

# Sidney Jackson: An American in Russia's Boxing Hall of Fame

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Russia's boxing hall of fame commemorates a pioneer of boxing in Russia, Merited Coach of the USSR, Professor of English: Sidney Louis Jackson. Upon his death in 1966, the boxing authorities inaugurated in his honor the nationwide Jackson Memorial Boxing Tournament. No foreign athlete was more honored in the USSR. Yet Sidney Jackson is virtually unknown in his native land.

Sidney Jackson was born into a poor Jewish family in New York in 1886. He grew up at No. 1310 Brooke Avenue in the Bronx. His father, who had worked at the local chemical plant, died of tuberculosis when Sid was six, leaving Sid's mother, Sissy, to bring up six children. Early on, Sid became a tailor's apprentice in the Brix and Jones garment-making shop. He took up boxing when he was 12 in the Bronx Ridgeon Club and turned professional at 18.

These were the halcyon days of professional boxing, highlighted by Jack Johnson's winning of the world heavyweight crown against James Jeffries in 1910 (the first black man to win the title). As for Sid Jackson, he was a talented featherweight who represented his country on a number of occasions. When he was 28, he was on the U.S. boxing team touring the U.K. During his last fight, in Glasgow, he broke his thumb, which forced him out of the ring for some six months. In the meantime, he decided to use the enforced layoff to see Europe.

He almost booked a tour to Italy, but, influenced perhaps by ancestral ties to Russia and, as he put it, "by the ad man's promise of Polar bears roaming Russian streets," he set off on a sea trip to Scandinavia and Russia. He took with him a fellow boxer, Frank Gill, eager to promote contacts in Russia for his father's canning firm.<sup>7</sup>

The two tourists arrived in the White Sea port of Archangel in mid-July 1914. Evidently, Russia's northernmost port on its Arctic seaboard did not captivate the boxers; they were unimpressed by the ramshackle wooden

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1. The two major Soviet sources on Jackson's biography differ on Jackson's companion. Yakov Kumov, "Doglie dolgie raundy," *Zvezda vostoka*, 9 (1974): 154-163, names him as Frank Gill; Georgi Sviridov, *Jackson oštayotsya v. Rossii, Romany* (Moscow, Profizdat, 1978) gives Ernie Flynn. The former seems the more reliable source.

houses and bridges, the rowdy inns with their bawdy women and drunken men, the overcast northern skies-and not a Polar bear in sight. So they took the first train for the Russian capital, St. Petersburg; from there they went to Moscow, arriving in early August, totally oblivious of the tragic events unfolding elsewhere in Europe. It was only by chance, as they settled into the National Hotel adjacent to the Kremlin, that they read in an English-language newspaper of the outbreak of World War I.

Apprehensive at being stranded abroad for the duration of the war, they at once wired the U.S. Consulate in St. Petersburg requesting guidance. A week later, an official letter informed them that the westward escape route was blocked on land and sea; the best course was to sit tight and hope for a swift end to hostilities. No comfort to boxers at the peak of their careers (Jackson was already 28)! The only possible exit point, the Consulate advised, was Tashkent in the south, from there over the border into Afghanistan and through Persia to the Arabian Sea. They had little choice, anyway, since their money was running out. With their remaining rubles, they bought tickets for Tashkent and left the next day by train with a letter of introduction to the Governor-General of Turkestan.<sup>2</sup>

### **Arrival in Tashkent**

The first thing the two dusty travelers did on arrival in Tashkent was to visit the General Post Office, to see if money had arrived in response to their urgent wires home from Moscow. Gill was in luck, Jackson not. It was agreed that Frank would hasten back to the USA and do what he could to help Sid from there. It later transpired that Sid's widowed mother had moved from New York to California for the sake of her son Eli's health (he was shortly to die of consumption). Even if she had heard from her son, it is doubtful whether she could have helped, being virtually penniless. Jackson's erstwhile manager, meanwhile, had taken on a replacement bantamweight and abandoned his former charge.

Jackson was not to know this at the time and paid daily visits to the post office, asking desperately in his broken Russian whether any news had come for SID-NEY LOU-IS JACK-SON. Unable to pay his hotel bill, Jackson appealed for work to the Governor-General and, when asked about his occupation, amused officials by replying 'boxing,' a sport unknown in Central Asia at the time.<sup>3</sup> So he had to revert to his early trade as apprentice tailor, at the Yaushev Garment-Making Firm.

