

# **Sport, Recreation and Gender: Jewish Immigrant Women in Turn-of-the-Century America (1880-1920)**

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The period from roughly 1880 to 1920 has often been considered one of the most tumultuous periods in history. With unbridled optimism and belief in the providential destiny of the nation, and fueling an economic expansion on a scale unheard of before, wave upon wave of human masses arrived at the gates of America. A brilliant meeting and meshing of old-line Anglo-Saxon cultural and political values and of vibrant new ideas from the Old Continent took place in these forty years. American society provided these immigrants with unlimited opportunities in expanding their economic, human, and intellectual horizons. In turn, the newly arrived formed and reformed the face of American culture and society.

Among the sparsely charted territories of this epoch, the story of newly arrived immigrant women is especially intriguing. The purpose of this study is to investigate the recreational and sporting habits of the Jewish community during the turn-of-the-century with a special emphasis on Jewish immigrant women. Closed in by society's mores and a particular ethnic value system, women's emergence in such diverse social institutions as religion, occupation, housing, education, and, of course, sport can be instructive as to how American civilization evolved. Among the many curious stories of settling America none is more obscure than the role recreational activities, exercise, and sport played in the lives of newly arriving women in their ethnic communities. Also the question of how society attempted to use sport in molding these diverse individuals into a coherent national and social entity, and how these groups responded to attempts at acculturation still needs to be answered.

To claim that Jewish women's experiences in America are unique is perhaps stating the obvious. After all, the history of all ethnic groups in American society is complex and highly diverse. One is always confronted by two often contradictory sets of factors. We must first peel off layers of economic, cultural and societal factors promoted by the dominant culture. And after that, there is still a curious mixture of religious, cultural, and ethnic heritage with which these immigrants arrived on the shores of their new country. This second set of

factors is what makes the experiences of each individual ethnic and immigrant group unique.

An etching of women's lives, a course of their history, and their participation in various societal institutions (such as religion, education, housing, sports, etc.), within contemporary ethnic communities harbors even more complex lines. These lines create two concentric circles that surrounded women. On the one hand, immigrant women came to face an advanced industrial society with a strong attachment to Protestant religious ideas. They were obviously influenced by the host country's dominant norms and values. On the other hand, as ethnic individuals, their role in society, community, and the family was also defined tentatively by their group's religious, cultural, and political value system. As to how fast and how far a woman advanced within the new environment depended at least as much on the latter as on the former. Thus Jeanne Nobel's opinion about the status of black women in history is perhaps also characteristic to women of all ethnic groups. She noted that they "labored under the double handicap of race and sex—a Negro in a white world and a female in a male world."<sup>1</sup>

The story of Jewish girls and women, and their recreational and sporting culture, can be told in similar terms. Yet there were additional ingredients which set them apart from other women as well as their male "landsman's" experiences.\* Gender relations after all were based on a very unique Jewish perception of the role and place of women within the community and the family. These values differed greatly not only from that of society but from those of other ethnic groups as well. Also, the role and importance assigned to physical culture in the hierarchy of Jewish values were markedly different from those of the Irish, Italian, or Poles.

This last statement may need some clarification. The concept of "recreational and sporting habits" themselves will not fit completely a contemporary definition. This is due only partly to the fact that competitive sports and athletics were overwhelmingly a male domain during this period. More importantly, we must recognize that a unique Jewish understanding of these terms differed drastically from that of society at large. One of the most distinguishing notes of the newly arriving Jewish women from Eastern Europe was their complete lack of a "sport" consciousness. Many ethnic women had some opportunities to participate in various club activities brought over from the old country—German women (and among them many Jews) in the Turnvereine, Czechs in the Sokol, Irish in Hibernian societies, etc. Russian and Polish Jews brought with them neither a gymnastic movement nor a sport tradition. Even folk dances and national games (brought by Italians for example), save perhaps some Purim games, were notably absent from the Jewish immigrant "baggage." It is true that many German Jews were founders of the Turnvereine in America—especially in New York and San Francisco. But their participation can be attributed more to their quest for

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1. Jeanne L. Noble, *The Negro Woman's College Education* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), p. 26.

2. "Landsman" is a Yiddish term signifying a person from the same country, municipality, or geographical area. "Landsleit" is a group of people.

assimilation and societal acceptance through sport than to a deep-seated conviction in this social institution.<sup>3</sup> This seeming contradiction belies a basic philosophical strain in Jewish thought which always viewed sport with a certain degree of ambivalence. Going “deep into the recesses of the Jewish psyche,” as the historian Irving Howe so eloquently phrased it, it was part of an intellectual “inheritance”—part of a pronounced ambiguity toward the “physical” and the body in general. Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog characterized the shtetl in their classic anthropological study, as a place where physical violence was always considered “un-Jewish.” Sport and the body in this larger philosophical picture occupied a place only as a physical manifestation of existence. Thus spiritual over the sensual and physical was always a cornerstone of Jewish religious and communal ethic. Simultaneously, however, the recognition that mind and body are inseparable and that one affects the other was also ingrained in Jewish consciousness. Jewish religious philosophy believed in the care of the body as an integral part of health. Maimonides, the most influential Jewish teacher of the Middle Ages, promoted not only hygiene but also exercise, though with moderation. Nevertheless, the overwhelming belief was that the “intellect, a sense of moderation, cherishing of spiritual values and the cultivation of rational, goal-directed activities,” would be central to legitimate Jewish conduct. “Emphasis on the body, excess, blind instinct . . .” were looked upon with suspicion and ambiguity.<sup>4</sup>

The newly arriving Russian and Polish Jews accepted sports and games as a means of Americanization which they embraced wholeheartedly, but not more than that. A distraught father expressed the feelings of many immigrant fathers in the Jewish quarter by writing to the Yiddish paper, *Forward* in 1903, that “It makes sense to teach a child to play dominoes or chess. But what is the point of a crazy game like baseball? . . . I want my boy to grow up to be a mensch [a good human being], not a wild American runner.” The response of the socialist paper was to let the boy play baseball as long as it did not interfere with his education. Chess is good, but the body also needs to develop. “The Irish boys want to be boxers and the Jews-debaters.” Besides, baseball develops the arms, legs, and eyesight. And, the paper concluded: “it is played in the fresh air.”<sup>5</sup>

3. Andrew Handler, *From the Ghetto to the Games: Jewish Athletes in Hungary* (New York: Columbia University Press, East European Monograph Series, 1985); George Eisen, “Maccabiah Games: A History of the Jewish Olympics,” Ph.D. diss. University of Maryland, 1979; George Eisen, “A Brief History of the American Turner Movement,” paper presented at the Annual Convention of the North American Society for Sport History, Eugene, Oregon, 1976; Roberta J. Park, “San Franciscans at Work and at Play, 1846-1869,” *Journal of the West* 22 (January 1983): 44-51.

