
The Nazi Olympics: Berlin 1936

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THE NAZI OLYMPICS: BERLIN 1936; Special exhibition at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, D.C. Developed by Sara Bloomfield, Associate Director for Public Programs; Steve Goodell Director of Special Exhibitions; Greg Naranjo, Exhibition Developer; and Susan Bachrach, Exhibition Historian.

Conventional wisdom suggests that a successful museum exhibit should feature evocative artifacts or interactive devices that draw in the visitor. But *The Nazi Olympics: Berlin 1936*, which is on display at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum from July 1996 to July 1997 and then will travel to other locations, defies that convention. It is a very traditional exhibit without dramatic artifacts or devices and built largely around flat panels, featuring reproductions of newspaper articles, photos, and posters, along with some film footage. But it is also powerful and largely successful.

Why? A key reason is context. The exhibit's location within the Holocaust Museum is an important feature of its success. Visitors treat it as part of the museum and they approach it with the same seriousness and attentiveness that the entire museum evokes. They move through the exhibit with a hushed and reverent silence broken by an occasional baby crying or a whispered conversation that differs from the animated talking in small groups that is common in most museums. They also read the labels and look at the pictures with more care than usual. Anyone who has watched visitors at exhibits knows that they often move through quickly, only pausing and looking closely when something catches their eye or their fancy. Visitors to the Holocaust Museum generally proceed much more deliberately than other museum visitors and that deliberateness extends to this exhibit as well.

Another part of the context is the timeliness of the exhibit. I visited in August 1996, just a few weeks after the Atlanta Olympics had concluded. The connection gave the exhibit a power that it would not have had a year earlier. Lurking over the

exhibit is the comparison between an earlier Olympics of such obviously profound political consequence and a very recent Olympics that was turned into a television spectacle with cheap emotional content. (Or is that only my own cynical comparison? Did other visitors hold a more reverential view of the 1996 Olympics?)

The story that the exhibit tells is both straightforward and probably familiar to most readers of this journal. It begins with a brief overview of the rise of Naziism in Germany, focusing particularly on the years 1933 to 1936. Then it turns to the relationship between German sports and German politics in a section on the "Nazification of German Sport," which looks both at the uses of sport for indoctrination and at the exclusion of non-Aryans. Here the story of Gretel Bergmann, the German Jewish track star who was barred from the 1936 German Olympic team, is introduced.

Politically and interpretively, the key section of the exhibit is the next one on the "Boycott Debate." The curators' sympathies appear to be with the advocates of the boycott, but that sympathy is muted. The opening to the entire exhibit puts the case for the boycott tentatively: "Having rejected a proposed boycott of the 1936 Olympics, the United States and other Western Democracies missed the opportunity to take a stand that some observers claimed at the time might have given Hitler pause and bolstered international resistance to Nazi tyranny." The exhibit clearly frames the clash between Jeremiah T. Mahoney, the president of the Amateur Athletic Union, who tried to lead a boycott, and the president of the American Olympic Committee, Avery Brundage, who maneuvered a close vote in the A.A.U. against the boycott. Brundage argued that "the Olympic games belong to the athletes and not the politicians" and charged that a "Jewish-Communist conspiracy" sought to keep the United States out of the games.

The exhibit also provides revealing coverage of the response to the boycott effort among African Americans (most of whom opposed the boycott and some of whom noted the hypocrisy of focusing on the treatment of the Jews in Germany, while ignoring discrimination against African Americans at home) and among Jews. Some Jewish leaders like Rabbi Stephen S. Wise strongly supported the boycott, but others worried that it might foster anti-Semitism at home. Jewish athletes also split over the boycott. The largely Jewish basketball team from Long Island University (coached by Clair Bee, who was later to become famous as the author of a popular series of sports books for young people) boycotted the Olympic trials, whereas such athletes as track star Marty Glickman (later a well-known sports announcer) joined the team.

The largest section is naturally devoted to the Olympics itself; it includes some excellent film footage of the events. Particular attention is given to the remarkable record of African American athletes, whose success challenged myths of Aryan superiority. Ten of the 18 black members of the American team—including such notables as Jessie Owens, future Congressman Ralph Metcalfe, and Matthew "Mack" Robinson (older brother of Jackie)—won medals. But perhaps the most dramatic and troubling image in this section is of fencer Helene Mayer, the only Jew on the German team. The half-Jewish (and blonde) Mayer gives the Nazi salute as she is awarded the silver medal.

In many ways, the most compelling portion of the exhibit comes in the closing section on the aftermath. The moving, final panels are devoted to pictures of Olympians who perished in the Holocaust including the German Jewish gymnast Alfred Flatow (who won a gold medal in the 1896 Olympics), the German Communist wrestler Werner Seelenbinder (who was beheaded for treason), and the Sinti (Gypsy) boxer Johann Trollman. (The exhibit contains significant information on the oppression of the Gypsies—one of the ways that it avoids an exclusively Jewish-centered view of the Holocaust.)

The closing section also includes four compelling video history interviews with key figures in the story of the 1936 Olympics—track star Marty Glickman (who tells the story of how he and his Jewish teammate, Sam Stoller, were replaced at the last minute in the 400-meter relay by Owens and Metcalfe for reasons that Glickman attributes to anti-Semitism); African American gold medalist John Woodruff (who argues that black success destroyed this master race thing); Harvard track team captain Milton Green (who boycotted the Olympics at the request of his rabbi); and high jump star Gretel Bergmann (whose Jewish heritage barred her from the German team). The decision to locate the oral histories in this section of the exhibit is disappointing, because it puts them out of the way and in a place where it is uncomfortable to stand and listen to all four interviews. They would have been much more powerful if they had been strategically placed throughout the exhibit—allowing you, for example, to hear Marty Glickman's version of events at the place in the exhibit where his story is told.

The looks on the visitors' faces and their comments in the guest book suggest that they found the exhibit a moving experience, but what messages did they take away with them? I suspect (and my reading of the guest book supports this) that one conclusion is that the 1936 Olympics were part of the larger and inexorable tragedy of the Holocaust. The guest book includes many words about the sadness of the event or the implacable evil of Hitler. Yet a different lesson of the Nazi Olympics might focus on this as a moment in which people could have fought back against Naziism by, for example, boycotting the games. Though the curators seem sympathetic to that interpretation, this message may get overwhelmed by the larger sense of tragedy engendered by the museum itself as well as the stories of individual heroism and achievement (e.g., Owens' four gold medals) that are such a staple of sport history.

I am not sure how readily the curators could have conveyed this alternative message. One possibility would have been to create a place in the exhibit where visitors would need to make their own choice about whether or not the games should have been boycotted in the same way the Smithsonian's Field to Factory exhibit forces visitors to walk through a white or colored doorway. Another possibility would have been an effort to connect the 1936 Olympics to more recent efforts to politicize sports—for example, the boycott of South African sports teams or the U.S. refusal to participate in the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Or better yet, how about a sidebar on what current International Olympic Committee president Juan Antonio Samaranch was doing in the 1930s? (He was with the Spanish fascists and later became Francisco Franco's sports czar.) But, for a variety

of obvious reasons, the curators and exhibit designers may have not wanted to confront visitors so sharply with the difficult choices that the past and the present sometimes offer us. These reservations aside, 'The Nazi Olympics' is a thoughtful and moving representation of one of the most important and most meaningful moments in the history of sport. It deserves to be widely seen.