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2. Tashkent was a place of banishment of political undesirables in both tsarist and Soviet times, often being used as 'safe' rehabilitation city after the prisoner had served a sentence in Siberia (as was the case with Sikharulidze). Solzhenitsyn describes his exile in Tashkent in his book *Cancer Ward*. There thus grew up an extremely heterogeneous community of Europeans in the city.

3. Although a boxing club had been started up by Baron Kister in 1894 in Moscow, the sport tended to be looked down on as a muzhik's pastime, violent and dangerous. Kister was discharged from the Russian Army for championing boxing, even though he had transferred the club to his wife; it became baroness Kister's Boxing Arena. The sport had not spread outside the major European centers of Russia by World War I.

Fate had certainly played him a cruel trick. Instead of fighting for titles, earning prize money and traveling the world, Sid Jackson found himself stuck in a flyblown Asiatic outpost of the Russian Empire. doing sweated labor in the rag trade. unable to understand or be understood. evidently abandoned by everyone. A far cry from the skyscrapers and grand stores of New York, and the world's boxing rings.

He lived. like many other Europeans in the cosmopolitan city of some quarter of a million people, as an exile. It was with one such misérable. Semyon Sikharulidze, a Georgian exile who spoke English, that Jackson lived: in a cramped one-room mud hut in the old quarter. The war having forced up prices. it helped the two exiles to share expenses. The new arrangement also had the advantage to the American of bringing him into contact with Russian. Jewish<sup>4</sup> and other educated exiles who not only acquainted him with Russia, but helped to teach him Russian.

#### Revolution and Civil War

Two years went by without news from home. At last. in late 1916. Jackson received a letter from his mother. But no money. Despite the turbulent events of the war years-the abdication of the Tsar, the two revolutions of 1917. the demonstrations and armed struggle in Tashkent. the creation of worker councils (Tashkent became the stronghold of Bolshevik power in Central Asia)--Jackson remained unpolitical. a foreigner on the outside looking in. with little interest in other people's affairs. All the same, when civil war broke out in 1918, it was no time for fence-sitting. Since his friends were on the side of the Red Guards, it was natural that he should volunteer as a private in the International Brigade. fighting in a motley band of Germans. Koreans, Hungarians. Chinese, Persians, Czechs. Serbs. Tatars and the rest against both local anti-communist (and anti-European) rebels (known as *Basmachi*) and the British expeditionary force in Central Asia under Major-General Sir V. Malleston.

During his four years of service, Jackson took part in battles all over Central Asia and the Caucasus, was wounded twice, and eventually helped in interrogating British POWs and writing pamphlets addressed to British soldiers. One of his army commendations runs:

Comrade Jackson. American born. saw active duty 1918-20 against White Guards on the Caspian Front. carried out a number of missions and served as interpreter at Army HQ. For his valiant and valuable service. Comrade Jackson was decorated several times.

(signed) General N. Paskutsky<sup>5</sup>

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4. See James Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 19

5. Russia was the home of the world's largest number of Jews at the turn of the century, Tashkent having a particularly large concentration made up of Jewish exiles from central Russia and the Ukraine, Jewish artisans and Bukharan Jews who made their way to Central Asia's most prosperous city, Jackson may well have spoken Yiddish with some of them although he was evidently not religious, according to his children and friends.

In the winter of 1921, as the civil war died down, Jackson returned to Tashkent to work as sports instructor for *Vsevochuch*, the Universal Military Training organization that had been given charge of all sports amenities in the country (Jackson actually remained in the army reserve until 1933). Jackson was assigned to the Fortune Sports Club where he began to introduce boxing to the people of Central Asia. He soon made a boxing ring out of old ship rope and set it up in the city's central park, patched up the only three pairs of gloves (filled with seaweed) he could locate, and made new ones out of leather and horse hair he obtained from the local slaughter house. With that material and thick felt he also made punch bags and balls. But he did not confine his activities to promoting boxing—though his club was indeed the very first boxing club in the whole of the new Soviet state; his experience in other sports enabled him to found clubs and organize facilities for lawn tennis, swimming, track and field, basketball, soccer, tug-o'-war and unarmed combat—all of which he coached himself. As a Soviet sports authority later confirmed, “Until that time, not one of these sports was well known in those parts; Jackson was truly the founder of [organized] sport in Central Asia.”<sup>6</sup>