4. Shtetl might be defined both in geographical as well as organizational terms. It refers to small-town Jewish communities with their typical religious and communal institutions. Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life is With People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (New York: International University Press, 1952), pp. 149, 340-1; *American Hebrew*, July 3, 1908; *Wahrheit*, August 1, 1912. For an excellent analysis about the Christian view of the body see Jean Delumeau, *Sin and Fear, The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture, 13th-18th Centuries*, trans. Eric Nicholson (New York: St. Martin, 1989); Meir Bakshi, “Physical Culture in the Writings of Maimonides,” in the proceedings of an *International Seminar on Physical Education and Sport in the Jewish History and Culture*. Wingate Institute, 1973. European-Jewish attitudes toward sport was discussed by John M. Hoberman, “Sport and the Myth of the ‘Jewish’ Body,” paper presented at the North American Society for Sports History, Clemson, SC, 1989.

5. *Forward*, August 6, 1903, quoted by Irving Howe and Kenneth Libo, *How We Lived, A Documentary History of Immigrant Jews in America, 1880-1930* (New York: Richard Marek, 1979), pp. 51-52. According to

This perception of physical activity, based on moderation and common sense, also defined spontaneous and organized sport participation and recreational pursuits for girls and women. Within the confines of their communal values, the opportunities for their sport and recreation were inevitably governed by their own intuitive aspiration for fun and diversions or by the well-defined goals of educational institutions whose main concern was the mental and physical health of the newcomers. In the first instance, the most natural and immediate response of the children and young women was to escape the overcrowded, unhealthy, and stifling tenement houses. Children "often were not old enough to work and [had] no room to play" in the small apartments, overflowing into the streets. Jewish families settled in so called "dumbbell" houses; three room apartments in which only one room received light or air. Because of a high fertility rate among Jews from Eastern Europe large families were the rule rather than the exception. Thus, the rooms were a combined sitting room, parlor, and workroom. At night a family and several boarders converted the entire space into a bedroom. Yetta Adelman remembered "ten girls sleeping on the floor."<sup>6</sup>

To most youngsters, including Hilda Satt, the only space that remained, then, was the streets. "Here I played my first American game, which was called 'run sheep run.' " At least in her neighborhood in Chicago there was very little traffic, save an occasional horse and wagon, so they were fairly safe for play. The asphalt coated streets proved to be irresistible for the children everywhere. But in New York, an eyewitness recorded, "you are in constant dread, lest some of the children be run over. . . . On fair days and evenings, children crowd the street, playing their various games."<sup>7</sup> The faded photographs from the Lower East Side (Hester Street, Henry Street, Orchard Street and elsewhere) testify to much more animated street life. It is little wonder that Jacob Riis, one of the most passionate chroniclers of children's lives in the Lower East Side, captioned a picture of Hester Street, "the school children's only playground." These street scenes breathe an almost Brueghelian quality: little girls skipping ropes, dancing, running, bouncing a ball in front of the dilapidated tenement houses. Mike Gold, a young urchin growing up in the Lower East Side, described a street scene as his sister and her friends immersed themselves in a frenetic dance to the tunes of a poor Italian organ grinder. They could even forget the forlorn surrounding:

My sister Esther is dancing with Lilly. The sun blazes. The street roars. My sister's face is flushed with joy. In her ecstasy she does not see me. Her pigtailed fly as she jogs in and out the mazes of a Morris dance. There are other dark little

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Eddie Cantor, "To pious people of the ghetto a baseball player was the king of loafers." Irving Howe, *The World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), pp. 182-8; and Steven A. Riess, *City Games, The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sport* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), pp. 104-5.

6. Hilda Polachek-Satt, *I Came a Stranger, the Story of a Hull House Girl* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), p. 30; Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985), pp. 150-51.

7. Milton Hindus, *The Old Eastside* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969), pp. 100; Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* (New York: Horace Liveright, 1930), p. 51.

skinny girls. Their little bodies are aflame with rhythm. They have followed the hand organ from street to street, but after hours of dancing are still unsated.<sup>8</sup>

“The streets,” as the journalist Catharine Brody put it, “were the true homes of the [city’s] small Italians, Irish, and Jews.” The little girls and boys observed and soaked up the colorful life of the city. But while these streets seems suitable enough, endlessly absorbing for the children, officials, educators, social and health reformers were genuinely concerned because of the crowded and unhealthy conditions within the tenement houses as well as the demoralizing influences these streets exerted upon the morals of the young girls. Among them the corrupting influence of saloons, illegal gambling establishments, and thriving prostitution which afflicted many Jewish neighborhoods, rated prominently in the minds of these civic leaders. The *American Hebrew* noted that Allen Street, in the heart of the Lower Eastside, “was infamous for its immorality and vice.” Benjamin Antin, an eyewitness explained that in this street, traversing the Lower East Side, “there were a hundred women on every corner.” Contemporary sources place the percentage of pre-World War I Jewish prostitutes in New York alone at close to twenty percent and in the Lower East Side proper at least two thirds of the men and women engaged in the business of prostitution were Jews. While it is difficult to ascertain the accuracy of these estimates, prostitution seemed to be fairly widespread among Jewish women during the turn-of-the-century.<sup>9</sup>

The demoralizing influence of the street was not limited to children alone, and young women were often warned about its moral dangers. In the minds of social reformers there were temptations everywhere, even in such popular and apparently harmless diversions as “balls.” Dance in general became perhaps the most popular form of physical activity and recreation for many Jewish women. Belle Israels, writing in *Survey Magazine*, exclaimed, “the town is dance mad . . .” Dances on the grassroot level were organized by unions, social and political organizations or neighborhood Landsmanshaft societies. Contrary to the Germans, Scots, Irish, and other immigrant groups, Jews did not bring these organizations with them. Although a high percentage of the Jewish immigrants were politically highly motivated—especially toward political and labor radicalism—life in Eastern Europe revolved more around religious than secular institutions. Thus, after settling in America the new immigrants first task was to establish social clubs, political circles, and mutual-aid societies. Within the confines of city life, they provided entertainment, psychological support in a turbulent transition, as well as a social outlet for the youth. Bella Feiner had warm memories about this period of her life:

