

Hammerin' Hank

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THE LIFE AND TIMES OF HANK GREENBERG (1999). Dir./Prod. Aviva Kempner. Cowboy Booking International.

Hank Greenberg's major league baseball career (1930, 1933-1941, and 1946-1947) was spent with the Detroit Tigers and Pittsburgh Pirates. Greenberg won four home run and four RBI titles. His 183 RBIs in 1937 fell only one short of Lou Gehrig's American League record, and no right handed batter exceeded his 1938 total of 58 home runs until 1998. Only four players have higher lifetime slugging percentages than Greenberg's .605. Twice he received the American League's Most Valuable Player award. Despite injuries and four and one-half years lost to World War II military service, Greenberg augmented his .313 lifetime average with 331 career home runs and 1,276 RBIs, ensuring his election to the Baseball Hall of Fame.

The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg is not, however, about baseball statistics. The film examines Greenberg from the vantage point of culture and American Jewry. The September 1934 controversy concerning Greenberg's competing obligations to the Detroit Tigers, fighting for an American League pennant, and his Jewish heritage, which required observance of the High Holidays, is central to Kempner's film. After agonizing soul searching, heightened by conflicting advice from secular and religious authorities, Greenberg played on Rosh Hashanah; his two home runs paced the Tigers to a 2-1 victory. With the pennant all but assured, Greenberg did not play on Yom Kippur. Folk poet Edgar Guest paid tribute to Greenberg's observance of the Day of Atonement:

We shall miss him on the infield
And shall miss him at the bat,
But he's true to his religion—
and I honor him for that!

Aviva Kempner inhabits *The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg*. She wrote, produced, and directed the film. Due to financial exigencies, it took approximately twelve years—nearly as long as Greenberg’s major league career—to complete the film. The film is as much a tribute to Chaim Kempner, Aviva’s late father, as it is to Hank Greenberg. A Lithuanian-Jewish immigrant, Chaim served in the American army that liberated Europe, married a Holocaust survivor, and settled in Detroit. Identification with Greenberg facilitated Chaim’s Americanization. Chaim transmitted his passion for Greenberg to his daughter. “I thought Hank Greenberg,” remembers Aviva, “was part of the Kol Nidre liturgy.” Her father and Hank Greenberg gave Aviva Kempner a counterbalance to the canards that Jews were timid, weak, and physically inept. Kempner’s first film, *The Partisans of Vilna*, honored Jewish resistance to the Nazis; her Ciesla Foundation documents heroic images of Jews. For Aviva Kempner, Hank Greenberg, who viewed his home runs as weapons against Hitler, epitomized muscular Judaism.

The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg provides ample historical context. The anti-Semitism encountered by Greenberg reflected the ethnic biases of the 1930s. During the Great Depression, anti-Semitism intensified, with Jews serving as scapegoats for economic distress. Detroit harbored two of the era’s most notorious purveyors of bigotry: automobile manufacturer Henry Ford and radio priest Father Charles Coughlin. In addition, Jewish-American concern with the Nazi menace abroad intensified anti-Semitism in isolationist America. Kempner emphasizes that Greenberg was an ethnic standard bearer at a time of great difficulty for American Jewry. Greenberg, prior to the emergence of modern Israel, was a tough Jew when the only other tough Jews recognized by American popular culture were disreputable boxers and gangsters. Although the film rescues Greenberg from relative neglect, neither Kempner’s data nor her interpretation will prove novel for specialists: they are derivative. The great strength of *The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg* rests with its ability to convey a mood. This film superbly captures the consciousness and conversations of that generation of Jewish Americans who came of age with Hank Greenberg. Although Kempner utilizes 1983 and 1984 television interviews with Greenberg as well as extensive autobiographical remarks he recorded on a Dictaphone, the Detroit slugger is not the voice of the film. The true voice of the film is the Jewish fan writ large.

Several prominent Jewish Americans appear in the documentary, discussing the profound and personal impact Greenberg had on their lives. Terming Greenberg “the single most important Jew to live in the 1930s,” high profile attorney Alan Dershowitz says of Greenberg, “He is what ‘they’ said we could never be.... As a kid, I always thought Hank Greenberg would be the first Jewish president.” For Michigan Senator Carl Levin, Greenberg “validated that this was the land of opportunity: look we could even play baseball.” Coming of age in the 1930s, second generation Jewish-Americans, the children of East European immigrants, viewed Greenberg as the apotheosis of the American Dream. The late actor Walter Matthau acknowledged a visceral attachment to Greenberg: “He was part of my dreams, part of my aspirations. I wanted to be Hank Greenberg.”

