

Settlement Houses to Olympic Stadiums: Jewish American Women, Sports and Social Change, 1880s-1930s¹

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The story of Jewish women in American sport remains scarcely explored in women's history, sport history, and American Jewish history, Jewish American females, as participants and administrators, altered and expanded sporting opportunities for Jewish American women and girls. In some cases, Jewish women even advocated for greater access to sports for the female gender, increasing sporting pursuits for Jewish and non-Jewish women and girls. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, at Jewish settlement houses and at Young Men's-Young Women's Hebrew Associations, middle-class reformers designed programs to promote Jewish American women's physical health and sport as part of the Americanization of lower-class female immigrants within Jewish social and religious contexts. The experiences of Jewish women in American life need to be explored to better understand women's roles in sport in American society.

Whether engaging in sports for physical health, competition between Jewish or non Jewish teams, or representing athletic prowess on national teams, Jewish American women's sporting activities provide a valuable lens to investigate the multifaceted place of sports for women in American culture and history as well as offering insight on the ways gender, ethnicity, religion, and social class shape sporting experiences in international contexts. Jewish organizations in the United States and other countries, formed for various reasons including immigration aid, promotion of Jewish religiosity, preservation of ethnic practices in leisure and foodways, reveal important connections to the kinds of sports played by women and girls, and how some Jewish women and girls made significant contributions to the sporting culture for Jewish and non-Jewish females in local, national, and some times international forums such as the Olympic Games.

Jewish women themselves campaigned for physical culture and sporting activities even within limited autonomy and control of resources at some Jewish settlements and Young Men's and Young Women's Hebrew Associations. Yet most studies on immigration and ethnicity, such as those focusing on Jewish men and sports, fit in the characterization historian Donna Gabaccia presents about gender and immigrant life, that 'most histories of immigrants in the United States begin with the experiences of migratory men disguised as genderless human beings';² by probing materials about Jewish immigrant women, however, it becomes evident that some Jewish American women demonstrated extraordinary leadership and shaped women's sports in their local communities, Jewish organizations and non Jewish organizations,

and even in the Olympics, influencing sport in the larger American culture and the international sporting culture. The tension between maintaining Jewish ethnic and religious practices, and becoming oriented to new American traditions for Jewish immigrant women in the United States emerged in the way some women experienced sporting opportunities suggests significance for other international sport studies exploring gender and interactions between ethnic minority culture and the majority culture. Thus, while this research investigates some of these Jewish institutions playing a major role in Jewish American women's access to sporting activities in the agendas of 'ethnic conservators and Americanizers who wanted "to go after the women"',³ it serves to expand historical understandings of intersections of gender, ethnicity, class, and religion in sporting contexts.

This historical research uses diverse primary materials, including archival sources, the Jewish American press and the American press, Jewish American periodicals, reports from Jewish associations designed to benefit Jewish people in the United States, and material culture evidence yielding information about the ways Jewish American women played sport and pursued physical activities. Jewish American women and girls engaged in sport and expressed interests in promoting their physical health, deriving enjoyment from sports participation, and partaking of competition with Jewish and Gentile women in venues to display their athletic skill. Moreover, at times some of these Jewish women challenged traditional gender and ethnic boundaries in sport to secure sporting opportunities for women in Jewish American ethnic institutions, as well as in more mainstream sites in American society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Jewish immigrant Women, Settlement Houses and Programs for Physical Exercise and Sport

For Jewish immigrant women, exposure to American life and sporting forms occurred at settlement houses and immigrant aid associations in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. East European immigrants came to America and populated urban areas like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia. German Jews, who by the 1880s became wealthier and oriented to American culture and institutions, sought to aid the newest Jewish immigrants to adjust to American culture; German Jews opted to promote assimilation rather than nurturing the ethnic identities and religiosity of these Jewish immigrants.⁴

Jewish females spearheading settlement house programs for immigrants advocated that Jewish women and girls engage in sporting and recreational pursuits as part of their provisions for the well being of the immigrants. In 1885, Miss Fannie Binswanger and other young Jewish philanthropically oriented women founded the Young Women's Union in Philadelphia, the oldest Jewish settlement in the United States. The Young Women's Union served the social needs of Russian Jewish immigrants. The settlement initially opened a kindergarten to serve working mothers and their children. Soon other programs followed at Philadelphia's Jewish settlement house, including a school for domestic instruction, classes in English and reading, and

recreation and sports to give city children a chance to escape the congested city.⁵ Miss Caroline Massman and Miss Sadie Kohn instructed Young Jewish women and girls in calisthenics and gymnastics, and when the new building opened in 1900, 'the gymnasium was used by girls as well as boys' for 'Gymnasium Class'.⁶ When the Young Women's Union moved into this larger facility in 1900, the President reported the need to construct a new gymnasium. Reorganized as the 'Neighborhood Centre' in 1918, the Director of the agency explained the Centre's schedule featured added activities in art, dramatics, embroidery, cooking, and athletics.⁷

