

Reflections of a Jewish Athlete in Nazi Germany

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Although German by birth, Gretel Bergman, recognized internationally as one of the best female high jumpers in the world, never made the 1936 Olympic team even though recruiters had scoured her country in their search for athletic talent. She did not win a place on the German Olympic team “not because she was Jewish,” but because she was not a member of the German Light Athletic Association -which barred Jews.

Through personal interviews and the writings of individuals who observed events in National Socialist Germany, this paper examines the problems, perceptions and insights of a competitive champion trapped by forces which reduce the individual to helplessness when criteria other than measurable athletic performance determine selection for participation in the Olympic Games in clear violation of Olympic principles. This paper also examines the dilemma of an athlete who chose to participate in a competition despite the threat of a boycott which sought to win for her that right denied.

Bergman’s life bears examination for other reasons. Insofar as it was typical of the fate of other Jews in the Third Reich, it is instructive as well -except that she beat the odds and survived. Bergman won medals in four countries, continuing in competition despite the difficulties of adjusting to life in a new country. Only a war could end her resolve.

In 1979, in a ceremony of Special Commemoration, Bergman was inducted into the Jewish Hall of Fame, representing those athletes who “under Nazi domination or influence, never knew the measure of ‘the Olympic spirit’ simply because they were Jewish.” And so recognition finally came to Gretel Bergman -recognition, but never the Olympic gold she had so avidly sought.