An Apology to Pawnbrokers

By Mel Lavine

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In last week's column I made an unfortunate reference to pawnbrokers. I was writing about the unholy alliance of big money and politics in this election year. I quoted Theodore Roosevelt from a letter he'd written to a British friend in 1913. In the letter TR denounced government by very powerful men of wealth "but with ideals which in their essence are merely those of so many glorified pawnbrokers."

TR chose a poor example to make his point, and I was wrong to recycle it. As a friend reminded me, pawnbrokers provide a useful service in hard times by lending money at interest on personal property left with the broker until the loan is paid back.

But I was surprised when a reader wrote that she “assumed” that I “fully realized the atrocious anti-Semitic implications of using” the Roosevelt quote about pawnbrokers. Well, I didn’t. I am Jewish, I was born Jewish and I will die Jewish, but I have never thought of pawnbrokers as uniquely Jewish, and, of course, they aren’t.

According to my edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica, the trade is one of the oldest known to mankind. It existed in China 2,000 to 3,000 years ago. Pawnbrokers come from all races and creeds.

A word may be due Theodore Roosevelt. He was no bigot. Long after his death in 1919, the Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter recalled for the television cameras a conversation with Roosevelt who said, “This country will never demonstrate that it is a democracy in the full reach and range of that conception until we will have had both a Negro and Jewish president of the United States.”

But the last word belongs to the woman who wrote to me in defense of pawnbrokers, namely her father. This is what she said:

“He got up every day whether sick or not and went to work 6 days a week, 12 hours a day.

“He began working at the store while still a child and took it over permanently at 18 to support his families while his brothers were away at war.

“He went without much, so we could have an education.

“He had guns put into his face and kept going back.

“He swept his sidewalks every day and cleaned his awning.

“He avoided stolen merchandise and kept perfect and exacting records.

“He always obeyed the law.

“He charged miniscule interest, as registered by CA (California) state law, especially in contrast with today’s bank cards and payday loans.”

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