To promote spiritual and bodily well-being of Jewish females, philanthropists who founded the Irene Kaufmann Settlement House in Pittsburgh in 1895 incorporated 'many social, civic, health, recreational and educational activities'. The Irene Kaufmann Settlement House integrated women's sport and physical education in their program offerings. Known as the 'IKS,' the settlement conducted activities in wholesome physical exercise and athletics. In the settlement's house organ, the *I.K.S. Neighbors*, a writer noted, 'Many of our girls have asked for the use of the gymnasium and their requests have been granted'. Classes were held in 'dancing, gymnasium, and swimming' In short, for the IKS females, 'Gym and a Swim for Vigor and Vim'.⁸

In Boston, one of the earliest Jewish settlements in the city considered health and physical welfare of Jewish immigrant females of importance in offering services to these newcomers to America. Lina F. Hecht founded the Hebrew Industrial School in 1899; her husband Jacob Hecht was a philanthropist in Boston. In 1922, when Lina F. Hecht died, this institution changed its name to the Hecht Neighborhood House. For the physical well-being of the Jewish youth, Hecht explained that when the Public Evening Schools closed, 'This school is to serve as a recreation house and yard for those who live in the ill-favored streets of the West End'.⁹ To promote the physical health of girls, the Hebrew Industrial School in 1900 featured the 'Soap and Water Club, designed to achieve 'personal cleanliness' for the immigrants. In the 'Pledge of the Soap and Water Club', the member pledged to keep 10 rules of health and hygiene'.¹⁰ Such rules for health linked physical and moral well-being for Jewish females.

From the early emphasis on physical well-being, the Hecht House expanded its physical education and sporting activities for Jewish youth. Jewish identity remained a concern for women workers at Hecht House. For example, at a meeting, staff 'discussed question of taking children swimming during Jewish Holiday, "Tish a Ba Ov". Decided that Miss Kramer shall ask advice of Mrs. Caploe'. If she approved the youngsters swimming, 'Then each child will ask his parent's consent before we take him'.¹¹ In a 1930 report a Hecht house worker stated that in the Junior Mass Activities for boys and girls, activities consisted of baseball, basketball, track meets, camping trips, and prize walks.¹²

Jewish women serving as administrators in settlement houses integrated physical health and wholesome active recreations into their mission to aid

young lower-class Jewish females coming to cities. For example, The Settlement in Milwaukee, founded in 1896 by Lizzie Black Kander and a group of thirteen women involved in serving the Jewish immigrants in the community, was referred to as the Jewish Settlement. When it desired to expand its building in 1900 Mrs Simon Kander, author of the well-known *The Settlement Cook-Book: The Way to a Man's Heart* (1901), based on kosher recipes from Kander's cooking classes, used the money from the cookbook sales for larger quarters. The Settlement's program featured 'classes in English and other branches, some in sewing and domestic science, gymnastics, dancing or other kinds of recreation'.¹³

To accommodate the need for greater space for the newly arriving Jewish immigrants, The Settlement moved to a larger home in 1911. The Milwaukee press described the new home: 'The gymnasium is provided with all apparatus necessary and has Instructors, both for boys, girls, young men and women'. Kander's settlement served as the forerunner of the Jewish Center in Milwaukee, which opened in 1931.¹⁴

The Chicago Hebrew institute and Women's Access to Sport

At other Jewish institutions, females desired to participate in more vigorous and competitive sporting forms. The Chicago Hebrew Institute on the lower West Side of Chicago, organized in 1903 by a group of young men, promoted the moral, physical, religious, and civic welfare of Jewish immigrants and residents. The Chicago Hebrew institute (CHI) in its Americanization of Eastern European immigrants offered a comprehensive range of classes in Citizenship, English, Commerce, Domestic Science, Jewish Culture, Literature, Art, Physical Culture, Drama and Music.¹⁵ Jewish philanthropist and businessman Julius Rosenwald helped secure property for the Institute. President Jacob M. Loeb elected in 1912 and Dr Philip L. Seman, Director of the Institute from 1913 to 1945, guided the expansion and program development to create a thriving Jewish institution, the forerunner of today's Jewish Community Centers. Seman explained, 'The institute is frankly Jewish and staunchly American'. In 1922, the Chicago Hebrew Institute changed its name to the Jewish People's Institute and moved into a new building in Lawndale in 1927.¹⁶