I loved life and was anxious to go to dances . . . I didn’t go to dance halls but to

8. Gold, *Jews Without Money*, p. 51.

9. Catharine Brody, “A New York Childhood,” *The American Mercury* XIV (1928): 57. See also David Nasaw, *Children of the City: At Work and At Play* (New York: Doubleday/Anchor Press, 1985) and Colin Ward, *The Child in the City* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); *American Hebrew*, March 8, 1929; Benjamin Antin, *Gentleman From the Twenty-Second* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927), p. 30. Nasaw, *Children of the City*, pp. 140-44; see also Ruth Rosen, *The Lost Sisterhood: Prostitution in America, 1900-1918* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

organizations of towns in Europe [Landsmanshaften]. The town organizations invited each other to affairs. That is how we melted, mixed. I went to a Rumanian affair, a Russian affair. We met different young people.<sup>10</sup>

There were also negative sides to this preoccupation with dance. The emergence of professional dance halls where the underworld assembled sent an alarming jolt through the community. As a natural response to working conditions in the sweatshops, a contemporary remarked that “the young people in Jewtown are inordinately fond of dancing and after their day in hard work will flock to these ‘schools’ for a night’s recreation.” Concerned parents, social reformers, law enforcement officials, and especially German-Jewish community leaders, who were embarrassed by Jewish crime, viewed these establishments with consternation. Dance halls and similar institutions of “ill-repute” were regarded by them as jumping boards towards a life of vice; and specifically prostitution. An article in *McClure*, written by George Kibbe Turner, described in-graphic detail, though somewhat embellished, how the poor Jewish girl, fresh from Galicia, is lured into a cheap dance hall--the chief recruiting grounds for the white slavery traffic. Mike Gold, growing up in a seamy neighborhood, analyzed the relationship between women, dance halls, and pimps more from an eyewitness’ point of view:

Pimps infested the dance halls. Here they picked up the romantic factory girls who came after the day’s work. They were smooth story tellers. They seduced girls the way a child is helped to fall asleep, with tales of magic happiness. No wonder East Side parents wouldn’t let their daughters go to dance halls. But girls need to dance.<sup>11</sup>

There were some notorious dance halls to be sure. But for many reformers dance itself, reflecting a Victorian preoccupation with sexual temptation, was objectionable. The Jewish social worker Lillian Wald, head of Henry House in New York, observed with some trepidation that “an entirely innocent and natural desire for recreation afforded continual opportunity for the overstimulation of the senses for dangerous exploitation.”<sup>12</sup> How much this was true and how much was a result of an overactive imagination is hard to gauge in retrospect. However, partly to respond to this real or perceived deterioration of the moral standards of the youth and partly to counteract the abysmal physical surroundings in the ghetto, settlement houses, social clubs, unions and Landsmanshaften also organized frequent cultural events, visits to Coney Island and outings to the nearby mountains. In New York, the Social Halls Association was organized specifically with this aim in mind. Liquor was only partially blamed for menacing the morals of immigrant women. The “new dances” inspired by ragtime, more athletic and sexually suggestive than the sedate waltz or fox-trot, were equally a culprit. Some settlement houses, among them Lillian Wald’s

10. Belle Israel, “The Way of the Girl” *Survey* 22 (1909): 494; quoted in Ewen, *Immigrant Women*, p. 210.

11. Hindus, *The Old Eastside*, p. 101; George Kibbe Turner, “The Daughters of the Poor,” *McClure’s Magazine*, 34, no. 1 (November 1909): 45; Gold, *Jews Without Money*, p. 92.

12. Lillian Wald, *The House on Henry Street* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1915), p. 225; see also Jenna Joselit-Weissman, *Our Gang, Jewish Crime and the New York Jewish Community, 1900-1940* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), pp. 48-49.

Henry House, offered dance classes while the new dances were sternly prohibited. Picnics, visits to parks, and occasional boat rides provided additional interaction between young people. Visits to Central Park harbored special attractions to single women. For many Jewish garment workers dancing during the 1st of May festivities became almost a tradition. To dance, play cards, "flirt with boys on the Hudson River," and row on a lake was part of a move away from the tutelage of strict parental supervision.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond their immediate recreational benefits, dances, outings, and other physical activities offered a badly needed psychological respite from the drudgery of everyday work. More importantly, they also created a new definition of femininity that led to a rejection of the constriction of family bonds. A new framework for exercising individual freedom—a breaking away from paternal supervision and ethnic constraints—emerged as a consequence. If we draw a comparison with other ethnic groups, the Italians and Irish for example, one can find many similarities. Yearnings for intellectual and sexual freedom were perhaps the same within the three communities, but its attainment was based on different terms. From an ethno-cultural point of view, it is interesting to note that those activities involving both sexes were more frequented by Jewish women (and Irish for different reasons) than Italians. This can be attributed in a large degree to the different family dynamics governing these ethnic communities. While both Italian and Jewish families were close knit, Italian mothers remained more traditional and much stricter than their Jewish counterparts. The relationships between fathers and daughters, while in all three groups staunchly patriarchal, were also conducted along drastically different lines. In the hierarchy of Italian family values, one, especially a woman, was not to surpass the head of the household. The poignant words of an Irish novelist that "Irish fathers simmer with envy of their children . . . of their opportunities, their schooling, their unblemished bodies and minds" is perhaps too strong to characterize the Irish family. It is, nevertheless, not without foundations. Most women came from Ireland by themselves, almost "plotting to wriggle free." In Jewish culture, on the other hand, children, regardless of gender, were encouraged to excel in education, occupation, and employment.<sup>14</sup>

Additional opportunities for spontaneous recreational and sporting activities were confined to the few accessible parks or hastily created playgrounds. While the original intent of city fathers in most major metropolises was to create "lungs for the city," these parks rarely reached the inner cities. For children the

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13. Mrs. Charles Israels, "The Dance Problem," pp. 141-46 and Beulah E. Kennard, "Emotional Life of Girls," pp. 146-48 in *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections* (1912); André Manners, *Poor Cousins* (New York: Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1972), pp. 187-191. *Landsmanshaft* refers to a basic communal unit, in Yiddish, which designated the city or district from which a given individual hailed. See Michael R. Weisser, *A Brotherhood of Memory, Jewish Landsmanshaftn in the New World* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Hamilton Holt, ed., *The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans As Told by Themselves* (New York: James Pott, 1906) p. 46.