#### Political and social value of sport

The value of competitive sport and sports festivals was coming to be appreciated by the central authorities in helping to rally support for the regime and to unite the various nationalities. Tashkent had been the venue of a Central Asian Olympiad in October 1920, featuring local folk games and involving the various Turkic- and Iranian-speaking nationalities. Now a much grander program was planned for October 1921, embracing a wide range of both local and European sports. This was the first time in Russian history that Muslim peoples and Europeans had competed in any sporting event together.<sup>7</sup> But there was more to the festival than the state goal of integration within a multinational state: in a community where women had long been excluded from public life and discouraged from baring face, arms and legs in public, it was felt that the involvement of Uzbek and other Central Asian women in the Olympiad would be a vivid demonstration of the new life and opportunities for liberation.<sup>8</sup>

Jackson was particularly keen to involve Islamic women in the sports parade through Tashkent; the parade would help publicize sport and, at the same time, strike a blow for women's liberation. He was later acknowledged, in fact, as the “first organizer of sports parades in Tashkent.” But the accolade was hard earned: two of his assistants, a young Russian Umarov and a teen-age Uzbek girl Aigul, had gone into the old part of the city to persuade women to join the parade, but had been badly beaten up—Umarov died and Aigul spent months in the hospital. She was luckier than some women who

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6. Documents seen by the author at the Jackson home on 13 March 1988.

7. See Kumov, p. 160.

8. See Riordan, pp. 113-114.

were stoned to death on their way to join the sports parade.<sup>9</sup>

It was in the midst of these torrid events that the U.S. envoy Howard Rand arrived in Tashkent, bringing Jackson his exit papers. Still smarting from what he regarded as being abandoned by the U.S. Embassy seven years earlier and engrossed in the exciting work of building a new life and community, Jackson told Rand it was too late: “There was a time when I would have done anything to go home. But the U.S. forgot about me. It’s a great honor to be a U.S. citizen. it’s now an even greater honor to be serving here.”<sup>10</sup> Soon after, in 1922, he took Soviet citizenship in “the New World.”

Jackson’s path to sporting renown in the young Soviet state was by no means smooth. First, there were those radicals in the 1920s who strongly opposed boxing and other “decadent” bourgeois sports considered potentially harmful to physical and mental health. Such pursuits as boxing, weightlifting and gymnastics were, in the opinion of some groups, like the “hygienists” and Proletarian Culture proponents, irrational and dangerous and encouraged individualistic rather than collective attitudes and values-and, as such, were contrary to the desired socialist ethic.<sup>11</sup> Boxing was actually banned in the mid-1920s (before being reinstated under amateur, three-round rules in the late 1920s). Jackson obviated the ban by renaming his junior boxing group the “Unarmed Combat Club” and switching some of his attention to swimming and tennis.<sup>12</sup>

Second, Jackson’s efforts to promote sport later came to be ignored, as Stalinism took hold and an excess of patriotic zeal ascribed successes to Russians and other native-born people rather than to foreigners.” Being a Jew, furthermore, Jackson also had to live through the period of anti-Semitism, when “rootless cosmopolitans” were expelled from positions of responsibility and sometimes purged. Unlike refugees from Nazi Germany and Fascist Spain, unlike such one-time communist leaders as Bela Kun of Hungary and Peter Stuchkas of Latvia, Jackson escaped imprisonment, torture and execution during the Stalin years of terror. Some of his friends did not. Akmal Ikramov, Uzbek communist leader, gymnast and frequent visitor to Jackson’s sports club, was arrested in 1937 and executed (as were his wife, all his brothers and nephews-through guilt by association).” Jackson.

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9. Kumov, p. 161.

10. See Sviridov, p. 19. Such deaths are also reported in G. I. Sviridov’s “Jackson ostalsya v Rossu, *Fizkultura i sport*, 5(1958): 16-17.

11. Sviridov, p. 43. How much credence one should give to Sviridov’s rather ‘romantic’ account of Jackson’s early life in Russia is hard to establish, Jackson’s children were unable to confirm the meeting in correspondence (1984).

12. See Riordan, pp.95-105.

13. Jackson’s daughter confirmed (march 1988) her father’s need to change the name of his boxing club in the 1920s and to abandon boxing for a time.

