

## *From the Ghetto To The Games: Jewish Athletes in Hungary*

by Andrew Handler (Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, No. 192, 1985). Reviewed by Steven A. Riess, Northeastern Illinois University, Chicago, Illinois., U.S.A.

Historian Andrew Handler is the author and editor of several works on Hungarian history and the holocaust, including the recent *From Goals to Guns: The Golden Age of Hungary's Success in Soccer, 1950-56*. In 1985 he completed *From the Ghetto to the Game*, but it received very little attention among scholars even though it was a volume in the prestigious *East European Monographs* series edited by Stephen Fischer-Galati. Handler was partly motivated to write this book by nostalgia, having been a junior member of the Hungarian Teamsters' Union soccer team as well as a tennis club that represented the National Police (and encountering considerable anti-Semitism). He was also motivated by his desire to demonstrate the extent of Jewish Hungarian participation in sport at its highest levels (Hungarian Jews had won nearly one-third of all the Olympic medals won by Jews, including 48 gold compared to 18 for the USA through 1964) as well as to write the first thorough volume on the athletic contributions of any Jewish national community. Handler argues that Jewish athletic participation helped advance Hungarian sport and physical education on the national and international scene, which was welcomed by liberal politicians and assimilationist Jews.

The book begins with a chapter entitled "The 'New Jews'" which is a brief overview of Jewish Hungarian history to about 1948. A more thorough analysis of the subject would have been very useful, particularly in providing a more complete context for the examination of Jewish athletes.

The next chapter examines the first generation of Jewish athletic champions when "Jews were the very antitheses of the values, traditions, self-image and physical appearance which were associated with the Hungarians' millennial national past" (p. 14). Handler identifies Dr. Henrick Schuschny's 1895 essay in the influential *Evkonyv* (Yearbook) of the Hungarian Jewish Literary Association as a landmark in the course of Jewish assimilation. Schuschny argued that assimilation was incomplete, but could be fully achieved through physical education as healthy, robust Jewish folk would gain recognition from the broader society. Schuschny's assimilationist goals were further advanced by educator Ferenc Kemeny, a fellow student of Coubertin in Paris, and the first Hungarian member of the IOC. In 1894 Kemeny and Count Csaky recommended Budapest as an alternative to Athens when political and economic problems threatened the first Olympic Games. Two years later when the first Olympics were held, three of Hungary's seven competitors were Jews, selected by secret ballot by the Hungarian Olympic Committee. Eighteen year-old Alfred Hajos-Guttmann won the 100m and 1200m races swum in the Bay of Piraeus. He was an outstanding all-around athlete, a member of the first national soccer team, and in 1924 shared the championship medal in architecture at the Paris Olympics for his stadium designs.

In Hungary, as in other continental countries, it was essential for aspiring athletes to join top athletic clubs if they hoped to flourish. Jews were not accepted by the prestigious Magyar Athletikai Club (MAC), founded in 1875 by Count Mika Esterhazy, which was the nation's largest sports club. Leading Jewish athletes had to represent less prestigious clubs. The top club identified with Jews was MTK, founded in 1888, which was never exclusively Jewish. Nonetheless, Handler argues that Jewish sportsmen (competitors and organizers) were involved in the rise of virtually all sport in Hungary, except for equestrianism and rowing, including the first workers' sports clubs.

In 1906 the Zionist Fencing and Athletic Club (VAC) was organized in Budapest. It was created in response to Max Nordau's call for muscular Judaism, and was the nation's only exclusively Jewish sports club, an anathema to the assimilationists. Within a few years VAC could attract some top Jewish athletes, including in 1913, Imre Gelert of MTK, an Olympic medalist in 1908 and 1912. In the following years, several VAC gymnasts made the national team. While Zionist in theory, VAC generally conformed to the nationalist and assimilationist philosophy of most Jewish athletes. Handler explains this was why Hungarian Jews did not participate in the Maccabiah Games.