14. For an in-depth comparative analysis see Thomas Kessner, *Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City, 1880-1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Nancy Schrom Dye, *As Equals and as Sisters: Feminism, the Labor Movement, and the Women's Trade Union League of New York* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1980); John McGahern, *Amongst Women* (New York: Viking, 1989).

city parks could not provide an adequate alternative to the crowded apartment houses. Being built for the middle and upper classes they were invariably located far from immigrant neighborhoods. New York, with the highest population density in America, had less than 5 percent of the total land area set aside for parks. According to some estimates this population included 1.5 million children under the age of twelve, but there was only one playground for every 12,000 of them. The situation in the Lower East Side was much worse: the few existing parks served close to 250,000 children.<sup>15</sup> High land prices obviously hampered efforts by concerned officials, social reformers or community leaders. One remaining alternative was to establish playgrounds within the confines of the settlement houses or educational institutions. Lillian Wald devotes a whole chapter for "Children and Play" in her book *The House on Henry Street*. She touchingly describes the little ("miniature" is her word) playground that was termed by Joseph Lee, the President of the National Playground Association, as the "Bunker Hill" of playgrounds. Hilda Satt's reminiscences included similar pictures about her Chicago neighborhood where "there was not a tree or a blade of grass anywhere. . . ." Only through the initiative of Jane Addams, was a playground built in close proximity to a Jewish neighborhood. On her urging, a piece of land was donated to Hull House on which Chicago's first playground was built. "I remember the happy voices," Hilda Satt recorded, "coming from that first playground."<sup>16</sup>

These playgrounds were utilized by the entire spectrum of the immigrant community. During the morning directed play activities and gymnastics were conducted while later in the day the facility was utilized by mothers and older children. At night in the Henry House settlement, "Japanese lanterns illuminated the playground, which then welcomed the young people who, after their day's work, took pleasure in each other's society. . . . On Saturday afternoons the playground was used almost exclusively by fathers and mothers. . . ." In addition to these pleasant corners, every available space was harnessed to create play space for the children. Thus impromptu playgrounds on flat roofs became choice sites-especially in New York-for exercise classes and play activities. The sight of little girls skipping rope on the roof playground of the Hebrew Institute of New York and Henry House became part of America's sporting heritage.<sup>17</sup>

The *New York Tribune* reported that paved asphalt areas between the Bowery and the river were also substituted by Jewish children as playground. While their aesthetic appeal left much to be desired, these urban spaces were perhaps better suited for vigorous play and sports than some of the better equipped parks

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15. Weisser, *Brotherhood of Memory*, p. 75; Riess, *City Games*, chapter 4; for the emergence of a comprehensive park system in Boston see, Stephen Hardy, *How Boston Played: Sport, Recreation and Community, 1865-1915* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1981). Goodman, Cary, *Choosing Sides: Playgrounds and Street Life on the Lower East Side* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979), p. 56.

16. Wald, *The House on Henry Street*, Chapter 4; Satt, *I Came a Stranger*, p. 74.

17. Wald, *House on Henry Street*, pp. 82-83; Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, illustration; Jeffrey S. Gurock, *When Harlem Was Jewish 1870-1930* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), pp. 35,42, 161; Brody, "A New York Childhood," p. 60.

in more fashionable neighborhoods. The same reporter's remark summed up well this situation: "The smoothness is perhaps the chief element in their adaptability to sports of childhood." Being responsible for their younger siblings often forced children to take upon themselves the role of a "mother." Little girls rarely played with dolls. Instead, they freed themselves for games by cooperating with each other in baby sitting. Growing up in Manhattan, Catharine Brody remembered of parking the "[baby] carriages, generally at the edge of the sidewalk and placed kitchen chairs and footstools together." Their play activities, "ring around a rosy," "roll a hoop," play with a ball, or the game of "potsy" (a form of hop-scotch), were markedly different from "stick ball" and "one o' cat" favored by the boys. Girls rarely participated in the boys' contests because of a cultural barrier; "the separation of boys and girls so rigidly carried out in the public schools also held on the street. . . ." Sophie Ruskay recalled that the only coed game fervently played by both girls and boys was "prisoner's base." It is obvious that the mainstream Victorian conception of gender segregation governed the school system. Yet it did not overlap squarely with the Eastern European Jewish perception of gender relations. Jewish mothers, overburdened with large families and also taking care of boarders, were forced to delegate many household chores and responsibilities to their daughters which inevitably restricted their free time. The testimony of a little girl from New York, who goes "to play a little while at night with the other children but [she] must mind Danny [brother] there because he does not like to go to bed until we do," summed up this state of affairs quite well. But, views on activities for both sexes tended also to accentuate the specific Jewish perception of the body and the importance of physical culture. Again, in this scheme of things sports and play were not an end in themselves but a means for attaining health, mental and physical balance, and speeding up the process of "Americanization." While contemporaries considered the boys more competitive than girls, in all games a sense of moderation, born out of a philosophical aversion toward an over-emphasis of physical sports, was imposed upon the children by their cautious elders. The *Tribune* reporter did not fail to notice that both boys and girls of "Hebrew parentage" played milder games than "other nationalities" because of their parents' restrictions.<sup>18</sup>

Gender segregation in sports and games, and assigning different objectives to these activities in the lives of boys and girls, was accepted practice not only in the public school system but in other educational and social institutions as well. As Mina Carson so aptly characterized them, they were based on "a mixture of progressive educational ideals and conservative social assumptions." For example, the Public Schools Athletic League, organized by the social reformer Dr. Luther H. Gulick, Jr. in New York City in 1903, initially excluded girls from competitive athletics. Only two years later a girls' branch was established to

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18. *New York Tribune*, July 5, 1896, quoted in Allon Schoener, *Portal to America, The Lower East Side, 1870-1925* (New York: Holt & Rinehart, 1967), pp. 68-69; Charles H. Warner, "Tendencies in East Side Boy's Clubs," *USS Reports*, 1901, p. 43, quoted in Nasaw, *Children of the City*, p. 108; Sophie Ruskay, *Horsecars and Cobblestone* (New York: Beechhurst Press, 1948), pp. 41-42.

