined, persevering lobbyist.”

—Wilbur Cohen, Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare

“If America were as disposed to build monuments to its social heroes as it is to its generals, every city would have an imposing statue of Abraham Epstein. He was a tiny man but a giant in ideas.”

—A. H. Raskin, *New York Times*

“Abraham Epstein did more in my judgment to initiate social security than any other man of my generation.”

—Paul Douglas, Senator from Illinois

“Blessed is he who considereth the poor.”

—41st Psalm



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## Prologue

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1

My mother Henriette's new knee had been strapped to an electrical apparatus that was moving it up, down, and around with a regular rhythm, flexing it constantly to aid in her recovery. But her new knee didn't like it, and neither did she.

"Aieeee!" she wailed in pain.

The odd device lay in bed with her. Dull metal and stained leather straps made it look like a piece of machinery that had seen too many years of service on too many knees, a medieval torture instrument resurrected from some dungeon deep in the bowels of the Hospital for Special Surgery.

A few days later, after her wires and tubes were removed, my mother began to ingest solid food. She was nauseated most of the day and for the first time I could remember did not finish everything on her plate. I began to have doubts. The doctors, both the surgeon and the arthritis specialist, assured me that her progress was admirable.

"After all she is ninety," the arthritis specialist informed me. "You have to expect some discomfort."

"How can you mutate the word 'agony' into 'discomfort'?" I wanted to growl, but I let it pass. His way of speech was just one of the marvels of a contemporary American idiom designed to avoid any emotional differences of opinion. But I let the doctors tell her in person, mostly to find a way to get myself removed of responsibility.

"You heard what Doctor Markenson said?" I asked her. "Yes?"

"Yes, I heard him . . ."

1

"What did he tell you?"

"I didn't hear all of it . . . he speaks too low . . . my knee hurts . . . aieeee! . . ."

"He said you're doing just fine," I said slowly and emphatically.

"Yes, but I can't eat . . ."

"You will soon. It takes time." It wouldn't hurt her to lose a little weight.

"Aieeee! . . . that machine! It's enough. Why don't they turn it off?"

"He said your progress was admirable," I found myself yelling. "Just what they expected. So you see . . . everything's OK!"

"Yes, all right . . . aieeee! . . . that darn machine."

From time to time friends telephoned and asked when they should visit. I answered the calls and told my mother who it was. She pouted and shook her head like a little girl. "Later, later, when I am recovered," she grumbled.

The truth was she didn't have the force to entertain anyone, that force that lay at the root of the charm and talk that had kept her spry well into her ninetieth year. She didn't have it, lying in her hospital bed with her ever-rotating knee. In her present state she didn't want to be seen by others. She would only be seen with her hair done, wearing one of her gaudy print dresses, carrying the customary massive necklace around her throat, and looking, as she always did, like she was ready for a good time. Otherwise, they might see through her, and the whole house of cards would tumble.

No, she had decided that it was me and me alone who she would accept as her go-between with the world. She had thrown herself on my mercy. Now what? It was the start of a new intimacy. And where would it take us? It was only the first of two new knees.

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My mother had summoned me from the other side of the continent, and I had taken the plane from Los Angeles to be with her on the night before the surgery. A taxi had then carried me through the misting, night-lit streets of Manhattan to the hospital. The city that I had moved away from not long before, that I had been part of from the age of six weeks, that I knew down to the last street sign, seemed indifferent to my return. All it would offer me in way of greeting was a wintry, dark, damp and cold gloom. But it was New York. It was my home. And when I went to bed in my mother's house, the peace and quiet of the surroundings became, without her hovering presence, a haven from the disjointed world of the hospital. In her cluttered home I was forced to put a small mattress on the floor for a place to sleep. But I didn't mind. When I awoke my eyes

were flush with the ground, and I could look around at all that I had known since infancy. I was at the eye level of my childhood, when I played my made-up games on the geometric red and blue figures of the Persian carpet.

One morning when I awoke and my eyes fastened themselves on my intimate friend the carpet, my ears took in a transporting sound. The curtains were drawn, the room was dark . . . and there it was . . . could it be? . . . was it? It was a sound I would know anywhere—distinct and harsh, clear and comforting. It echoed in my brain. I had heard it in many places, but in places other than New York it was never what I wanted it to be. The sound always seized and lured me, rolling me into the past. It would draw me to the window to see if some miracle had taken place—and I was always disappointed.