The Hebrew Institute emphasized the importance of physical fitness for males and females. In 1914, in an article in the American Jewish paper *The Sentinel*, titled, 'The Temple of the Body, How the Hebrew Institute is laboring to Make Jews Physically Fit', journalist Bertha A. Loeb stated the prevailing conception about Jews and sport and physical health in the early twentieth century. Loeb asserted, 'The undersized, anaemic "Jewish weakling" will soon be a recollection of by-gone days'. The Chicago Hebrew Institute aimed to establish that 'one of the first activities to be set into being was a gymnasium for the youth of both sexes'.¹⁷ In the report of the CHI *Observer* in 1913-14, Seman explained, the health and social benefits of the Ladies of the English School for Foreigners Gymnasium Class: 'The girls could not quite see what exercise and calisthenics had to do with the study of English, but it did not

take very long before they felt a new life entering their tired, wornout bodies . . . We recognized that the girls, who work hard in shops or in factories all day long', Seman claimed, 'needed physical instructions to invigorate them'.¹⁸

The history of the new gymnasium and swimming pool at the CHI opened in June 1915 reveals the debate on gender about how much money should be devoted to women's physical culture and what kind of sports women should secure. Initially the physical pursuits of girls and women did not receive great attention in the new building plans. But President Jacob Moritz Loeb, wanted to serve the needs of Jews of both sexes, and battled to construct equal athletic facilities for men and women. Loeb and James Davis, the athletic committee chairman during the quest for a new building, believed separate gyms and swimming pools, or 'tanks' as they were called, should be included in the new building. Loeb appealed to Jewish philanthropist Julius Rosenwald who donated \$50,000 for the new gymnasium. Loeb wrote to Mr and Mrs Julius Rosenwald in October 1913. 'We can build a gymnasium for \$100,000 if we build it for men and boys alone but we cannot build it for \$100,000 if we wish to give service to *women, girls and children* (this is for Mrs. J.R. to think about)', and Loeb asserted, 'I have repeatedly in the last year in public and through the Observer promised the people in the neighborhood that they would have a gymnasium for both girls and boys'. Loeb urged Rosenwald to consider the plans for the larger gymnasium. 'I impress upon you the great need of the gymnasium, especially of the women's and girls' departments. The women and girls who are to avail themselves of the benefits which a gymnasium affords in that particular neighborhood', Loeb explained, 'are of the working class. They can get the very much needed recreation to revive their physical strength for the morrow's hard task in the evening only'. Loeb and the women's committee made their case to secure adequate space for women in the new gymnasium.¹⁹

A battle ensued between Loeb and Rosenwald about the funds to be spent for the gymnasium. President Loeb appealed to 'the supreme court in the gymnasium case, namely to the honorable judges Mr. and Mrs. J. R. [Julius Rosenwald] sitting en Banc'.²⁰ Indeed, on 1 November 1913, Loeb filed a 'Petition for Rehearing on Behalf of Appellee *Chicago Hebrew Institute Gymnasium Case*' based on the conviction that the conclusions reached by Rosenwald 'are in error'. Loeb presented Four 'Assignment of Errors', some related to gender issues:

First: The court erred in not rendering an opinion as to the argument relative *gymnasium* for both sexes Four: . . . we fail to see that the 'Better Half' of this Honorable Court either affirmed in or dissented from the decision rendered.²¹

Despite this appeal, in his letter 3 November 1913, Julius Rosenwald disclosed he would not allot any more funding.²²

Although the lack of this financial support delayed the construction of CHI's new gymnasium, Loeb raised the needed extra funds, and the CHI offered some of the best athletic facilities. In the address of Jacob M. Loeb to the CHI on 31 March 1914, he assured members of the benefits of sport facilities accessible to both genders: 'If our boys and girls have shown such wonderful results as I have stated, in an antiquated and old gymnasiums what will they be able to do in a building of their own?' Loeb propounded that CHI opted for innovative plans for a gymnasium because 'Our demands were different than any YMCA or social center building in as much as we wished to accommodate all of our people, namely boys and girls, men and women' and to achieve this 'it was necessary to draw plans for practically two gymnasiums'. Two gymnasiums, two swimming tanks, 'one for the men and boys and the other for the women and girls' required more funding, contributed by the Jewish community members.²³