which many Jewish girls from the slums flocked to participate. However, the rationale for their sport participation was drastically different, based on Gulick's belief in the physical inferiority of women, from that of the boys. Although an ardent believer in Muscular Christianity, Gulick subscribed to the Darwinian premise that play and sports are evolutionary impulses which are necessary for the proper mental and physical development of an individual. In this view of play, the inherent inferiority of girls relegated them to games and sports for grace, beauty, and fun in contrast to the boys whose activities emphasized a "safety valve" or catharsis for their fighting instinct. As he postulated, "athletics do not test womanliness as they test manliness."<sup>19</sup>

This unbridled social Darwinism was not limited to Gulick and was eagerly embraced by others in the educational establishment as well as the enlightened German-Jewish community. In Europe, the emerging Jewish gymnastic movement (Jüdische Turnerschaft) subscribed to similar philosophical precepts. Max Nordau, the Zionist leader, openly advocated the emergence of a "Muskel-judentum" which could provide a balance to mind and body. A speaker in the 1898 Zionist Congress specifically reflected on the plight of Eastern Jewry in declaring "that sick children, living in poverty, overcome the decay of their physiques through gymnastic exercises." The young minds should not, as has been the case until now, be overburdened by too much mental exertion. There is also a need for physical training for greater numbers of people."<sup>20</sup>

The physical surroundings in crowded tenement houses of the American slums were not much better than in Eastern Europe. Thus, organized play and sports for immigrant girls and women were prompted by similar needs. A unique American institution, the settlement houses, were instrumental in answering those needs. By their nature, they were secular and above ethnic lines—they made every attempt to eradicate ethnic and social differences. Yet their golden age coincided with the large scale of Jewish immigration from Russia. The settlement houses were undoubtedly one of the cardinal institutions in assisting acculturation and shaping the health and exercise habits and values of young Jewish women. Led by a group of dedicated educators, health and social reformers, mostly middle class, well-educated WASPs and a sprinkle of highly visible German Jews, they established gymnasiums, class rooms and playgrounds for the inner city youth. Social workers such as Jane Addams, Lillian Wald and others viewed play and sports for inner city youth as one of the most important means of conveying new ideas on health, education, and work. The Hull House of Chicago, encircled by an ethnic patchwork ghetto, functioned under the leadership of Addams, who placed the gymnasium in the

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19. Thomas J. Jable, "Public Schools Athletic League of New York City: Organized Athletics for City School Children, 1903-1914," in *The American Sporting Experience: A Historical Anthology of Sport in America*, ed. Steven A. Riess (West Point: Leisure Press, 1984), pp.221-33; Riess, *City Games*, pp. 160-63; Mina Carson, *Settlement Folk. Social Thought and the American Settlement Movement, 1885-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 174; Luther Gulick, *A Philosophy of Play* (New York: Scribner and Sons, 1920), p. 92. Gulick later became the founder of the Campfire Girls.

20. *II. Zionisten-Kongresses zu Basel 1898, Stenographische Protokoll* (Vienna: Verlag des Vereines "Erez Israel," 1898), pp. 24, 89-90; Eisen, "The Maccabiah Games," pp. 20-26.

center of the educational process. The setting in which Hull House flourished was also by and large characteristic of the settlement environment as a whole. It drew its clientele mostly from Russian and Polish Jews. The Hull House was perhaps better known at the time for its women's basketball teams and post-game dances than its many other achievements.<sup>21</sup>

Not surprisingly, the Henry House in the heart of the Jewish Lower East Side functioned along uncannily similar lines. Led by Lillian Wald, a German-Jewish social and health reformer, Henry House sports became the centerpiece of the social program. Its physical education director phrased this notion quite forcefully: "the gymnasium today is a manhood factory and manhood is more than a bunch of muscle and more than a skilled machine. . . . Character is the thing we seek to cultivate." The focus of social attention for girls was aimed in a different direction. The boys learned discipline, honor, competitive spirit, and self-respect through athletic participation. Girls, on the other hand, were encouraged to develop their individual talents, personalities, and group loyalties through much less competitive means. They were to have outlets for their creative and physical energies in gymnastics, dancing, drama, and singing.<sup>22</sup>

The case of the Henry House settlement is especially instructive because its clientele was overwhelmingly Jewish and because its leader, Lillian Wald, represented the traditional attitudes of the German-Jewish establishment. As the pampered daughter of a middle-class family, she proudly traced her American heritage to the '48ers. Wald shared an intrinsically mandated generosity with her German Jewish coreligionists toward social concerns without their almost anguished ambivalence toward the new immigrant Russian Jews. In line with the Jewish tradition of social responsibility for the community many of the settlement houses and other educational institutions were specifically established by the German Jews. Henry House, for example, was generously supported by Jacob Schiff, noted philanthropist and the head of Kuhn, Loeb and Company. The German Jews, who preceded Russians and Poles by several decades, took seriously the ethical mandate of a communal responsibility toward their coreligionists. By 1910, at least seventy-five Jewish neighborhood center and settlement-type agencies were functioning. In addition, fifty-seven similar organizations under "non-sectarian" auspices were largely serving a Jewish clientele. This German-Jewish elite, though irritatingly paternalistic toward their "backward" brethren, was genuinely concerned with the physical and mental debilitation due to crowded and unhealthy living quarters and set out to "mitigate the dire consequences" of tenement living. In addition, the avowed spiritual aim was the rapid "Americanization" of this "unruly" multitude—play and gymnastics played prominently in this quest. While not wanting to be

21. Riess, *City Games*, p. 165; Allen F. Davis, *American Heroine: The Life and Legend of Jane Addams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 68-73; Jane Addams, *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1923).

