

Gideon Reuveni, Michael Brenner, eds.

Emanzipation durch Muskelkraft:
Juden und Sport in Europa.

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European Maccabeans

It is an ironic twist of history that it was Judaism, with its comparative leniency toward the needs of the body, that came to be associated with the rejection of physical activity, rather than Christianity, a religion that declared matters of the flesh sinful from the start. Whereas the Hebrew scriptures depict Jews engaged in vigorous exercise, such as smiting enemies, hiking through the desert, or wrestling angels, the New Testament offers little in terms of Christian athleticism. Over the centuries, however, Christian Europe developed a distinct image of the Jew as studious, but physically inferior; shrewd in business matters, but unwilling, even unable, to perform hard labor; cunning, but cowardly. Today, the state of Israel both refutes and confirms the cliché of the unathletic Jew: while Israeli soldiers embody the "muscle Jew," Israeli sports lead a sorry existence on the world stage. Though there are a few award-winning Olympic athletes, the thought that the Israeli national soccer team might one day win the World Cup will give rise to either laughter or tears, depending on whom one talks to. Seen in this light, this volume is part of a relatively new trend in Jewish historiography. Scholars such as Linda Borish and Jeffrey Gurock have produced interesting studies on the history of Jewish sports in the United States; in addition to written works, *Watermarks* (2004), a documentary film on Hakoah Vienna's women's swim team, has broadened our knowledge of Jewish athletes in Europe. It is thus revealing that the Michael Brenner and Gideon Reuveni still define one of the book's objectives as rebutting the cliché of the feeble Jewish egghead. Even today, historians confronting deeply engrained Jewish stereotypes have to be wary of producing apologetics despite themselves.

As is well known, the alleged physical unfitness of Jews for work and military service was often used as an argument against emancipation by antisemites. Disproving it was therefore more than just a matter of personal pride; sports served, as Brenner points out, "sowohl als Vehikel der Inklusion wie auch als Mittel der Exklusion" (p. 8). The theme of "muscle Judaism," famously introduced by Max Nordau at the Second Zionist Congress in Vienna in 1898, pervades all of the contributions to some extent. Those by Moshe Zimmermann, Daniel Wildmann, and Gideon Reuveni address it directly. Following the link between nationalism and exercise established by the German *Turnverein* movement and its antisemitic founder, Friedrich

Ludwig Jahn, during the Napoleonic invasion, Jews had to prove their physical fitness if they wanted to belong to the "national body." Zionists took up this idea when they demanded the creation of a "new Jew": physically fit, ready to defend himself and Jewish honor, able to work the land and, preferably, young. Physical and moral education were thus inextricably linked. The history-laden Hebrew names of most Jewish sport clubs testify to their participation in the creation of a national ideal: Hakoah, Maccabi, Bar Kochba. Yet, in his fine essay on Jewish sports in interwar Poland, Jack Jacobs demonstrates that Zionism was not the only Jewish political movement to instrumentalize (or, to put it less ideologically, enjoy) sports. Jewish socialists, some of them decidedly anti-Zionist, justified such bourgeois diversions as boxing (next to soccer, the most popular Jewish sport) with the need to prepare workers for the class struggle. Whether Jewish socialists saw it as a victory for the working class or for the Jewish people when a champion by the memorable name of Shepsl Rotholts literally knocked three Nazi boxers out of the German national team shall remain unanswered. Another Polish Jew who made waves during the interwar period, circus artist Siegmund Breitbart, is in a way the odd man out. Biting through iron and the like does not count as a sport, and Sharon Gillerman's essay on Breitbart must thus be taken as dealing with Jewish physicality in the broadest sense. The reception and creative adaptation of that legendary Jewish "superman" over the years by different interpreters, however, show the continuity of the reduction of Jews to foils for various fantasies. Speaking of legends, the Austrian Jewish sports club Hakoah Vienna is abundantly represented both in the book and in the annals of European Jewish sports. John Bunzl devotes his article to the club, which won the Austrian soccer championship in 1925 and became the model for many other Jewish athletic associations. But Hakoah Vienna, like Jewish sports in general, was embroiled in a losing battle with European antisemitism. The articles of Michael John, Tony Collins, Rudolf Oswald, Victor Karady, and Miklos Hadas describe what is basically the futility of Jewish endeavors to gain acceptance (or simply assert normality) through sports. Nevertheless, while the individual and collective desire for either assimilation or dissimilation through physical regeneration may have remained unfulfilled, many chapters show its beneficial effect on Jews who were threatened by psychological destruction. In particular, Albert Lichtblau's contribution on refugee sports in Shanghai and Philipp Grammes's piece on athletics in German DP camps illustrate the function of sports as a valve for the aggressions of a victimized group under conditions of enforced inactivity. The collection ends on a seemingly lighter note, with John Efron's not only amusing but also analytically strong case study of Tottenham Hotspur, an English soccer club whose gentile fans proudly call themselves "the Yids." As Efron points out, the appropriation of a misunderstood Jewish identity by this definitely non-Jewish audience paradoxically allowed some young British Jews, in what constitutes a minstrel show in reverse, to reassert their Jewishness.

Emanzipation durch Muskelkraft is an engaging and entertaining book. Its few shortcomings should be mentioned nonetheless. First, for a work

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subtitled *Juden und Sport in Europa*, it is too Germanocentric; half of its essays deal (all or in part) with Germany, two others with Austria. While the absence of, say, Iceland is not sorely missed, what about countries such as Italy and France, which are of great importance both for Jewish and sports history? Second, antisemites were not the only ones who denied Jews any talent for sports or polemicized about the "Jewish body" and its alleged unfitness for athletics and its twin, military heroism. Numerous Jewish jokes (admittedly, often distinguished from antisemitic ones merely by the person who tells them) poke fun at Jewish weakness and "goyish" (gentile) strength. Yiddish idioms such as "healthy as a goy" reveal a lot about the ready adoption of the stereotype of the weak, sickly Semite by Jews themselves. This stereotype was perhaps easily accepted since it was (and is) often accompanied by pride in the purported prevalence of superior intellectual qualities in Jews, more indicative of what is uniquely human than the brute, beastly strength that marked the "goy." If Jews admitted the existence of a "Jewish body," they did so knowing that it was crowned by a "yiddisher kop," a Jewish--meaning a smart--head. However, hardly any of the essays as much as mention the embrace of the non-athletic Jew by Jews. Such minor weaknesses aside, Brenner and Reuveni have managed to gather a highly informative collection of methodologically sound essays; it will convince any skeptics that sports is a worthy subject for serious intellectual attention.

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