There were no Jewish competitors in the 1900 and 1904 Olympics. Yet the head of the 1906 team that attended the Intercalary Olympic Games in Athens was Alfred Brull, a wealthy philanthropist, and sports administrator. In 1908 two Jewish athletes of opposite physical stature won individual gold medals. Dr. Jenő Fuchs, the winner of the sabre, was physically unimposing--short, balding, and wore glasses, whereas Richard Weisz, for several years the Hungarian heavyweight weightlifting and wrestling champion, took the gold in heavyweight Greco-Roman wrestling. In addition, the sabre team (4/5 Jewish) won the team championship. Other medals were won in swimming and track, although world record javelin thrower Mor Kóvász-Kóvács came in a disappointing fourth.

By 1908 Hungary had become a world power in fencing; seven of the eight finalists in the sabre competition at the Olympics were Hungarians. This martial, upper class sport seemed inappropriate for Jewish athletes, who had been barred from bearing arms in the nineteenth century. Handler argues that Jewish interest in the sport began among university students who learned to fence so they could challenge anti-Semitic classmates to duels. The Jewish success in fencing was so recent that as late as 1908 there were no Jews of national repute. Jenő Fuchs, for instance, belonged to no club and had no national title, having come in third in the qualifying competition for the Olympics.

Jewish success in the sport continued at the 1912 Games in Stockholm when Fuchs repeated as sabre champion. One third of the entire squad was Jewish, including half of the gold medal sabre team. In addition, the Jewish-dominated gymnastics team took second, the forerunner of substantial successes in that sport.

The Jewish-Hungarian emphasis on social mobility and assimilation was reflected by their favorite sports, fencing, swimming, water polo, and figure skating. The first Hungarian figure skating champion was Arpad Weisz. Jews virtually monopolized the sport from 1908 to 1923, including Lili Kronberger, national champion from 1908 to 1910 (at a time when men and women competed against each

other), and world champion from 1908-1911. Her successor, Andor Szende, was national champion through 1923. Another sport that Jews dominated was table tennis (ping pong), imported from England in 1902.

Despite Jewish participation in high status sports, Handler argues that soccer best revealed Jewish efforts at assimilation, even though the sport did not stress individuality or social status. Soccer was the most popular game in Hungary, and the sport where Jewish athletes could be publicly viewed. Between 1901 and 1918, about thirty Jews played for the national team. Handler argues that in the early 1900s the majority of the star players were Jewish. Jews continued to dominate the national team through the early 1920s; eight starters on the squad that played in the Paris Olympics were Jews.

Politics played a significant role in Hungarian sport in the 1920s when the country was controlled by moderate anti-Semite Admiral Horthy. The 1920 Olympics had been originally scheduled for Budapest, but the International Olympic Committee, dominated by representatives from the allies, moved the event to Antwerp, and barred Hungary from participating. The next Olympics where Hungarian Jews made a major impact was in 1932 when five Jewish fencers helped Hungary capture the team sabre titles. Handler points out that there were relatively few Jewish male and female fencers in the inter-war era, yet that small cohort were obviously sufficient to produce world-class fencers. Hungary also took gold in soccer. Its outstanding soccer eleven had a Jewish coach, Bela Momjadi, and three Jewish players.

In the inter-war era, Jews excelled at aquatic sports and table tennis. In table tennis Jewish men won every Hungarian singles national title but one between 1925 and 1940; and they were equally successful in doubles through 1941. Jewish women also dominated the sport, sharing in all but two pairs championships between 1926 and 1939. Anna Sipes alone won five singles and eight doubles titles. On the international level, seven world championships were won by Hungarians between 1927 and 1933, and only once was there a gentile squad member. Viktor Baran himself won 22 gold medals in world competition. In the United States, Jewish men and women dominated the sport after World War II. Although Handler is silent on the subject, it would be interesting to discover the social backgrounds of table tennis players since it was a very accessible, inexpensive indoor sport of no particular social status.

Handler does not discuss any debates in the Jewish community over participation in the 1936 Games. At Berlin Ilona Elek (half-Jewish) won gold in foil fencing, Ibolya Csak won the high jump, and Karoly Karpati won in wrestling over the German national champion. Endo Kabo, who encountered a great deal of anti-Semitism from the people running the sport, and was the only Jew on the fencing squad, won the individual sabre championship and led his cohorts to the team title as well. Finally, a Jewish coach and two players helped Hungary win the water polo title. Fascism and Nazism ultimately had a deleterious impact upon Hungarian Jewish sport. In 1939 a law was enacted that barred Jews from sports clubs and athletic competition. Several former and current stars were killed in extermination camps or died from the horrible conditions under which they were forced to exist during the

war. Ferenc Kemeny, grandfather of the Olympic Movement in Hungary, committed suicide in 1944 during an Arrow Cross incident.

