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INTRODUCTION

When Jewish sports fans are asked to name Jewish boxers, invariably they will mention Benny Leonard and Barney Ross, the famous champions. Sometimes Ruby Goldstein, a contender, will be added, and more infrequently “Slapsie” Maxie Rosenbloom, a great light-heavyweight champion. And there it ends. Even knowledgeable sports fans have no notion that there were many outstanding Jewish champions and contenders, and thousands of Jewish boxers in the twenties, thirties and even forties. “How was it possible?” they will ask. “It is so contrary to Jewish tradition and culture. It is astounding.”

In fact, Jews entered the ranks of American boxing in large numbers and by 1928, were the dominant nationality in professional prizefighting, followed by the Italians and the Irish. Ten years later, Jews sank to third place, preceded by the Italians and the Irish. When World War II ended and the G.I. Bill of Rights and other avenues of advancement became available, boxing was no longer attractive to the Jews as participants. By 1950, there were virtually no Jewish boxers, and their number has been minuscule ever since. A similar decline occurred among Jewish trainers, but Jewish managers, promoters, and matchmakers continue to maintain a presence.

On the surface, it seems unlikely that Jews ever participated in such a brutal sport. It is assumed that Jewish pursuits were traditionally more cerebral and that education played an overriding role in the Jewish culture. Who would box when he could go to college and become a professional? But going to college and becoming a professional were not necessarily

options for the vast majority of Jewish youths in the 1920s and 1930s. When that choice as well as other economic opportunities became possible, after the Second World War, Jewish boxing rapidly disintegrated.

During the years 1910–1940, there were twenty-six Jewish world champions. This was an impressive achievement, particularly in an era when there were only eight weight classes, instead of the myriad that exist today (to say nothing of the multiplicity of sanctioning bodies). But this success must be viewed in the context of overall Jewish participation in boxing. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s approximately 16 percent of the champions were Jewish, but nearly one-third of the fighters were also Jewish. While there were indeed Jewish champions, Jews did not excel out of proportion to their number of participants and were, in fact, under-represented at the championship level. In boxing, at least, Jews could be average, a possibility that was not available in other sports such as baseball.

At the 1907 Chanukah meeting of the Menorah Society at Harvard University, Harvard's president Charles Eliot stated that the Jews "are distinctly inferior in stature and physical development . . . to any other race." Dr. Eliot lamented the loss, since the days of the Maccabees, of the martial spirit among Jews and thought it would be beneficial if "many of you joined the militia."¹ Eliot's pejorative description of Jewish physical prowess ignited some controversy. A considerable number of Jews perceived themselves as Eliot did, agreed with him, and urged the Jews to attain greater bodily strength and ability. Others were outraged by what they considered to be thinly disguised anti-Semitism, and argued that Jews were no different from anyone else physically.

What motivated so many Jewish young men to careers as prizefighters? Was it a response to the kind of criticism leveled by Eliot? Was there a need to prove the manliness of Jews who had been persecuted for so many centuries and who consistently appeared to be physically helpless and unable to defend themselves? Did the Jews who became boxers believe thereby that they were representing Jewish people or, more pointedly, Jewish power?

Most Jewish boxers denied that they were acting for anyone other than themselves and their fans, and asserted that their only thoughts in becoming boxers related to the desire to earn money, and had nothing to do with their Jewishness or other Jews, except as they were fans. But the responses are really more complex than that and more subtle. From some of the fighters, we discern a sense that in various ways their ethnicity played a more defining role than they would admit or have thought about.

The thesis that Jewish boxers represented the Jewish people as a whole is a theme that recurs, with variations, throughout Jewish boxing literature. In discussing the motivation of the Jewish boxer, Jimmy Johnston, a well-known (non-Jewish) promoter of the 1920s and 1930s declared:

You take a Jewish boy and sooner or later his race is decried. He tries so much harder to fight back for himself and for his people since he regards himself as a representative of all Jews. The knowledge that more than one Jew is on trial when he fights gives him an incentive for training more faithfully and taking greater pride in his work.²

This sense of national mission may have been true of a Barney Ross.³ It clearly was not characteristic of the boxers whom I interviewed. As “Schoolboy” Bernie Friedkin put it, “Who was I to represent the Jewish people?” The boxers interviewed represented themselves and their fans. The idea that they were somehow emissaries of their “race” appears to them as arrogance. And there simply may have been too many Jewish boxers for that. Yet, the boxers’ sense of pride as Jews did contribute to a felt obligation to conduct themselves in a certain manner.

It is probably true that the great Jewish fighters such as Barney Ross possessed more of an overt ambassadorial sense. For example, Allie Stolz, who is acknowledged as the best of the surviving Jewish boxers and who came closest to winning a championship (lightweight title in 1942), also came closest to stating that as a boxer he represented the Jewish people. But while some of the boxers had large followings, particularly Jewish fans who took much pride in their fighters, the significance of their ethnic identity was not as powerful as some writers would suggest.

Related to the “mission” theme is the thesis that boxing helped the fighters to acculturate as Americans. While this may have applied to many Jewish fans, it played no conscious major role in the boxers’ thinking. They were already Americans. Living as they did among Jews on the lower East Side of Manhattan or the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, the vast majority imagined no broader society into which they were seeking entree. They boxed because they loved it and sought to make money, not because they wished to negate the stereotype of the Jew as weakling or to be accepted as Americans. If they were aware of the stereotype at all, they could not have cared less. Even the boxers who fought in the 1920s, such as Oscar Goldman and Sammy Farber, did not think they had to prove anything to anyone but themselves. Yet, as their testimony indicates, there were manifestations of ethnic pride and identity in their roles as Jewish boxers.