Even more evocative than the observations of celebrities are the words and emotions, captured by Kempner, of those American Jews who are not famous. For many ordinary American Jews, Hank Greenberg—big, strong, intelligent, talented, patriotic, and proud of his ethnic heritage—assumed mythic proportions. Bert Gordon, a fan, remembers the

powerful impact of Greenberg's physical presence; "Six feet four! My God, nobody had ever seen a Jew that big. Everybody was five foot five, five foot six!" On Yom Kippur 1934, the congregation applauded when the Tiger slugger entered the Shaarey Zedek synagogue. Jewish fans transformed Greenberg's 1938 assault on Babe Ruth's then record of 60 home runs in a season into a legendary epic. Greenberg, according to retired oral surgeon Don Shapiro, symbolically challenged restrictions against Jews: "They could deny Jewish boys the right to swim in a pool, but they couldn't deny the fact that a Jewish boy was close to breaking Babe Ruth's record." Young Harriet Coleman tirelessly wrote Greenberg of her unrequited admiration; Zelig-like, she even managed to appear in a photograph of Hammerin' Hank without his knowledge. Reeve Brenner, later a rabbi, found empowerment through his identification with Greenberg; "I had this Captain Marvel, Hank Greenberg, on my shoulder."

The Life and Times of Hunk Greenberg effectively synthesizes vintage newsreel footage, telling photographs, period music, clips from Hollywood films, observations spoken in Greenberg's own voice, and excerpts from numerous interviews. Yiddish renditions of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" frame the film. Beyond commentary from ordinary Jewish correspondents, Kempner's 47 interviews embrace sportswriters, baseball players, fans, and Greenberg family members.

Nonetheless, the inclusion of certain materials and the absence of others in the film elicits caveats. Kempner offers no analysis of how Greenberg's experience in the national pastime differed from that of contemporary co-religionists or from those Jewish major leaguers who preceded and followed him. A revealing 1980 interview with Greenberg, conducted by Eli Wohlgelernter for the William E. Wiener Oral History Collection, was not included. Kempner might have displayed a visual image of "Homage to Hank Greenberg," a magnificent oil painting by the talented folk artist Malach Zeldis. In this autobiographical work, Zeldis depicts Greenberg towering like a colossus high above Detroit's Navin Field, linked by an oversized radio to a Jewish household. Conversely, it is not readily apparent why Kempner included film clips from *Woman of the Year* and *The Stratton Story*. The film employs commentary from Caral Gimbel, the department store heiress who was Greenberg's first wife and the mother of his three children. Yet the documentary eschews examination of marital difficulty between Caral and Hank Greenberg and their subsequent divorce. The second Mrs. Greenberg, actress Mary Jo Tarola, whose twenty year marriage thrived until the retired slugger's 1986 death, does not appear in the documentary. Indeed, the film makes no reference to Mary Jo Tarola or Greenberg's second marriage.

Although omission of significant biographical details distorts a life portrait, *The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg* offers detailed coverage of its subject only through his first thirty-six years. In addition to silence about Greenberg's divorce and remarriage, cursory attention to the second half of his life limits treatment of his years as a front office executive for the Cleveland Indians and Chicago White Sox, his collaboration with maverick baseball entrepreneur Bill Veeck, relations with his own children, the continuing evolution of his Jewish identity, and Greenberg's thoughts about Israel. There is a legitimate rationale for terminating Greenberg's biographical treatment in 1947, with the end of his playing career. Moreover, by 1947 the chronological distance from the era of mass immi-

gration and the appearance of the third generation lessened the need for a Jewish standard bearer. After World War II, America and its national pastime increasingly viewed minority group dynamics from a racial rather than ethnic perspective. As Kempner emphasizes, it is significant that Greenberg's last year as a major league player was Jackie Robinson's first. The film depicts the veteran Jewish star offering strong encouragement to the embattled black pioneer

The Life and Times of Hank Greenberg is an exemplary film. Interesting and evocative, the documentary gives new life to an important passage in American ethnic and sport history. Kempner reminds us that sports in the United States have historically related to status, self-image, inter-group dynamics, discrimination, social mobility, generational relations, assimilation, and the American Dream itself.