Jewish institutions were revitalized after the war, but the Communist takeover badly hurt the community. The reborn VAC was dissolved, Jewish culture was oppressed, and Zionist organizations were broken up. Nonetheless, the national interest in sport gave middle class athletes an opportunity to get back into the national mainstream. In 1946 Alfred Hajos-Guttman was appointed president of the Hungarian Olympic Association, and two years later Ferenc Mezo, winner of a gold medal in Amsterdam in 1928 for *The History of the Olympic Games*, was appointed to the International Olympic Committee.

After the War, Jews continued to perform capably in sport, especially table tennis and gymnastics. Gymnast Agnes Keleti, one of the greatest gymnasts ever, participated in the 1948 Olympics, although she did not medal. In 1952 at Helsinki, Keleti won four medals, including gold in the floor exercise, and, in 1956 at Melbourne, at the advanced age of thirty-five, won four gold and two silver medals. However, in fencing, retirements and the Holocaust largely wiped out the Jewish preeminence. The Elek sisters, who were nearly the only prominent Jewish women fencers, continued their outstanding performances after the war. In 1948 Ilona Elek won a gold twelve years after her victory in Berlin. She was considered the most successful woman fencer in history. In 1964 Tamas Gabor won a gold medal in team fencing.

Post-war Hungarian Jews were particularly successful in aquatic sports. Laszlo Fabian won twelve world championships in kayaking, including a gold medal in Melbourne in the pairs 10,000m. Dezso Gyarmati and Gyorgy Karpati, both half-Jewish, made notable contributions in water polo, a sport that Hungary dominated on the world stage. Karpati won three gold medals in 1948, 1956, and 1964. The highlight match was the 4-0 victory over the USSR in 1956 at Melbourne when Russian tanks were in Budapest. This was one of the bloodiest contests in the sport's history. In swimming, Eva Szekely was one of the most noted breaststrokers in history. She won her first national championship in 1940, at age thirteen, and returned to prominence after the war with 32 individual national championships. She failed to medal at the London Games in 1948, but at Helsinki in 1952 won the 200m breaststroke in Olympic record time. Handler asserts that she was one of the few Hungarian Jews who publicly acknowledged their ethnicity. Her daughter Andrea Gyarmati, a world record holder in the butterfly and backstroke, won two Olympic medals in 1972.

Handler had a difficult time accumulating his data. Many of the individuals he contacted were indifferent; some did not want to publicize their Jewish identity; although others were very enthusiastic about the project. One of the biggest problems was simply identifying the Jewish origins of athletes, especially since many Hungarian residents of the late nineteenth century had Magyarized their family names. He decided that rather than adopt the prevailing definition of a Jew as someone who so identifies him/herself, or was the child of a Jewish mother ("Such criteria will simply not suffice with respect to societies in which the public declaration of one's Jewishness is a serious impediment to advancement, success and acceptance" (p.viii).) The author omitted individuals whose religious identity was in

dispute. However, it should be noted that George Eisen in his 1986 review in the *Journal of Sport History* (p. 156) questioned the identity of several of Handler's subjects.

The manuscript does not have footnotes or endnotes, although, there is a bibliography. Interviews provided an important source of information. Hungarian language materials were heavily relied upon for primary and secondary literature. There is a critical bibliographical essay on Marxist Hungarian sport scholarship.

The work would have greatly benefitted from a more elaborate integration of his subject with Hungarian social and cultural history and the history of Jewish Hungarians, widely perceived as extremely assimilationist compared to other east European Jews. How did their experience compare with the Jews of nearby Vienna or Prague? Were Jews in Hungary more geographically dispersed than in neighboring lands? Despite these criticisms, Handler's book is very informative, and broadens our awareness of the importance of sport in eastern Europe and of the varied experiences of Jews in the Diaspora.