22. *Settlement Journal*. [Henry House Settlement], January 1913, p. 16 quoted in Carson, *Settlement Folks*, pp. 173-74; Doris Groshen Daniels, *Always a Sister: The Feminism of Lillian D. Wald* (New York: Feminist Press, 1989); Robert A. Woods and Albert J. Kennedy, *Young Working Girls: Summary of Evidence from Two Thousand Social Workers* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1913), pp. 133, 34, 140-41, 154-55.

identified with the “downtown” Jews, they still felt the imperatives of religious custom and humanity. Thus it was characteristic of the spirit if not the pattern of this “uptown” Jewish philanthropy that it functioned on a non-sectarian basis.<sup>23</sup>

The gulf separating the two communities was not confined to socio-economics or culture. The physical appearance of this motly group itself was offensive to the German Jews. One of the most devoted settlement workers, Ellen Starr, a gentile social reformer from Hull House, remarked plaintively that it was hard to love one’s fellowman in the summer heat when he smelled bad—particularly, she added, the Russian Jew, “poor dog.” Through the periodical descriptions in the *New York Times*, we can get a glimpse of this prevailing view about the newcomers. A bewildered *Times* reporter invited his readers to see “attenuated creatures, clad in old, faded, greasy, often tattered clothing . . . men and youths whose cheeks are pinched and pale and hollow . . . whose sad, lustrous eyes look at him pitifully, like the eyes of hunted and captured animals . . .”<sup>24</sup>

This “embarrassment” was further magnified by a flourishing crime rate in Russian Jewish enclaves. Alarmed by what seemed to be a virtual explosion in number of youthful Jewish offenders, a separate Jewish correctional movement emerged under the tutelage of Jacob Schiff, Isidor Straus, and other pillars of the “uptowners.” Jewish involvement in prostitution specifically taxed German sensibilities. Scores of homes for wayward girls in the “wholesome” atmosphere of the country were built. So vexing was this “crime problem” that a call for a Jewish reformatory in the *American Hebrew* obviously contradicted even their avowed “Anti-sectarianism.” Located in a pastoral setting in upstate New York, the Hawthorne School (discretely identified as a training school and not a reformatory!) drew on the most up-to-date progressive educational philosophies. Replete with baseball diamond, running track, football field, playgrounds, and a gymnasium, it evoked the unshakeable belief in the power of sports and exercise in deterring delinquency and vice.<sup>25</sup>

The above descriptions would have already given an indication that a harmonious relationship between the two groups or a unified Jewish community was more a myth than a reality. It is easy to distinguish even at first glance the contours of a deep socio-economic, religious, and political rift not only between the well endowed and assimilated German-Jewish community and their coreligionists from backward Eastern Europe but group tension existed also among the prosperous German and Sephardic Jews. And while the topic of this cultural and socio-economic segmentation within the Jewish community is beyond the scope of this paper, it is interesting to note that its traces were visible within the Jewish social and sports scene as well. In turn, the Eastern Europeans

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23. Another prominent example of a German Jewish woman who, although often confrontational, made a major contribution to the Russian Jewish community was Julia Richman—the often embattled Superintendent of Schools of Greater New York. Robert A. Woods and Albert J. Kennedy, *The Settlement Horizon* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1922), p. 332.

24. Ellen Starr was quoted in Carson, *Settlement Folks*, p. 72; *New York Times*, 13 September, 1894, quoted in Howe *World of Our Fathers*, p. 89.

25. *American Hebrew*, August 7, 1903; *American Hebrew*, May 10, 1907; and *American Hebrew*, October 25, 1907. See also David J. Rothman, *Conscience and Convenience: The Asylum and Its Alternatives in Progressive America* (Boston: Little Brown, 1980).

resented this paternalistic, patronizing, and oppressive noblesse oblige of the uptown (i.e., German) Jews. In response, they began to establish their own schools, mutual aid societies, and above all, sports clubs. For example, Atlanta's Jewish community supported three highly segregated country clubs for Sephardic, German, and Russian Jews.<sup>26</sup>

Beside an intense concern with the negative impression cast by the influx of a ragtag, exotic collection of Eastern European Jews, the German-Jewish establishment was also acutely aware of new intellectual ideas emerging during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The attraction of Social Darwinism, applying an evolutionary model to human affairs, was already mentioned and enjoyed quick acceptance both by American as well as German intellectual elites. It was natural that Americans turned to anthropology for finding information which would make sweeping judgment possible about different ethnic groups. More troublesome for German Jews was the ascendance of "pseudoscientific" theories—and among them that of eugenics. Eugenicians were in the forefront of these efforts. Based on the tripartite classification of whites in descending order: Nordic, Alpines, and Mediterraneans (i.e., Italians, Portuguese and Jews). The last one was considered an inferior stock that constituted a twofold threat to the United States. The Russian Jews, in contrast to both old-stock Americans and German Jews, possessed one of the highest fertility rates prior to the First World War. They also scored sufficiently low on mental tests to cause a leading "expert" of that era to claim that Jews were inferior. In addition, an inevitable interbreeding between old-stock elements and Mediterraneans, according to the eugenicians, would dilute the desirable qualities within the superior races.<sup>27</sup>

With eugenicians looking over their shoulders, the German-Jewish community reacted to these notions with two-pronged attacks. On the one hand, they made every effort to alleviate the outward manifestations of Jewish inferiority. The commonly held American perception of the "over-intellectualized" Jew was to be erased first. Secondly, a rapid course of "Americanization" was to be implemented. In both instances education, health practices, play, and sports were viewed as the most effective means to remedy these problems. Both precepts were based on the maxim, well summed up by a European observer, that "the normal proportion between body and mind is absent from the Jew and a frightening predominance of mentality is the existing norm within him." Eerily a similar diagnosis was rendered by an American

26. For inter-Jewish conflicts see Naomi W. Cohen, *Encounter With Emancipation: The German Jews in the United States, 1830-1914* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1984) and Moses Rischin, *The Promised City: New York's Jews, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977); Stephen Birmingham, *The Grandees, America's Sephardic Elite* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 249; for Jewish social and sports clubs see Marshall Sklare, ed., *The Jews, Social Patterns of an American Group* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1967); Steven Hertzberg, *Strangers Within the City: The Jews of Atlanta, 1845-1915* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1976).