The opening of the new \$125,000 gymnasium of the CHI in 1915 drew praise, especially for the athletics afforded Jewish women and girls. At the 9 June 1915 dedication for the women's day of the events, Mrs Julius Stone lauded the New Gymnasium Building and expressed to President Jacob M. Loeb and his co-workers 'for the consideration they have given to the needs of women and girls. We consider it a gift and a tribute to all womankind'. Superintendent Dr Philip L. Seman proclaimed, 'For the first time in the history of American Jewish social service, an Institution is fitted to meet a great Jewish need by having a gymnasium second to none in the United States'. In the CHI *Observer* for 1915 Seman declared the Gymnasium offered 'equal facilities for men and women'.²⁴ One journalist even remarked the gym 'Is Boon for Women. . . . In a city where the women have as little athletic opportunity as Chicago this is a great step forward. It is only another instance of the aggressiveness', he stated, that 'has placed the Hebrew Institute where it is on the athletic map'. The reporter observed because women have their own swimming pool and gymnasium, 'At no time need they be inconvenienced by the activities of the men'.²⁵

The CHI gym provided girls a place to develop their basketball ability and competitive spirit. The 1921 team compiled an impressive record; 'The Girls' Basketball Team has played 26 games and has not a single defeat against its name'. The Institute girls won the Central AAU Girls' Basketball Championship and in their outstanding season, 'The Chicago Hebrew Institute girls made 447 points and their opponents only 116 points'. In 1922, the team again repeated their excellent record.²⁶

At CHI's natatorium, females obtained swimming instruction from Miss Sara Hanssen, a noted Olympian from Denmark. Over 300 girls, from age five to thirty, swam at the pool, and many learned to swim from instruction by Miss Hanssen. And with the new ladies' swimming tank getting regular use, the Chicago *Herald* in 1916 in the article, 'Mother, May I Go Out to Swim?' asserted, 'The Jewish girls make particularly good swimmers', commenting, 'It is a well known fact that women learn to swim quicker than men. There is more flesh and less bone, consequently her body is more buoyant'.²⁷

Girls at the Hebrew Institute demonstrated their athletic prowess in swimming, practicing their strokes in the ladies' swimming tank. In 1921, 'The girls' swimming team has made a very splendid record for itself during the season The team won the Open City Swimming Championship of Chicago' hailed as the 'biggest of its kind ever held in the city". In team competitions, too, JPI compiled an impressive record, beating the YWCA Girls' Team in a dual meet at the institute's swimming tank with over three hundred spectators at this meet.²⁸

Young Women's Hebrew Associations and Sporting Experiences for Women

For Jewish women desiring the chance to play sports and use the gymnasium, as well as securing vocational training, the Young Women's Hebrew Association of New York City served as one of the most important organizations at the turn-of-the-century. This YWHA early on offered physical education to immigrant Jewish women. Jewish American women from prominent backgrounds spearheaded the leadership and administration of programs at this YWHA supporting both Jewish culture and sporting culture. Founded in 1902 under the leadership of Mrs Israel Unterberg and a small group of women active in Jewish philanthropy, the dedication of the first building for the New York Young Women's Hebrew Association, took place on 1 February 1903. As a separate association from the Young Men's Hebrew Association, guided by the work of President Mrs Unterberg, this YWHA is the oldest existing organization for Jewish women and girls and classified its activities in 'religious work, gymnasium, social work and educational work' to promote the social and physical welfare for Jewish females.²⁹ As Mrs Bella Unterberg reminded her fellow YWHA workers, 'it is the finest thing a Young Women's Society can start with, with the gymnasium and the basket-ball teams for your recreational work'. The large numbers of Jewish young women and girls using the facilities, from 30,000 in 1906 to 102,000 in 1913 at the Lexington Avenue home, prompted the Board of Directors, to undertake a campaign for a new building. In 1914 the impressive new YWHA opened on 31 West 110th Street.³⁰

The New York YWHA records reveal the sport and physical culture activities available to Jewish women and girls, The new home featured 'a swimming pool, 20 feet by 60 feet, a gymnasium' and 'a roof garden with tennis courts'. In fact, President Mrs Israel Unterberg emphasized the importance of physical culture in describing the new building. She stated, 'We have made ample provision for the physical welfare and the recreation needs of our girls'. Unterberg detailed the Association's new home:

The large gymnasiums connecting lockers and the shower baths in the basement, will hold a class of 200, in, say, Swedish floor work, We are planning regular gymnasium classes under competent instructors, and there will be organized sports, activities that were not possible in our former crowded quarters.³¹

One New York newspaper hailed the Association as 'the most comprehensive program of physical education in the country for Jewish women and girls'. The indoor swimming pool opened in October 1916 and girls enjoyed contests in water sports.³²