The boxers knew of no fabled Jewish worship of education. To them and their families the choice was not boxing or college, but boxing or work. In the depression days of the 1930s, college was a remote luxury, even for second-generation Jews such as the boxers. It is true that by 1936, 11 percent of the second-generation Jews had entered the professions and the ranks of Jewish boxers were thinning. In New York, where Jews made up 25 percent of the population, they comprised 65 percent of the lawyers, 64 percent of the dentists, and 55 percent of the doctors. But the boxers were not part of the Jewish population for whom it was feasible to enter the professions. Even where education such as at City College was free, the boxers felt they were required to work to support their families. And nothing, to them, was as yet more lucrative than the ring. The boxers did, however, for the most part value education, and once they could afford it, a great number of their children became doctors, lawyers, and teachers.

It should not be assumed from the boxers' lack of "national purpose" that they were not proud Jews. They were and are. Their ethnic identity was never in question. Most of them wore Stars of David on their bathrobes and trunks until religious symbols were banned in the 1940s. Usually, they considered themselves part of the Jewish community, and they participated in major Jewish holidays and rituals. They lived at home until they were married, and contributed to the family's upkeep (as did the Irish and Italians). Like 95 percent of the Jews in New York at that time, they married Jewish women and generally remained married.

Jews in boxing encountered virtually no anti-Semitism either in the ring or outside it. So many of the fighters, trainers, promoters, and managers were Jewish that it would have been difficult for anti-Semitism to obtain a foothold. And no matter how grueling the match, there was very little animosity between the boxers. Professor John Hoberman calls it "The Brotherhood of Arms." The first experience that many of the boxers had with anti-Semitism occurred when they entered the armed services in World War II. Their sensitivity to these encounters is described by mild-mannered Al Reid (see Chapter 7).

If they did not worry about assimilation, anti-Semitism, or ethnicity, Jewish boxers most definitely feared the injuries and brain damage that are inherent in the sport. This fear pervades many of the interviews. Every fighter expressed relief that he quit in time, before he was brain-damaged or otherwise impaired.

The economics of the boxers is another topic often neglected. How did they fare, especially if they were not main-event attractions? When Bernie Friedkin quit the ring at age 23 he had amassed \$7,000. That was a lot of

money to him in 1940 and the equivalent of three years' wages of public school teachers. Friedkin fought a number of main events but still averaged only a modest \$200 to \$300 a fight as his net. From the gross winnings, expenses such as gymnasium charges and trainers' fees were deducted. Then the manager received one-third and the fighter two-thirds. If Friedkin's total purse was \$500 and his expenses were \$100, the manager would receive \$133 and Friedkin \$267. When Artie Levine, a headliner, fought in Cleveland, his purse was supposed to be \$15,000. After all expenses were deducted, he received \$300. Most of those interviewed were careful with their money, and when they married, they had established nesteggs that were greatly in excess of what they could have accumulated by working at a regular job. While they were boxing, that was their business, and the boxers usually did not have other employment. The careers of the boxers after their boxing days varied.

In their essay "The Occupational Culture of the Boxer," Weinberg and Arond analyze the jobs of ninety-five former boxers of all nationalities.⁴ According to their statistics, one-quarter held blue-collar jobs. Steven Riess, while admitting that he has no scientific data, nonetheless argues that Jewish boxers ended up better than their peers. He claims that only one of the thirty-six boxers for whom he had information was a manual worker and that one-third of the Jews owned businesses or had lucrative white-collar jobs as compared to 2.1 percent in the Weinberg study. A number became cabdrivers, messengers, dispatchers, bartenders, or, like Maxie Shapiro, never really worked. Charlie Gellman was the professional president of a hospital; Danny Kapilow was a high official in the Teamsters Union; Artie Levine was a car salesman and dealer; Sigi Ashkenaz owned a jewelry business; Sammy Farber owned a bar; Marty Pomerantz was in the shoe business; Miltie Kessler sells imported automobiles; and Joey Varoff was a fire chief.

Was the preeminent position of Jews in boxing during its "Golden Era" really so astonishing? Boxing was part of the urban Jew's effort to get ahead. It provided opportunity, and had Jews not played such an important role in boxing during those years, it would have been even more surprising. Howard Sachar, in his book *A History of the Jews in America* (1992), reports that in 1911, 75 percent of the prostitutes in New York and other major urban areas were Jewish; 50 percent of the brothels were owned by Jews. In 1921, 20 percent of the jail population in New York State was Jewish, and practically 100 percent of the bootleggers were Jewish. And what of Murder Incorporated and the pervasive Jewish mob influence in New York and other cities? According to Sachar, Jews dominated prostitution and the liquor trade in

major portions of Eastern Europe and continued these activities in the New World.⁵ Where the Jews discerned opportunities, they took advantage of them. While boxing was a new activity for Jews, it was no different from anything else that urban Jews were doing to advance their economic position in life.

In 1955, Thomas Jenkins traced the history of the dominant nationalities in boxing, and concluded that the second generation of practically all urban immigrant groups gravitated to boxing.⁶ He thereby explained the ethnic succession of the English, Irish, Italians, Jews, blacks, and others. The ascendancy of Jewish boxers was a natural and predictable demographic phenomenon of Jewish immigrants and cannot be attributed to unusual causes. This thesis is supported by the testimony of the boxers themselves. When other opportunities appeared after the war, Jews quickly vanished from the scene as contestants, although they continued their role in entrepreneurial aspects of the sport, which were forms of white-collar business enterprise.

In the precipitous disappearance of Jewish boxers from the ring, the Jewish experience does run counter to that of the other nationalities whose decline in boxing was more gradual. As to their entering the ring, however, perhaps the most unusual aspect of the Jewish boxing experience in this country, especially to a people whose history is so studded with apocalyptic events, is how thoroughly normative it actually was.