

Handler, Andrew. *From the Ghetto to the Games: Jewish Athletes in Hungary*. New York: East European Monographs, Distributed by Columbia University Press, 1985. Pp. xii, 140, Bibliographical notes. \$20 (cloth).

Judging by its title, this is a promising book. Its subject, Jews in Hungarian sport, could provide interested scholars with a most richly textured ethnohistory. It has all the trappings of a sumptuous French dinner—just the thought is mouth watering. We are full of anticipation, but when the waiter finally serves it the cook somehow failed to fulfill all of our expectations. I guess it is an unfair expectation since Jewish history in general, and in combination with Hungarian history in particular, is very complex. It must incorporate the complexity of the Hungarian national psyche with all the insecurities and aspirations of an ethnic group newly emerging from the shadows of centuries of oppression and humiliation.

No one can dispute that the writing of a book of this genre is a most formidable task, mandating a thoroughly interdisciplinary approach incorporating social, psycho-, and cultural history. But, then, the author himself felt that “the achievements of Hungarian-Jewish athletes constitute an unparalleled chapter in the annals of Jewish history.” (p. vii). For a claim of such magnitude a mere compilation of the “Einsteins of Jewish sport,” and the book proves that, might not be enough. The book is divided into four chapters in a chronological arrangement. The first chapter provides a brief history of Jews and their emergence to social and economic prominence in the land of the Magyars (as Hungarians call themselves). The following chapters describe the sporting successes of this highly mobile ethnic group from the second half of the nineteenth century up to present times.

Handler, a professor of history, presents an interesting, yet troubling book in many respects. In gathering the data and corroborating the evidence for the impressive array of Jewish achievements in sport the author had to face, by his

own admission, an “exasperating dilemma.” In fact, a researcher into ethnic cultures and their interaction with society at large must face many more dilemmas. In his research the author had to incorporate and synthesize oral histories, interviews, and secondary sources—no written primary sources exist on this subject. Memory is a selective mechanism and many of the secondary sources were written on a rather sloppy journalistic level. It should not come as a surprise, then, that we find glaring errors and mistakes all through the narrative. Those are perhaps the minor flaws, but a historian should carefully check the accuracy of his/her sources. The positive side of the text, on the other hand, is that the author provides names of outstanding athletes, sport officials, and coaches, and their athletic accomplishments. Brief biographical sketches and anecdotes enliven the narrative. Many of the facts, even if some of them are not true, are surprising to say the least. For example, who would suspect that the first representative of Hungary for the initial Olympic preparatory congress in 1894, Dr. Ferenc Kemeny, who later offered to hold the first Games in Budapest, instead of Athens, was a Jew—or at least of Jewish descent. Not that his Jewishness was pertinent at the time. In my view, this fact becomes indeed pertinent only during the Hitler era when both he and his wife committed suicide. There are many more unexpected facts of such a nature and they succeed in keeping our initial attention glued to the book. But, this curiosity soon gives way to some tantalizing questions. Why were the Jews so instrumental in the emergence and development of modern sport in Hungary? Why were the Jews so numerous among Hungarian sportsmen? Why were the Jews so particularly prominent in fencing? And, the ultimate question, who can be included in this book—who is a Jew?

Unfortunately we never receive an answer to those rather crucial questions. It is a pity for even a cursory investigation would find an interesting correlation between the Jewish sport experience and social, economic and cultural developments in Hungary. Recent demographic studies show that in late nineteenth century Hungary where an extensive urban petty bourgeois had just begun to emerge, the newly emancipated Jewish community quickly and decisively moved into the sparse ranks of the middle class. While financially becoming equal, socially and psychologically they remained outsiders. And as an emerging power, the Jewish middle class had to pursue its social and political integration as well as assimilation through sport by trying to conform itself to the social norms of the ruling, upper classes. Not surprisingly, similar developments took place in Germany, where a disproportionate percentage joined the Turners. Also, in light of a desire on the part of this insecure community to identify itself with and be accepted by the Hungarian aristocracy, the whole-hearted embrace by Jews of fencing, which was after all an aristocratic and military pursuit, is more understandable. Again, we find parallels in the dueling controversies of the university *Burschenschaften* of Germany and Austria.

An in-depth study of these processes could provide at least partial answers to some of my questions. However, the basic issue of who should be included in this book is even murkier, for the author in his zeal to increase the number of

Jewish athletes, did not follow a clear definition of Jewishness. Handler utilizes a host of athletes who were born into the Christian faith and whose parents themselves had converted at an early age. The never answered question inevitably arises: are Jews a religious or an ethnic group? It is a problem which obviously is beyond the scope of this book. However, to quote one authority, "some of those mentioned in this book would surely turn in their grave to be nominated as Jews."¹ To belong to an ethnic group is, after all, a matter of self-identification. Among those who obviously should not be included in this book, just to mention one example, is the Olympic champion Kato Szoke. Her mother, who was born as a half-Jew, had never considered herself to be Jewish. Similar sentiments were clearly expressed by the noted swimmer herself. Moreover, Kato Szoke's father became an ardent Hungarian Nazi during the war, which in itself should raise eyebrows about Szoke's Jewishness. Handler is on even flimsier ground in his decision to include some athletes whose inclusion could not be justified on Halachic (traditionally religious) interpretation which stipulates Jewishness based on the mother.

From the Ghetto to the Games follows in the footsteps of books on the glorification of ethnic successes in sport without investigating its subject thoroughly from the perspective of social and cultural history. Do we really need another book about the "Einsteins of Jewish sport"-a phrase coined by the noted German sport historian Manfred Lammer? One's answer might be a resounding "no"-at least on the instinctual level. Intellectually, however, this book is necessary for while it provides neither analytical insights nor definitive answers, it raises serious and tantalizing issues. On the final account, we must admit that a book, any book, not always has to be right-at least not in every detail. It is far more important that it can foster scholarly arguments and point the way to new and more fruitful investigations.

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1. About the factual veracity of many of the data in this book I have consulted with Dr. Ferenc Zold. As an eminent fencer, sport official, and noted sport historian, who was acquainted with many of the characters mentioned in the book, he possesses an encyclopedic knowledge of Hungarian and international sport.