Yet, in most of the YWHAs, autonomy of funding, decision-making, and employment of female staff trained in physical education and sports supervision, did not exist and their history differs from that of the New York City YWHA. During the first decades of the twentieth century, at most YWHAs, which were affiliated with YMHAs, women only secured limited access to the use of the gymnasium and they lacked female physical training instructors. YWHAs as auxiliaries typically struggled for funding and athletic spaces. For example, the Louisville YMHA, was founded in 1890 and remained mainly the male domain. A picture of the gym class in the 1890s termed it Ladies 'Gym' Class as if this hardly qualified for sport pursued by men.³³ In San Francisco the YMHA was formed in 1877 and held separate quarters for Jewish men. The YWHA organized in 1914, and the women originally lacked access to the YMHAs quarters for gymnasium activities. However, the San Francisco YWHA used various club rooms and included gym classes, basketball, and swimming as well as vocational training for young women. For Jewish women, in 1918 'the YMHA gymnasium was used for their physical activities', with the YWHA's Monday night gym classes taking place at the Haight Street building of the YMHA, which housed a new gymnasium.³⁴

While Jewish women desired to participate in sport and active recreation, limited use of gymnasiums and athletic fields hampered their opportunities. In 1921, the National Jewish Welfare Board (JWB) was organized and became the national governing body for YMHAs and YWHAs, and the National Council of Young Men's Hebrew and Kindred Associations. The JWB actively promoted the merger of YMHAs and YWHAs and sought to develop them into Jewish Community Centers (JCCs) by the mid-decades of the twentieth century. A national campaign to improve Jewish community life for Americans of all social classes and religious backgrounds occurred in the first decades of the twentieth century; the call to provide physical recreations in Jewish cultural settings within the larger American culture prompted staff of the JWB to work with numerous local communities desiring to renovate YM-YWHAs or build new JCCs. New York Supreme Court Justice Irving Lehman served as President of the JWB from 1921 until 1940. The JWB mission integrated Jewish life, education, social activities and sports for both sexes, with varying degrees of success, in YM-YWHAs.³⁵

Most situations explored by the WB revealed that women wanted to partake of physical culture classes and sports, but faced restraints by male personnel wanting to limit women's use of popular athletic facilities. In several cases, the national Field Secretary for Women's Work, Emily Solis-Cohen, recorded hardships faced by Jewish women in the YWHAs organization and programs. In South Brooklyn, NY plans to merge the YWHA with the YMHA in November 1923 were presided over by Emily Solis-Cohen as the YWHA

voted to reorganize and merge with the YMHA. On 8 January 1924, Solis-Cohen reported, 'The girls also said they had no use of the gymnasium and therefore were not holding their members and had difficulty in collecting their dues'. In fact, Mr Harris, the Executive Secretary of this YMHA informed the YWHA, 'The gymnasium schedule is full, for evenings, being given to the boys, and Monday evenings to lectures. Consequently, for this season', Harris stated, 'The women cannot have the gymnasium'. Yet, the YWHA members wanted to use the gym; Solis-Cohen asserted in her correspondence that she and Mr Samuel Leaf, a JWB worker, 'would take up the matter of the women's gymnasium' in communicating with Mr Harris.³⁶ Women confronted the power of gender and the YMHA board's effort to constrain their activities. Solis-Cohen explained, 'It is apparent that there is a feeling among some of the members that the building is a man's building and the association a man's association'.³⁷

As some YWHAs procured space for their female members' use, they offered physical training classes and athletics like gymnastics, swimming, tennis, basketball, volleyball, badminton, track and field, bicycling, and bowling. The Hartford, YWHA was founded in 1915 by a group of Jewish young women at the city's YMHA rooms. The association grew fairly quickly, the women wanted to secure a place for YWHA work. The leadership of Miss Marion Scharr, Executive Secretary, enabled the Hartford YWHA to administer a full range of programs, and the Athletic Department became a success even though the girls lacked 'proper quarters'. The *Connecticut Hebrew Record* commented on the Hartford YWHA, 'There was good and enthusiastic material for several basket ball teams', but not until the Brown School gymnasium 'was procured, and then for but once a week'. Despite this handicap, the YWHA team was good enough to play the YWCA, and the 1920 Hartford YWHA basketball team wore uniforms with 'YW' on the front of their gym shirts to identify their squad. Miss Lee Gersman, athletic director, offered other sports to the Jewish girls, such as swimming, despite the need to go to the YWCA pool, and soccer and tennis.³⁸

