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### Stan Hochman | Exhibit packs a punch

#### DISPLAY HONORING JEWISH BOXERS A KNOCKOUT

THEY TELL this story about Benny Leonard,

fighting Irish Eddie Finnegan in a dusty coal mining town, early part of the last century. The crowd, fueled by booze and

bigotry, screamed for Finnegan to "kill the kike."

Leonard, furious, lashed at Finnegan, staggering him repeatedly.

Grappling into a clinch, Finnegan pleaded for mercy, gasping in Yiddish that his real name was Seymour Rosenbaum.

"I tell people," fight promoter J Russell Peltz says, "that Jewish fighters were as tough as they come...but they were afraid of their mothers. Which is why so many changed their names."

Which is why a wonderful

exhibit that opens Sunday at the National Museum of American Jewish History honoring Jewish boxers contains so many posters, photos and memorabilia

featuring guys named McCoy and Ross and Fields.

"Boxing is show business,"

explained Mike Silver, curator

of the exhibit. "Here was Jake Finklestein. Was he going to draw people as Jolting Jake Finklestein? He grew up in Chicago, near the Marshall Fields department store. He thought, Fields, that's a good name.

"Became Jackie Fields. Became the welterweight champion. Barney Ross was Beryl Rosofsky. There were three reasons for the name changes. First, to have a catchier name. Second, to keep the family from knowing. Third, to take on an Irish name because Irish fighters were crowd-pleasers."

Between 1910 and 1940, there were 26 Jewish world champions. The exhibit focuses on that

golden age and expands to include promoters, trainers and the impact on popular culture.

"These were the sons of

immigrants," said Silver, a

boxing historian and journalist. "This [boxing] was a way to move up and out of the ghetto.

A preliminary boy in the '20s could earn more in a four-rounder than his sweatshop-laboring father earned in a week.

"In many homes, though, it was thought of as a *shonda* [a sin] for a Jewish boy to turn to boxing. It was like going on the road to be an actor. What kind of bum is that? It softened the blow when the fighter starting bringing home the money."

The exhibit is titled "Sting Like a Maccabee: The Golden Age of the American Jewish Boxer." It is ironic, because it borrows from Bundini Brown's poetry that inspired Muhammad Ali, "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee." Funny thing is, Brown converted to Judaism and wore a Star of David around his neck.

"I think the exhibit is beautiful," said Silver, who crisscrossed the continent borrowing memorabilia from relatives of the boxers. "Maxie Rosenbloom was one of the great fighters of all time. When his career was over, he went to Hollywood as a character actor.

"To see his trunks, his training shoes, his boxing gloves, that had an effect on me. It made it seem alive to me. All those items, well-worn."

Rosenbloom, great fighter, awkward nickname. "Slapsie Maxie Rosenbloom," sighed Peltz, who lent more than a dozen items to the display. "A sensational fighter, who just couldn't punch hard. He fought 40 times a year, fought against everybody out there. And every fight went the full 10 rounds because he couldn't knock you out."

There are some evocative paintings by Charles Miller, and some fight film clips from Bill Cayton's legendary collection. The first American Jewish champion? Would you believe it was Harry "The Human Hairpin" Harris?

Philadelphians sparkle throughout the exhibit. Herman Taylor was an outstanding promoter who staged the Dempsey-Tunney fight. Benny Bass, who won the featherweight title in 1927, is featured. As is Benny

Leonard, who held the lightweight title from 1917 to '25. Fought 191 times, lost only three.

Lew Tendler fought Leonard twice, went the distance both times. In those days you had to knock out the champion to take his title. Tendler later owned a restaurant at Broad and Locust for years, and Peltz contributed a teacup and a copy of a 1940 menu.

A complete dinner, shrimp cocktail, brisket, two vegetables, dessert, set you back 75 cents. Corned beef and cabbage, that was 85 cents.

There are movie posters, including one for "Monkey On My Back," the story of Barney Ross. "He fought at Guadacanal," Peltz said. "Was wounded, became

addicted to morphine."

Another poster is from one of my favorite flicks, "Body and Soul," starring John Garfield. "I still cry when I see that movie," sighed Peltz, squelching the

theory that there is no crying in boxing.

The ranks of Philadelphia

Jewish fighters thinned as other routes to fame and fortune opened after World War II.

Mike Rossman, whose mother was Jewish, was the last of the champions.

"The last of the Jewish champions is my son, Daniel Peltz," Peltz said proudly, trying in vain to suppress a chuckle. "Graduated from Indiana and entered the Indiana Golden Gloves. Didn't dare tell his mom. Asked me to send him some trunks.

"Fought a wrestler from

Purdue. Won. Called and said

he didn't 'think this is for me.' Threw up, got headaches. And he'd hardly been hit. Turns out it was the flu. Wanted to pull

out of the semifinals, but stayed with it. And then, his opponent pulled out.

"Meanwhile, my wife is surfing the Internet. Checking under 'Peltz.' Finds this story from the *Indianapolis Star* about the son of the fight promoter fighting in the Golden Gloves. Goes nuts.

"Finals, I get this call from a friend at ringside. Tells me,

'You've got the Indiana 165-pound champion.' And then they announce the decision and it goes 4-1 for the other guy. We went to dinner, to a crowded restaurant.

"I figured if I told Linda there, she wouldn't shoot me. And then there was this picture of him in the paper, landing a terrific punch. I framed the picture and I've got his trophy in my office.

"He's an accountant now, with KPMG. I told him he ought to

advertise, 'If you need an accountant who's gonna fight for you...' But he never told his mother."

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

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