14. The xenophobic, and his anti-foreigner campaign began in the early 1930s, with the trial of foreign engineers on trumped-up charges of sabotage; it continued throughout the 1930s and worsened, following the war, in the latter part of the 1940s and early 1950s. It included claims that Russians had been responsible for many of the world’s inventions (radio, bicycle, TV motor car, electric light.)

however, as his daughter recalls, “was never a Party man, never political, though nonetheless dedicated to his work.”<sup>15</sup>

Although preferring the balmy climate and relative calm of the backwaters of Tashkent, Jackson made a number of visits to Moscow. In 1928, for example, he was summoned to meet the visiting American film stars Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks. Knowing of Fairbanks’ passion for boxing, the Soviet leadership brought Jackson to Moscow to interpret and invite the film star to join the judges panel for bouts held in Sokolniki Park on 21 July. It is possible that Fairbanks may even have heard of Jackson from his prewar boxing days.<sup>16</sup>

### A new life begins

Shortly after his return to Tashkent from meeting the U.S. film stars, Jackson married at the age of 43; his wife was a young Jewish woman from Kiev, Bertha Braginskaya, some 20 years his junior. They were to have two children: a son, Leo, born in 1930, and a daughter, Paina (Pah-eena), born six years later when Jackson was 50.

With the responsibility of a family, Jackson’s life changed. While still devoting much of his time to boxing, he quit the army reserve in 1933 and took up studies for a degree, with a view to teaching English. The year 1933 was a time of terrible famine in Central Asia when many refugees had come crowding into the city and care for the needy left little time for sport.

It was no easy decision for the boxer from a poor, barely educated background; he had to take an English degree involving examinations in Russian. His daughter recalls him sitting up night after night wrestling with Russian and English grammar and literature. His boundless energy, discipline, stubbornness and thirst for learning saw him through. Not only did he take his degree when he was in his early 50s, he also gained employment as English professor at the Tashkent Institute of Foreign Languages. According to colleagues who knew him at the Institute, he became a cultivated man, with considerable enthusiasm for American writers; he was particularly fond of reading Mark Twain and Jack London to his children and students.<sup>17</sup> It is some testimony to his interest in education that both his children gained medical degrees, Paina going on to become a doctor and lecturer in Tashkent, and Leo becoming an eminent surgeon and professor of anesthesiology at the Kazakh Medical Institute in Alma Ata.

Throughout the 1930s Sid Jackson, or “Granddad Sidka” as the wiry, broken-nosed boxer with the shock of white hair was known, continued his

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15. See Kamil, “Looking up my father,” *Moscow News*, 11 (1988): 13.

16. Personal communication at her home in Tashkent on 13 March 1988. This was confirmed by several of Jackson’s former colleagues at the Tashkent Institute of Foreign Languages.

17. Documents in the Jackson archive of the Tashkent Sports Museum include the letter summoning Jackson to Moscow, a poster advertising the presence of Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks at the boxing match in Moscow and their autographs to Sid Jackson. See also Eduard Avanesov, “The story of a boxer,” *Soviet Today* (August 1983): 65.

interest in sport, mainly now as boxing coach and referee: he was particularly active in training junior boxers at the city Pioneer Palace, cycling there every morning on his old black bike. It was a tough school for the “Jacksonovtsy,” as several of his ex-pupils were to recall. Vladimir Karpov, who became editor-in-chief in Moscow of the literary journal *Novy mir*, records that “we trained every morning and evening, concentrating on stamina and strength. Granddad Sid was a stickler for discipline, never permitted alcohol into his home, and had no time for slackers. It was the sort of training for life you remember forever.”<sup>18</sup>

Jackson did not spare his son the experience. Young Leo was introduced to boxing at 11, eventually to become the Republican champion and one of the top three boxers in the country for his weight. Even as an eminent surgeon, he continued to referee boxing right up to his early death at 56 in 1986.