In fact, athletics expanded with the female autonomy of this association. The Hartford YWHA boasted in 1920 that, 'there are two basket ball teams and the girls have picked out the five best players and challenge any team in the State'. These Jewish girls wanted to play and win. Other Connecticut YWHAs preferred 'playing with YWHA organizations', and a game with great significance took place between rival Ys. 'December 14 will establish a new precedent in the history of the YWHA's of this State', a journalist explained, 'when two associations will meet in battle on the basketball court', the Hartford team representing 'the State Capitol' and the New Haven team representing the 'City of Elms. As both Hartford and New Haven are confident of winning, the contents will afford many thrills to spectators'. While admission to the game cost fifty cents, Jewish charities benefited: 'the entire net proceeds will be divided equally and contributed to the Jewish Home for Orphans and the Home for the Aged'. The contest was won by the YWHA of New Haven over the YWHA of Hartford but proved a success for players and

spectators alike: 'An audience as larger as ever turned out for any men's basketball game witnessed the match'.³⁹

By 1921, these YWHA girls practised twice a week, still using Hartford area school gyms. But playing keen competition appealed to the basketball players of this YWHA, and 'the association expects to join the basketball leagues comprising the Travelers Insurance Company, the Aetna Fire, the Simsbury Independents, the New Departure of Bristol and the YWCA'.⁴⁰ The athletic prowess of the Hartford YWHA team continued when the YWHA team, coached by Morris N. Cohen, won the State Championship in 1930 and 1931. The significance of these ethnic organizations for providing access to basketball for Jewish women and girls reveals the need to look beyond white Protestant Anglo-Saxon ideals of sport for white, middle-class women in the early twentieth century. As sports studies scholar Jennifer Hargreaves has written, 'There is a tendency for generalizations to be made about all women in sports from examples of white women', and these stereotypically refer to white, western bourgeois women.⁴¹ Working class Jewish women often participated in sporting endeavors similar to other working-class women; in their Jewish organizations designed to promote wholesome recreation and Jewish identity, indeed some young women excelled in basketball and achieved victories in their team competitions. These Jewish associations, at times promoting preservation of Jewish life, and at times offering Americanization programs, furthered access to sporting opportunities for women and girls, especially those gaining exposure to sports and physical recreations at these ethnic institutions.

Jewish American Female Advocates of Competitive Sports for Women in the Early Decades of the Twentieth Century

In sports like swimming Jewish American females benefited from their predecessors in water sports for women. In fact, Jewish and Gentile women seeking to pursue competitive swimming in a spectrum of settings, from club level to national and international levels, in the first decades of the twentieth century, benefited from the impressive leadership and reform activism of Charlotte Epstein. Thus, an article in the 1915 *American Hebrew* titled, 'Jewesses in Athletics', featured Charlotte Epstein, one of the most important women in the history of US women's swimming. 'For the first time the AAU has permitted women to enter the ranks of competitive amateur athletics and at the Sportsmen's show at the Madison Square Garden. In the swimming and diving events Jewesses have been taking a prominent part'. *American Hebrew* cited, 'Among the entries are Miss Lucy Freeman 440-yard champion; Miss Rita Greenfield, Miss Sophie Fruitage and Miss Frances Ricker'. The article identified, 'All of these young ladies are members of the National Women's Life Saving League, of which Miss Charlotte Epstein is chairman of the Athletic Branch'. In fact, Epstein, known as the 'Mother of Women's Swimming in America', joined the recently formed National Women's Life-Saving League (NWLSL) in 1911, and in 1912 became a member of the Athletic Committee, responsible for directing all competition. In

1913, Epstein became chairman of the Athletic Branch of the NWLSL. In this role, She and her associates have devised several spectacular events and swimming contests which will bring out not only the utmost speed and skill of the young women contestants, but will demand that they show proficiency in running, life-saving, and other endeavors'. Epstein swam in competitions and won in some of the 'Plunges', diving events, and played water polo in her own swimming career.⁴²

Several events sponsored by the NWLSL attracted skilled swimmers and gained recognition of Charlotte Epstein's outstanding leadership. Especially Epstein's work in affiliating the NWLSL with the Amateur Athletic Union promised better competition and organization of women's meets. To officially sanction women's swimming, Epstein promoted the sport to be under the jurisdiction of the Amateur Athletic Union in 1915. The *New York Times* explained that women swimmers permitted to register in AAU sanctioned meets 'may be regarded as a brilliant victory for the fair natators particularly as it opens to them the long sought opportunity of bidding for honors in Olympic Games'. Advocates like Epstein believed women should supervise women's water sports and the Life Saving League 'would place things in its hands' to provide competition for the fair contestants.⁴³ The press still described the women swimmers in gender terms, stating, 'Woman, the Life Giver, is Life Saver Too', or 'Men, Here's Rare Chance to Have a Fair Maiden Hug You'. Not only did Epstein and these swimmers advocate for competitive contests, they claimed the right to wear 'one-piece bathing suits, which they draped with skirts' when not racing for the prizes.⁴⁴