27. Thomas J. Archdeacon, *Becoming American, An Ethnic History*, (New York: The Free Press, 1983), pp. 159-62; Thomas Sowell, "Ethnicity in a Changing America," *Daedalus* 107 (Winter 1978): 217; Carl Brigham, *A Study of American Intelligence*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1923), p. 190. About eugenics see Ferdinand Canning and Scott Schiller, *Eugenics & Politics* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1926) and Edward M. East, *Heredity and Human Affairs* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927).

observer who lamented on “the overdevelopment of the mind at the expense of the body . . . [showing] little interest in physical sports.”<sup>28</sup> The most visible and effective achievement, combining both aims in one institution, was the Educational Alliance in New York. A curious mixture of night school, settlement house, day-care center, gymnasium, and literary club, it was influenced by the settlement-house movement of the 1880s. In conjunction with the Young Men’s Hebrew Association (whose building it occupied) one of its most notable departments was Physical Culture which was entrusted with the organization of summer camps for thousands of boys and girls in the Catskill Mountains. Play and exercise were extolled for their moral value and for their health benefits. True to their heritage, many of these well-to-do German-Jews were the founders and supporters of both the Turnverein and the Young Men’s Hebrew Association and its female auxiliary, the young Women’s Hebrew Association in America. Thus it seemed natural that gymnastics and exercises for girls and women became prominent features of the educational process. Its stated objective was “the overnight transformation [of the immigrants] into full fledged Americans.” *The Alliance First Annual Report* (1898) was a clear salvo toward the eugenicists:

The importance of physical training for our downtown brethren cannot be overestimated. Our coreligionists are often charged with lack of physical courage and repugnance to physical work. Nothing will more effectively remove this than athletic training.<sup>29</sup>

Athletic training and exercises were not the only means for the betterment of human conditions. Thus, by 1902 the Alliance became convinced of the importance of medical supervision of women participating in its programs. The Chairman of the Committee on Physical Culture made a request during a meeting of the Board of Directors that “a lady physician be present to examine the girls and women on admission to the gymnasium classes.”<sup>30</sup>

The second explicit aim of this philanthropy went beyond immediate social or humanitarian relief—it laid down the plans for a rapid and thorough Americanization. German-Jewish philanthropy, while patronizing, condescending, and irritatingly aloof, was effective. In Chicago, the Hebrew Institute (later the Jewish People’s Institute), the Maxwell Street Settlement, and the Jewish Training School become models of social responsibility as well as efficiency in transforming the newly arrived Jewish immigrants into responsible and productive American citizens. The Jewish Training School, for example, equaled the best schools in the city. It stressed arts and crafts. In addition to reading, writing, arithmetic, and geography, there were sawing classes and manual training for girls. Health courses and gymnastics (i.e., exercise classes) were

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28. Eli Sangar, “Jüdische Turnverein,” *Die Welt*, December 9, 1898, p. 9; David Snedden, *Civic Education*, (Yonkers, NY: World Book, 1922), pp. 291-92.

29. Benjamin Rabinowitz, *The Young Men’s Hebrew Association, 1854-1913* (New York: National Jewish Welfare Board, 1948); Weisser, *A Brotherhood of Memory*, p. 27; Gurock, *When Harlem Was Jewish*, pp. 97-98. *First Annual Report*, Educational Alliance, 1893, quoted in Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, p. 231.

30. Rudolf Glanz, *The Jewish Woman in America*, vol. 1 (New York: Ktav Publ., 1976), p. 166n.96.

taught in a real gymnasium—uncommon at that time in Chicago. By 1914 the Chicago Hebrew Institute followed suit and built a \$100,000 gymnasium as well. It differed from its sister institutions in that it sponsored athletic competition for girls in which prizes were awarded. A sport historian of Chicago's sport life also mentioned that along with other Jewish golf clubs, the Hebrew Institute resigned from the Western Golf Association, because of the organization's discriminatory practices against Jewish women.<sup>31</sup>

The question of how Jewish women reacted to these efforts still remains to be answered. It was noted earlier that the role and status assigned to women in Jewish culture, while harboring some similarities, differed markedly from that of other ethnic groups. During the early years of the new century close to 90 percent of unmarried or married immigrant women without children worked or were looking for work. A contemporary description vividly illustrates their lot: "The girls are nearly all at work for a few years (they marry between 20 and 25) either in the clothing factories . . . compared to the rest of the American community it is hard." Many among them had no consciousness or awareness of career and no initiative to make changes to improve their situations. Jewish women, on the other hand, took an unproportionately larger role in political activities, civil rights movements, union organizing, and club activities than their sisters from other immigrant communities. Garment manufacturing, for example, was overwhelmingly Jewish and, not surprisingly, one of the earliest "female" trades which became unionized. A "leftist" political awareness, carried over from Russia and inherent in Jewish thinking in America, can be credited only partially with these achievements. In contrast to the Italians, Jewish family mores were equally important in assigning a large degree of independence. And, finally, the place of children within the family set Jews apart from other groups. Among them, the centrality of children's educational attainment in the Jewish value system was perhaps the most important factor. While the education of boys took precedent over that of the girls, the overall effect of this intense "acculturation" drive, which fitted well into the existing leftist Russian-Jewish ideology, was the spectacular and unprecedented rise in the number of Jewish girls entering and excelling in the schools. A high school teacher commented on the pages of *Forward* that "all the teachers are amazed by their ability [Jews] . . . The children show the greatest interest in their studies."<sup>32</sup>

Aligned with employment and education, Jewish women's participation in sport, exercise, and recreation became a part of this struggle for individual expression and freedom. For example, one of the most popular and enduring

31. Special thanks to Dr. Jerry Gems for the material and discussion relating to Chicago's Jewish community. See "Sport and Culture Formation in Chicago, 1890-1940," Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 1989, pp. 224-30; *Jewish Training School, Seventh Annual Report for 1895-96* (Chicago: S. Ettlinger Co., 1896), p. 9; *Daily Jewish Forward*, July 16, 1923; a comprehensive list of educational organizations dedicated to Jewish immigrants in the United States is presented by Rabinowitz, *The Young Men's Hebrew Association*.