Jackson the elder has gone down in Soviet sports history, inter alia, as “the first person to develop practical training methods for top-class athletes in a hot climate.”<sup>19</sup> In view of the many athletes, European and Asian, who have come out of Soviet Central Asia, that is no mean accolade. But Sid Jackson gained most renown within his beloved sport of boxing. Besides being the chief Republican boxing coach for many years, he was also one of the first recipients of the 1936-introduced title of Merited Coach of the USSR: his certificate bears the number “4,” denoting him as only the fourth person to be awarded the title. Just reward for a man who in 45 years coached several thousand young pugilists! His Uzbek team won the USSR Boxing Championships several times and produced a number of Olympic, European, and Soviet medal winners. Not just local Europeans like Nikolai Anfimov and Vladimir Shin, but Central Asians like Abdulla Kadyrakhunov, Isold Mullayev, and Zakir Abdulkadyrov, all of whom won medals at the European championships. His most famous pupil was the Soviet Union’s best-ever boxer, the middleweight Valeri Popenchenko, Olympic champion and winner of the Barker Cup for the most technically skilled boxer at the Mexico (1968) Olympics.<sup>20</sup> Jackson also coached the most successful Uzbek boxer, Rufat Riskiyev, who became USSR champion, world amateur title-holder (Havana, 1976) and silver medalist at the Montreal Olympics in 1976. In tribute, a feature film was subsequently made of his career, featuring prominently his first coach.

#### Links with America

Jackson was still active in boxing at the ripe old age of 79, accompanying the Uzbek team to Tallin in Estonia, at the other end of the country, in the summer of 1965. But time was running out for the seemingly indestructible

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18. Personal communication from Jackson's former colleagues and his daughter (March 1988).

19. Vladimir Karpov, “Lichny opyt,” *Novy mir*, 8 (1970): 3.

20. Kumov, p. 162

old bruiser. He had an operation for stomach cancer in November 1964; but that had not confined him to a less hectic life style. On a visit to his beloved son Leo in Alma Ata, several hundred miles away, on the Soviet border with China, the two went walking in the mountains, and Leo recounted how "Dad went striding on ahead, despite the great pain he was in, me lagging behind out of breath."<sup>21</sup> Two months later, Sid died, on 5 January 1966, just three months short of his 80th birthday. The stream of letters of condolences from all over the country demonstrated his popularity; his funeral was said to have been the largest manifestation ever seen in the city: ample testimony to the enormous love and respect for the city's adopted American son.

In his declining years, so his daughter recounts, he often talked of seeing America again, visiting his sister Rosa; all his requests for an exit visa, however, had been denied. But he did meet up with Rosa: she visited Tashkent in 1958—their first meeting in 44 years. And she returned just before his operation in 1964. On her return to America she sent Sid another invitation which this time gained Soviet approval. Sadly, it was too late. He was in no condition to make such an arduous journey after the cancer operation. His daughter recalls how he frequently would take out from his desk drawer his sister's letter of invitation, the tears silently streaming down his face.<sup>22</sup>

Rosa made another visit in 1970, this time to lay flowers on her brother's grave. She received her brother's son at her home in Los Angeles in 1972, and his daughter in 1973. The next year she herself died, well into her 80s.

It is a mark of recognition of Sid Jackson's immense contribution to Soviet boxing that within months of his death the sports authorities established the annual nationwide Jackson Memorial Boxing Tournament (often judged in the 1970s and early 1980s by his son Leo); each year, participants in the tournament still make a ritual pilgrimage to Jackson's grave in Tashkent's main cemetery.<sup>23</sup> Further, a special section of the city Sports Museum is devoted solely to him.<sup>24</sup> No other foreigner has ever been accorded such honors.<sup>25</sup>

The American whom fate cast upon Russia's shores in the time of Tsar Nicholas II lived through two world wars, two revolutions, civil war, famine, mass terror, the rule of Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev—and survived it all. More than that: the barely literate Jewish bruiser from the slums of the Bronx raised himself to become college professor of English. Merited Coach of the USSR, and hero who stands forever in Russia's boxing hall of fame.<sup>26</sup>

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21. Popenchenko's early debt to Jackson was confirmed in a personal communication in Moscow in 1971, shortly before the boxer's tragic death in a fall at his home.

22. Personal communication from Lev Sidneyvich Jackson in correspondenc (August 1984).

23. Personal communication at the home of Paina Kats-Jackson on 13 march 1988.

24. *Traditsionny turnir po boksu, posvyashchenny pamyati zasluzhennovo trenera SSSR S. L. Jacksona* (Tashkent: Uzebksky Respublikansky Sovet DSC Spartak, 1977).

25. Witnessed in Tashkent, March 1988.

26. The only other American honored in any similiar way is John Reed, who has a plaque dedicated to him on the Kremlin wall in Moscow's Red Square.