At one of their outdoor swimming contests at Manhattan Beach, with about fifty women competing, the races highlighted the NWLSL's advocacy of suffrage. Indeed, the *New York Tribune* explained that this swimming meet in July 1915 'concluded with a suffrage rescue race, in which all the starters wore "votes for women" sashes. A manikin inscribed "anti-suffragette", served as victim'. Swimmers sprinted to the manikin, fifty yards from shore, and carried it to safety. In this 'suffrage rescue race', the prize 'was offered by suffrage organizations'. The *New York Times* printed the headline, 'Brave Suffragists Save "Anti" From the Sea', and indicated 'the whole thing was a suffrage feat done in connection with the exhibition of the league'. In this League, 'The water women are all good Suffragists, and when it was proposed that, with the other sports, they have an unfortunate Anti-Suffragists they all agreed with enthusiasm'. In this event, Jewish American swimmer Rita Greenfield reached the manikin first; Greenfield 'had the honor of supposing it back to the beach – though she admits she would much rather have drowned it', revealing her own support for suffrage.⁴⁵

To advance the sport of women's swimming, Charlotte Epstein founded the renowned Women's Swimming Association (WSA) of New York City in October 1917. Epstein and a few other members, also business women interested in swimming for exercise and securing pools for women to swim, resigned from the NWLSL to form the WSA, a non-profit club. Epstein explained that the new swimming club was organized 'because the members

felt that thereby they could best further the interest of all women desiring to learn how to swim and those of the competitors as well'. Epstein became swimming club team manager of WSA in 1917, served as Chairman of the Sports Committee, and then club President in 1929, demonstrating her excellent administrative ability and determination to enable the WSA to prosper. As founder of the WSA Epstein, known as 'Eppie', launched the national and international fame of American women swimmers in the early twentieth century. WSA members in 1917 held impressive swimming credentials; 'among some of the members are Claire Galligan, holder of the world's 500-yard record, National champion at 500-yds. one-half mile and one mile, and who is considered to be the best all around swimmer in the country; Lucy Freeman, national long distance champion, holding the record for swimming from Spuyten Duyvil to the Battery'; Charlotte Boyle, one of the best sprinters in the US.⁴⁶ In fact, Eppie's WSA members gained great success in diving and swimming competitions producing prominent Olympic champions like Aileen Riggan, Helen Meaney, Ethelda Bleibtry, Gertrude Ederle, Alice Lord, Eleanor Holms, and Olympian and the first all-around US swimming champion Charlotte Boyle. Epstein reported in the *WSA News* in 1923, the monthly periodical of the club, that WSA girls 'have held the all-around championship of the United States continuously', referring to the National Championships in the senior AAU competitions. The team remained an amateur club. Epstein encouraged the team with the club slogan, 'Good Sportsmanship is Greater Than Victory'. Eppie commented on the club's achievements in 1920: 'The WSA team maintained its leadership in this country, and established its right to supremacy throughout the women's swimming world'.⁴⁷

Charlotte Epstein provided extraordinary leadership and promoted competitive swimming of WSA teammates, becoming the team manager-chaperon on the 1920 Women's Olympic Swimming Team, the first time females were allowed to compete in the sport in the Olympic Games. One of Eppie's WSA club members, Aileen Riggan, the 1920 gold medal Olympic Fancy Diving Champion and 1924 Olympic medalist in diving and swimming, recalled Eppie's crucial role in giving WSA members the chance to compete in the Olympics. As a fourteen year old girl competing, Riggan remembered how 'this seemed to cause great commotions with the officials'. Epstein battled the Olympic officials. 'They had a bitter session but finally we won and the Committee members said they would allow us to go'. Indeed, Eppie's swimmers triumphed at the 1920 Olympics in Antwerp. 'Six of our members earned the right to represent the United States in Antwerp, out of a total of thirteen girl swimmers and divers selected', Epstein recalled.⁴⁸

During Epstein's leadership at the WSA and as Olympic manager, 1920-1936, WSA members accomplished tremendous swimming feats, earning world records in competitions. In the 1924 Olympics in Paris, WSA stars were again a strong group with Gertrude Ederle, Helen Wainwright, Aileen Riggan, Helen Meany, and others contributing to the US victory in women's swimming events. Epstein gained recognition for her work on behalf of US women's

swimming in 1924: 'Miss Epstein is the first woman to have been honored by being appointed an Olympic judge'.⁴⁹ No wonder WSA members praised that, 'no one person has accomplished more in the interests of aquatics for women, nor been more largely instrumental in the rapid upbuilding of our own association. If competitive water sports for our sex have been placed on an enviable standard footing, Charlotte Epstein is chiefly responsible'.⁵⁰

