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Posted on Thu, Dec. 30, 2004

In this corner ...

The new exhibition "Sting Like a Maccabee" sheds light on the little-known history of Jews in boxing.**By Robert Strauss
For The Inquirer**

Jewish boxers. Today, the two words are rarely spoken in the same sentence. But at the turn of the 20th century, when many poor sections of American cities were filling up with immigrant Jews from Eastern Europe, boxing gyms were often found in among the synagogues, tailor shops and pushcarts.

"Boxing was a quick way to make money in tough times, when the alternative was probably to work in a sweatshop," boxing historian Mike Silver said.

"It was an open sport. Anyone could go into it. You could just put on a pair of gloves, go to a local club, and hope you were good enough to make a buck doing it."

Like the Irish and Italians, there was no shortage of Jews trying to make that tough buck in the boxing game. In fact, between 1910 and the beginning of World War II, about 20,000 Jews fought for some kind of purse, according to Silver, the curator of "Sting Like a Maccabee: The Golden Age of the American Jewish Boxer," currently on display at the National Museum of American Jewish History.

The exhibit is a tour through a time when boxing was an integral part of the Jewish immigrant experience as they struggled to assimilate into mainstream American life.

"About one-third of all the fighters in the country in the 1920s were Jewish," said J. Russell Peltz, the Philadelphia boxing promoter. "They could make more in one night than their fathers could make in some labor job in a month." Jews fought other Jews in title bouts 11 times during that period, Peltz said.

More than a dozen pieces of Peltz's private collection of boxing memorabilia - as well as hundreds of other artifacts - are part of "Sting Like a Maccabee," many of them with a Philadelphia connection. Among his pieces are the bell from The Arena at 46th and Market Streets, site of many Philadelphia fights; menus from the restaurant of Lew Tendler, perhaps the greatest Philadelphia Jewish fighter of all; and a slew of boxing photos, posters, and advertisements.

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Until the turn of the 20th century, boxing was primarily a bare-knuckle sport, outlawed in many states. But as protective gloves and other safety standards came into use, the sport quickly became legitimized - and legalized - around the country, and was hugely popular throughout the 1920s.

"Everything really big [in sports] happened in boxing first," Silver said. "The first million-dollar gate, the first live event with 100,000 people, the first sporting event broadcast on radio. The first national sporting superstar, John L. Sullivan, was a boxer.

"Jewish boxers came into the sport just at the time of its greatest popularity," he said.

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Charles Miller's painting of welterweight and lightweight champ Barney Ross (born Beryl Rosofsky).

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"Sting Like a Maccabee" - Maccabee, which means *hammer* in Hebrew, was the name of an ancient tribe of Jewish warriors whose uprising against their Syrian-Greek oppressors is celebrated in the festival of Hanukkah - is the brainchild of museum executive director Gwen Goodman. She was inspired by a photograph in the Forward, a weekly Jewish newspaper, of a painting depicting Tendler with a Star of David sewn on his boxing trunks.

The painting is part of a series done by New York artist Charles Miller, who also is fascinated with the early Jewish fighters. He had the chance to meet and talk to some of them, now in their 70s and 80s.

"With each one, there was a great story," Miller recalled. "There was a guy named Danny Kapilow who fought Rocky Graziano in an exhibition bout. He was in the Army and went off the base to fight, then had to sneak back. It was all *On the Waterfront* meets *What Makes Sammy Run?*"

Peltz said the greatest Jewish boxer of all was Benny Leonard, who held the world lightweight crown from 1917 until his retirement in 1925.

"You see all the coverage of the Eagles in the papers these days? Well, that is what there was about boxing then," Peltz said. "There were only two professional sports that mattered - baseball and boxing - and each ethnic group had their favorites.

"Among sports people, Benny Leonard was on a par with Michael Jordan. He was that famous."

Leonard's greatest fight, at least in terms of coverage, Peltz said, was against Tendler on July 27, 1922. The event, before a sold-out crowd at Yankee Stadium, ended in a no-decision.

"Imagine 63,000 people coming to see two Jewish boys fight!" Peltz said. "But that's the way it was then." A newsreel of the event is part of the exhibition.

In all, 27 Jews held world boxing titles during the golden age of the sport, including Barney Ross (born Beryl Rosofsky), who won three titles during the Depression and was a hero at Guadalcanal in World War II. His boxing and Army careers, and his subsequent addiction and recovery from morphine dependency, were the subject of the 1950s movie *Monkey on My Back*, starring Cameron Mitchell. A Peltz-donated poster from the film is included in the museum display.

The GI Bill brought an end to the Jewish boxers' golden era, as more jobs for the newly college-educated group coincided with the flood of Jews into the suburbs - away from the cities, and from their immigrant roots.

In some ways, the story of Jews in boxing has been repeated many times.

"If you look at the history of boxing, you can trace the history of ethnic minorities into the mainstream," curator Silver said. "It starts with the Irish in this country in the mid-1800s, then down through the Jews and the Italians, and on to African Americans and, today, a lot of Latinos and Eastern Europeans, who have come along since the Cold War."

Yet the boxing world is different today, Silver and Peltz say.

"There was no hockey, no National Basketball Association, no pro football to speak of to fill arenas. But there was boxing virtually every night of the week in a big city," Peltz said.

"A good, tough Jewish kid, even if his mother didn't approve, could be in the ring a lot, looking, like kids today who play basketball in the streets, to maybe be a star."

If You Go

"Sting Like a Maccabee: The Golden Age of the American Jewish Boxer," through May, National Museum of American Jewish History, 55 N. Fifth St., Independence Mall East. Information: 215-923-3811 or www.nmajh.org. Hours: Mondays-Thursdays, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Fridays, 10 a.m.-3 p.m.; Sundays, noon-5 p.m. Closed Saturdays.

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