32. Frances A. Kellor, "The Immigrant Woman," *The Atlantic 100* (September 1907): 401, quoted in Doris Weatherford, *Foreign & Female, Immigrant Women in America, 1840-1930* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), p. 113. William English Walling, "What the People of the East Side Do," *University Settlement Studies* 1 (July 1905): 84; *Forward*, June 5, 1902, quoted in Howe, *How We Lived*, p. 199.

pastimes of Jewish women was the frequent visitation to the “schwitz”—a combination of Turkish bath, sauna, and social club. Traditionally, the “schwitz” was reserved for the women two nights a week. Molly Chernikovsky, a frequent visitor in the “schwitz,” spent every Monday night in the company of her landsleit (group from the same geographical area) in Rappaport’s “Schwitz” in the Lower East Side. The “schwitz” was not a “Mikvah” (ritual bath). It was a place of fun and games. “Noise prevailed, loud voices, laughter . . .” The women took a sandwich along, viewing the evening as one of the rare recreational opportunities after a long day of work. She often remained in the bathhouse’s dormitory for the rest of the night. These social interactions, in addition to ties from work, were further strengthened by the establishment of clubs on the model of existing women’s organizations. Following a call in the *American Hebrew*, “A Working Girls Club called the ‘Friendly Club,’ having a membership of 115, self-governed, and with classes in Dress-cutting, Millinery, Sewing, Bookkeeping, English, Bible, Callisthenics and Singing and encourages social features,” came into existence in 1895 in New York. A similar club, the Home for Jewish Friendless and Working Girls, followed suit several years later in Chicago. As a logical step in their evolution, self-help associations soon expanded into recreational areas. The Jewish Working Girl’s Vacation Society, for example, hosted 433 girls in their Vacation Home at Bellport, Long Island in the summer of 1900. The administration of the home programmed its activities to include moonlight sails which were “very much enjoyed, the girls leaving at eight and returning a little before ten . . . These parties are always well chaperoned. . . .”<sup>33</sup>

These city clubs, and vacation homes and summer camps in the country attempted to alleviate the negative ramifications of city life as well as the debilitating consequences of working in the sweatshops. But they transcended, again, their recreational values for they also afforded women a forum and opportunity to direct their own lives and provided some forms of independence and escape from traditional roles. This liberation from traditional roles opened new horizons for young women. It is significant to emphasize, again, that the family itself promoted education more often than not as a means for human betterment and social mobility for both sexes. Evening classes offered by settlement houses, Jewish educational institutions and public schools were attended and library cards were held by Jews in a much higher number than their number in the population would indicate. This trend exemplified the importance the community placed on education.

That this was not a smooth transition can be attested by a strong intergenerational conflict that erupted within the Russian Jewish community. While a generational conflict was not as severe as with other ethnic communities, it existed. It has often been pointed out that the emergence of generational

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33. Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonia Michel. *The Jewish Women in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1976), pp. 92-93; Weatherford, *Foreign & Female*, illustration, p. 98; *American Hebrew*, 37 (1888): 14; *American Hebrew*, 42 (1890): 235; *Chicago Israelites*, 49, no. 15 (October 5, 1901): 8; quoted in Ganz, *The Jewish Women in America*, vol. 1, p. 161.

conflicts are almost inevitable in times of stress and dislocations in the lives of ethnic or national groups. It is especially true during clashes between a new dominant culture and particular ethnic heritage. How this is manifested in a sporting and recreational context harbors obvious relevance to the general "acculturation." After all, the already quoted father, whose concern about his young son's yearning to play baseball appearing on the pages of *Forward*, also intimates a looming generational conflict. His son, the distraught father complained, "cries my head off" because of his ban on baseball. Obviously, in the case of Jewish women, this generational conflict took a different dimension. The main bone of contention revolved mainly around recreational pursuits that went beyond the control of the family-dancing, independent summer outings, and visitations to Coney Island. As I have mentioned earlier, in a family-centered environment this notion was natural. But, in the case of Jewish women the question went beyond a hierarchy of priorities-that they played sport instead of educating themselves. Rather, for them, education, and so their recreational and sporting activities, meant more in many ways than to the men. It meant not only financial and psychological independence in a male dominated capitalistic society but also emancipation from traditional female roles. Politically more radical than most of their contemporaries, quite a few Jewish women tried to model themselves after socialist principles. The historian Irving Howe, who chronicled so passionately turn-of-the-century Jewish New York, noted that "what stirred a number of young Jewish women to independence and self-assertion was . . . their eager reading of nineteenth century Russian and English novels." Many of them elected to go to school instead of getting married.<sup>34</sup>

One of the pioneers of American sport and physical education, Senda Berenson's example is instructive in this case. Coming from Russia in the summer of 1875, the family settled in Boston's West end. Her self-educated father, remaining a peddler for the rest of his life, insisted that his family become Americanized as quickly as possible. Senda, following her brother's example and without her father's emotional support, entered the halls of higher education, enrolling in the Boston Normal School of Gymnastics in 1890. She became a physical education instructor at Smith College, an innovator in women's physical education, and, as a sport historian aptly termed her, "a most unlikely pioneer."<sup>35</sup>

While the Berenson family converted to Christianity, their path through education exemplified the overall Jewish immigrant experience. Reading many of the diaries and reminiscences we can see that Senda Berenson represented a new breed of Jewish woman whose life was changed irrevocably by American

34. Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, p. 267.

35. Special thanks to Dr. Betty Spears who provided me with material about Senda Berenson. "A Most Unlikely Pioneer," paper presented at the North American Society for Sports History, Clemson, SC, 1989. One should not overestimate the extent and competitive rationale of women's athletics in women's colleges and universities during the turn of the century. President Nielson of Smith College used to remark that one of the great assets of the women's colleges was that they had "never lost a football game," Margaret F. Thorp, *Nielson of Smith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 240.

society. She, like many of her contemporaries, seized the opportunities which were offered by her new country. Sport and recreational pursuits of Jewish immigrant girls and women represented a slice of life that reflected all the sorrows, happiness, and struggles of their hard lives. Can we demystify, then, the sports participation of women during this often maligned Victorian era? Were women subjugated, oppressed, and shoved to the periphery of society? Or, as the apologists would claim, did they persevere and thrive in spite of male domination. The truth, as often is the case, lies somewhere in between. The picture of gender relations is much more complex to fit into either mold. Society, and the Jewish community in particular, created opportunities for sports and recreation because of an unshakeable belief in the power of play as a socializing, acculturating, and physical-mental health agent. The social reformers and civic leaders were deliberate in their aims to counteract the debilitating effects of ghetto-living. Social engineers were equally single-minded in their quest to create new Americans through sport. The women, on the other hand, were no less rational, deliberate, and pro-active in using and choosing their recreational activities. They danced, sailed, and played their games because their recreation had the power to blunt somewhat the hard edges of existence. Yet their play was not purely an escape mechanism. With the danger of romanticizing this notion, we can also recognize that their play and sport participation was an innate requirement for the human psyche to set itself free.