Charlotte Epstein's influential swimming career continued until her death in 1938. Epstein achieved the official position of Olympic team manager of the United States Women's Swimming Team in the 1920, 1924, and 1932 Games. Eppie worked with Jewish organizations with suitable swimming pools. So the WSA team of Olympians like Aileen Riggan and Gertrude Ederle swam at the Young Women's Hebrew Association of New York for national championship meets in the 1920s.⁵¹ The public acclaim of these women's swimming champions appeared in the Jewish and Anglo press, and Eppie's advocacy of swimming reached Jewish youth at the YM-YWHAs and American youth at the AAU and national swimming meets in which many of her WSA teammates triumphed in competitions.

In particular, the success of Eppie's competitive swimmers popularized swimming at some Jewish Ys in the Northeastern United States. At the YM-YWHA of New Haven, in September 1925, an article titled 'Hark Ye Athletes!' endorsed swimming for its members. Jean Greenhouse, manager of athletics, highlighted the achievements of WSA swimmers on the 1924 U.S. Women's Swimming Team in advocating the sport to Y members. 'When we get through with our swimming classes there will be many "Y" members competing with Aileen Riggan and Helen Wainwright for the championship to say nothing of those who will try and swim the English Channel' (referring to Gertrude Ederle).⁵² Other women athletes from the WSA and US Olympic Women's Swimming Team representing Eppie's distinguished teams demonstrated their notable swimming skills at the openings of YMHA and YWHA swimming pools and participated in swimming exhibitions at Jewish Ys during the first decades of the twentieth century.

To advance women's competitive swimming, Epstein served on other important committees in a distinguished record in US women's swimming. She was appointed Chair of the United States Olympic Women's Swimming Committee as well as Chair of the Amateur Athletic Union, National Women's Swimming Committee. In 1936, however, Epstein refused to attend the Olympic Games in Berlin because she opposed American participation. As a Jewish American she withdrew from the American Olympic Committee in protest of Nazi policies. To recognize Epstein's distinguished services to the American Olympic Committee, on 26 June 1939 the American Olympic Committee issued a 'Resolution on the Death of Miss Charlotte Epstein'. Epstein 'received national and international recognition for the part she played in the development of many swimmers and divers, as well as for her outstanding executive ability'.⁵³

Track and field engaged the athletic ability of Jewish females at Jewish Ys and the Olympics. In the 1920s Jewish American Lillian Copeland

attended the University of Southern California, and became an outstanding track and field athlete winning nine national titles and setting world records in the javelin and discus. Copeland excelled in an international meet in Brussels, Belgium in August 1928. 'Miss Lillian Copeland of the United States broke the world's record for the shot put with a toss of 11.71 meters and also won the discus and javelin throws', the *New York Times* reported. Copeland led 'the American women's Olympic team to victory over the leading European stars in an international meet' with the American women's team winning 'the meet by taking four first places of the nine events contested'. Copeland competed for the American women's Olympic team in the summer 1928 Olympic Games earning a silver medal in the discus. At the 1932 Los Angeles Olympic Games in the discus throw Copeland won the gold medal, setting another world record.⁵⁴

The history of Jewish American women in sports reveals that as athletes, advocates, and administrators, these women shaped the sporting landscape in the United States and in some cases, the sporting landscape in international venues. From the early efforts for physical culture and healthful exercise for women at Jewish settlements, to sport programs at Jewish Ys, and even in the Olympic Games, Jewish women in America have been a significant part of sport in the American past. Moreover, Jewish institution, seeking to conserve religious traditions as well as communicate important lessons about American society, influenced the access to sport of Jewish female youth, and as Jewish young women interacted with Jewish and non-Jewish women in sporting opportunities they gained access to American cultural traditions. Sporting activities, therefore, played a significant role in the cultural orientation of many Jewish women. 'The construction of ethnicity and the construction of identity', historian Donna Gabaccia remarks, 'were intertwined, not conflicting, cultural processes of change'.⁵⁵ Jewish women in the United States as proponents of physical training for immigrant women and girls, as participants in a variety of sports, and as leaders in local, national and international sporting events, reveal the considerable impact of Jewish women within their ethnic culture and the majority culture. This study of Jewish American women and sport and physical activities suggests that further research focusing on the historical experiences of Jewish women in international perspectives will yield additional important interpretations about gender, ethnicity, religion, and social class in sport history. Jewish women engaging in sports exist as part of the historical reality of sport in the United States and international settings.

NOTES:

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3. Gabaccia, *From the Other Side*, pp. xi-xii.
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