I lay on my mattress, staring at the carpet, and listened, attentive and hopeful. It was a sliding, rasping, grating, edging sound, a noise without echo, without resonance, as if muffled. I got up carefully and meticulously absorbed each repeated rasp. Slowly I parted the curtains that hid the garden in the back of the house. The garden was bathed in white—a gentle casing of snow had fallen during the night and was still falling, covering everything. I turned from the garden and moved slowly to the front of the house. I opened the shutters and looked down at the thoroughfare. And there I saw what I was hoping for. A solitary man, bundled up with hat and scarf against the cold, held a shovel, a curved black shovel with a long handle, a New York shovel. And with it he was patiently scraping the snow off the sidewalk into the street.

Scraaaaaape! Scraaaaaape! The sound flew up into my smitten ears as I watched the man and his shovel move the snow that was doomed to turn from its glorious white to filthy gray and then black within a day or two. But at that moment it all looked radiant and pure, the man, the shovel, the snow. I returned to the window facing the garden and watched the snow fall quietly on every stone and tree. The faint sound of the shovel was all I could hear. Scraaaaaape! Scraaaaaape! It was snowing, and I was listening to a man with a shovel scraping the snow from the sidewalk into the street . . . and at that moment I was a boy again living with my mother and father in New York.

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In 1941 I was seated in a large armchair by that same window overlooking the garden on the day Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and sent America stumbling into the Second World War. Curled up in comfort, I was listening to our grand “Pilot” radio, which when warmed up offered

a mysterious green light that glowed throughout the room. My father was in his study with the door closed, and when he was there I had to be quiet. In the winter gloom I listened to the broadcast of the New York Giants football game with the volume turned down, while my eyes stared at the carpet and its markings, using them to chart the players and their moves as they rushed up and down the field. That carpet had the magic ability attributed to carpets to take me any place I wanted to go. But when the announcer broke in with the news that Pearl Harbor had been attacked, I tore myself away from my imaginary game and rushed to the door of my father's study.

"Dad, something happened on the radio!"

I was eleven, and my thoughts had already been consumed by the despairing news from the war in Europe: Poland conquered, France occupied by the Germans, England under attack, and I lived with those events at all hours, transfixed by the profound force they had on my mother and father, both of whom had been born in lands destined to be ravaged by the armies of fascism. In that room I had heard dozens of refugees tell vivid tales of their escapes from Europe to America, and, mute and unobtrusive, listened in on unending political discussions and countless horror stories about what the Nazis were doing to our beloved France. But there was one incident that had overwhelmed me beyond understanding. It was the day I saw my father burst into tears on the streets of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, as he let slide from his hands the newspaper whose headline announced the Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939. So when the news of the Japanese attack on December 7 came over the radio, I was bursting with the importance of it. Something monstrous had happened. I knew it would affect us all. I didn't know how, but I knew my father would. I rushed to the door of his study.

"Dad, there's been a bomb attack!"

Could I have done nothing? Could I have continued to listen to the exploits of my favorite football players with their short, throbbing names—Ward Cuff, Bruiser Kinard, Mel Hein—like any other New York City kid of the 1940s? No, because I believed I was special that day. When I knocked on my father's door, interrupting him, I was like the Greek messenger I had read about that year in school. I was Pheidippides returning from Marathon.

"Dad! Japan attacked us!" And I knocked loudly on his door.

My father burst from his study and headed straight for the green-glowing radio.

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The snow continued to fall in the garden, the sound of the shovel was a faint rasp. Everywhere I looked I saw my father again, alive in those silent rooms. He was moving as he once had through that space, near the desk he had once used, by the books in the bookshelves, staring out from the posed photographs on the walls, a man to be reckoned with. His owl-shaped glasses. His short frame in his three-piece suit. His balding head.

I was desperate. I wanted him to be there with me again, to be able to turn and talk to him. Yet all I had were his written words.

"Dad, I'm going to read something you wrote. OK?" I said to what I knew was an empty room.

I turned to the bursting bookshelf in his old study, but most of what I was looking for was wedged behind boxes and books, invariably wrapped in suffocating plastic. My mother had decided that preservation was best achieved with plastic. This meant that every baggie that entered the house from the store was recycled for conservation, and that whenever I removed one book from the bookshelf to uncover another book I found myself first staring at words like "D'Agostino" or "Big Apple." I knew that I must not leave a trace of my doings. I needed to replace everything just as I had found it. So I carefully folded the baggies and set them aside, to be used again. Anything not back in its proper jumble might bring protests from my hawk-eyed mother. I could even hear her questioning voice: "Who moved those papers?"

