

Berkow, Ira, ed. *Hank Greenberg: The Story of My Life*. New York: Times Books, 1989. Pp. xxi, 311. Photos, index. \$19.95

This autobiography is the first book-length account of the life and career of Hank Greenberg, one of baseball's great power hitters and America's most significant Jewish athlete. A 6'4", 215 pound, first baseman-outfielder, he played for the Detroit Tigers (1930, 1933-1941, 1945-1946) and Pittsburgh Pirates (1947). Although injuries and four and one-half years of Army service (1941-1945) limited Greenberg to 5,193 at bats, roughly the equivalent of ten full seasons, his playing accomplishments—a .313 lifetime batting average, 331 home runs, 1,276 runs batted in, four home runs and four runs batted in titles, 58 home runs in 1938, a career slugging average of .605, two Most Valuable Player Awards—ensured him election to the Baseball Hall of Fame.

After he retired as an active player, Greenberg began a long association and friendship with maverick baseball entrepreneur Bill Veeck. As a baseball executive with the Cleveland Indians (1948-1957) and Chicago White Sox (1959-1962), Greenberg, serving in various capacities, including farm director, general manager, part-owner, and treasurer, helped Veeck win pennants, set attendance records, promote racial integration, and sponsor innovations that challenged the baseball establishment. Subsequent to selling his stock in the White Sox, Greenberg acquired substantial wealth operating an investment business. Greenberg and his second wife retired to Beverly Hills, California, where he died in 1986.

For years friends, family, and publishers urged Greenberg to undertake an autobiography. Claiming that he wanted to accomplish something "really important" (p. xviii) first, Greenberg long procrastinated. Finally, at the end of his life, Greenberg began recording recollections on a tape recorder. By this time Greenberg was in a race with the painful kidney cancer that would take his life. His family asked *New York Times* sportswriter Ira Berkow, author of several books, including a biography of Red Smith, to collaborate with Greenberg on the book. Berkow, still fatigued from his last project, initially refused, but, then, moved in part by the significance Greenberg had held for Berkow's own uncle and other American Jews, he reconsidered. The Greenberg family

gave Berkow the transcriptions of Greenberg's reminiscences, which amounted to 800 pages. The material was incomplete, often random, in no particular order, and not appropriate for publication. Due to Greenberg's illness, Berkow was not able to ask him the numerous questions raised by those portions of Greenberg's memoir that were incomplete, evasive, lacking in nuance, or inconsistent. After Greenberg's death, Berkow resisted the temptation to turn the project from an autobiography into a biography. Instead Berkow edited and rearranged Greenberg's recollections in a largely chronological sequence. Berkow sought to compensate for gaps in the Greenberg narrative by inserting connective material written by Berkow himself as well as through excerpts from newspapers and comments obtained from interviews with Greenberg's family, friends, associates, and adversaries. These parenthetical passages provide ballast to the eclectic presentation.

Hank Greenberg was the most important Jewish standard bearer to emerge from American sports. Runner Ron Myers, boxer Benny Leonard, and basketball player Dolph Schayes may have been as good or better athletes than Greenberg, but their sports did not have the status of the national pastime. A generation later Sandy Koufax achieved at least as much in baseball, but Koufax played at a time when American Jews, feeling more at home with both their American and Jewish identities, did not respond to an ethnic standard bearer with the same intensity. Special circumstances—the social abrasions intensified by the Great Depression, the rise of Hitler and the spread of anti-Semitism, and the coming of age of the children of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe—made the years of Greenberg's public prominence a time when his co-religionists were in great need of a symbolic standard bearer. The actor Walter Matthau recalled: "When I was growing up on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in New York City, my idol was Hank Greenberg. . . . When you're running around in the jungle of the ghetto of the Lower East Side you couldn't help but be exhilarated by the sight of one of our guys looking like a colossus. He eliminated for me all those jokes which start out: Did you hear the one about the little Jewish gentleman?" (p. 282). Ironically Greenberg the man as opposed to Greenberg the symbol was ambivalent about his Jewish fans and the Jewish religion. He felt that the emphasis on Hebrew and ritual in his own religious education had failed to teach him "what the service was all about" (p. 266). Moreover, Greenberg believed that throughout history religion had fostered prejudice and conflict. He did not give his own children a Jewish education. Nonetheless, Greenberg fought against the anti-Semitism he encountered during his baseball years, made substantial contributions to Jewish philanthropy, and experienced a resurgence of ethnic consciousness in his later years.

The Greenberg memoir, despite some interesting insights from his family, is essentially the autobiography of a public man. Ellipses and brief, cautious understatements characterize Greenberg's commentary about his private life. In part this relates to Greenberg's priorities: "Actually, I shouldn't use the term 'my career.' I didn't think of it in those terms when I was playing ball, I mean,

baseball was my whole life. . . .” (p. 197). The major reason, however, for so little introspection about the inner man was Greenberg’s natural reserve. Hank Greenberg was an intensely private person. Aside from a humorous anecdote about greeting the morning with Bobo Newsome’s date, Greenberg eschews titillative vignettes: “I’m not going to describe in detail all of my sexual affairs, but I just want to note that I was very normal in that respect” (p. 135). Nor does Greenberg explain how he emerged as the custodial parent of his three children after his divorce from his first wife, heiress Carol Gimbel. Likewise, one wishes Berkow had the opportunity to question and prod Greenberg about a variety of topics that he keeps at an emotional distance, including the meticulous attention he gave to finances, the morality of the Tigers stealing signals during the 1940 season through a telescopic sight mounted on a hunting rifle, his advocacy of corporal punishment, his feelings about his own father signing autographs as the progenitor of a celebrity and doing so in Hebrew, discussions during frequent nights out with J. Edgar Hoover, political loyalties, and his trip to Israel during his seventieth year. Even had Berkow raised these and other matters with Greenberg, intimate revelations would not have come easily from a man who hid his terminal illness and the excruciating pain it brought from his closest friends and some of his own family. While the book lacks both the critical analysis and extensive data base of a monograph, the presentation is, nonetheless, interesting, intelligent, lucid, honorable, and complex as was the life it chronicles.

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