Nervously, with the imagined tap tap of her approaching cane and the fantasy of her looming presence, I managed to extract old copies of such magazines as the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, *Harper's*, and many issues of the *American Mercury*. There were many more I liberated from their plastic coffins, an array of yellowing but suddenly reanimated magazines, all with an article and a byline: By Abraham Epstein. In the *American Mercury*, for January 1929 there was one with a title I thought irresistible: "Is American Capital Intelligent?" Far from being geniuses, my father wrote, American capitalists did not know what they were doing most of the time. "We are rich because we have riches," he ended it. "And were we more truly intelligent, we might be happy in fact as well as in myth." Little bells of delight started ringing in my ears. How had he sensed that the great capitalist disaster of 1929 was lurking around the corner eight months later? God, I thought, how that great American gadfly, the editor of the *Mercury*, H. L. Mencken, must have loved him.

The morning wore on and blended into afternoon, the snow continued, and I kept pulling works from the shelves. Finally, I faced a series of volumes, all with the same title. I had arrived at the many editions of my fa-

ther's last and major work. I pulled the final 1968 edition from the shelf. It had a bright blue cover. Holding its nine hundred pages in my hands, I struggled with myself to avoid starting to read the book. My eyes returned to the title page: *Insecurity: A Challenge to America*. By Abraham Epstein. I flipped the pages again. I came back to the introduction. And then I dived deep into a place where I had not been for a long time.

Ever since Adam and Eve were driven from the sheltered Garden of Eden insecurity has been the bane of mankind . . . it is the grim paradox of our present day society that with granaries bursting with food supplies, warehouses filled with shoes and clothing, and goods of every kind in overabundance, men, women and children go hungry and naked or depend on charity for their very existence. Fantastic and ridiculous as this would seem to a visitor from Mars, it is the stark reality today . . . the great insecurity of our day prevails despite our luxuriant plenty.

I looked away at the gently falling snow, and then down at the nine-hundred-page book cradled in my hands. The words I had been reading hit me like a message from the grave. They came from the heart of this long-dead man, my father, a fruit from his abiding harvest. And in the long-echoing aftermath of those words and of that time, I still bask in the glow of the green-lit shadows of that December night in 1941, and our special union, pressed next to one another, by that radio, by that window, by that garden, when we listened to the news of the coming war that would forever change our lives.

But it was not I, as Pheidippides the message bearer, who dropped dead but the man who received the message, my father, of a heart attack, some five months later.

New York was a deserted city over the long President's Day holiday when I brought my mother home from the hospital, against the grim advice of my former wife and my aunt, who told me I needed to rent an ambulance. While she was still in her hospital room, itching to get away from the bedpans, bad food, grimy windows, and the neighbor in the next bed who hadn't recovered from anesthesia and kept loudly repeating everyone's conversation, I softly told my mother what had been suggested.

"How much?"

"Two hundred and fifty."

"Too much." And she had shaken her head.

"To hell with them, we'll do it ourselves," I told myself. But when the nurse deserted us on the sidewalk I wasn't brimming with confidence. We were alone: my mother, tiny and withered in her wheelchair, clutching her little bag of belongings, and me behind her, numbed but determined to see the trip through. And then from nowhere a taxi appeared at the curb and the driver was Russian. It was a good omen, I thought. An image of comforting Russian nurses came to mind. Primo Levi, the writer and Auschwitz survivor, had written that after the liberation of the German extermination camps big Russian nurses had gently washed the prisoners with soap by hand. The Americans, when the same inmates had come back through their lines, had sent them into sterilized rooms where nozzles had sent out a fumigating gas. Primo Levi was whispering the story into my ear to buck me up.

"Iz your mother?" the driver asked me.

"Yes."

"Iz goot when children taking care . . . mother, father."

Right on cue. For a moment I knew that I could bring this looming odyssey to a calm conclusion.

But getting my mother into the taxi was more difficult than I had imagined. She needed to be lifted and slowly pushed on to the seat. Her knees would hardly bend, and so I moved her like a mannequin into an odd, upright position. She was strangely perched like a bird on a branch at the edge of the seat where it met the door. There was no room for me. I tried to budge her. Nothing doing. I got in on the other side.

As the taxi moved downtown I encouraged myself by exchanging banalities with the Russian. All the while my mother sat, unmoving and uncomfortable, almost a midget, her head barely reaching the window, pressed flatly against the side of the taxi. When we arrived at her door I extracted her shiny new walker from the trunk, unfolded its ugly utilitarian frame, and lifted her from the cab. As the walker sat on the sidewalk, waiting for me to encase my mother inside its forbidding metal, I thought it screamed out to all who passed by, "disease, decline, death." Slowly we inched our way through two doors and I stretched my body to its limits to hold both open at the same time. With her mouth open for air my mother tottered into the old, nineteenth-century brick house in Greenwich Village that had been her home for nearly all her years in Manhattan. I coaxed her nervously from behind as she painstakingly mounted the narrow, twisting stairs two flights to her door, grasping the railing with