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## The Establishment of the Muscular Jew- The Fight Against Anti-Semitism and the Rise of Jewish Masculinity in Mid 1930s Canada

In the years prior to the start of World War II, specifically the mid 1930s, anti-Semitism was not only present in Europe, but also prevalent in Canada. This led to Jews in Canada falling victim to many aspects of oppression and also being excluded from social organizations such as sports and athletics, as well as being plagued by the popular view that Jews were weak and fragile. Canadian Jews sought to combat and transform this antisemitic societal view of them as weak and fragile people who failed to contribute to Canadian society's masculine endeavours. One of the most significant movements that Jewish men pushed forward was the development of the idea of a physically strong, "muscular Jew", which they portrayed in specific sports such as boxing and basketball. For example, Sammy Luftspring was an important role model to young Jewish men, not only because he was very successful at his sport of boxing, but because boxing was widely known as a "tough guy sport," suggesting against the grain of the antisemitic trope of their so-called weakness, that Jews can be as just as tough as anyone else. Further, the Christie Pits Riot was significant in establishing Jewish masculinity, as engaging in large scale physical brawling to defend the reputation of Jewish peoplehood seemed to offer a clear public demonstration of Jewish men's willingness and ability to fight back rather aggressively against Nazi sympathizers and anti-Semitism. In addition, the Young Men's Hebrew Association (Y.M.H.A.) also aided in establishing Jewish masculinity as it provided a place for Jewish sports and athletics and allowed for Jewish athletes to compete amongst each other. During the mid-late

1930s, when anti-Semitism was prevalent and destructive to Canadian Jewish life, the establishment of Jewish masculinity and the notion of “the muscular Jew”, along with key figures in popular sports, changed the common perception of Jewish men. Through this, it aided in combatting anti-Semitism and bonding Jews to one another by promoting physical fitness, sports and athletics.

It is important to understand where the notion of muscular Judaism originated and by whom. The term was coined in 1898 by Zionist leader Max Nordau, and the general idea was to design a sort of “new Jew” and therefore reject the notion of the “old Jew,” which consisted of obedience and non-violence. The notion required for Jews to gather the mental and physical strength that would allow them to achieve the goals of Zionism, but in the mid 1930s, Jews applied this to sports and athletics. During the mid 1930s this idea was applied to sports and athletics and through this “muscular Judaism’s goal was to prove that Jewish men were real men who excelled at sport, and to encourage Jewish men to take up the sporting life.”<sup>1</sup>

In order to obtain a thorough comprehension of the significance of Jewish masculinity, it is important to understand the context of the society that Canadian Jews inhabited. As previously stated, the Christie Pits Riot that took place in Toronto on August 16, 1933 illustrates the profound presence of anti-Semitism in Canada, but also the first effective push back by young Jewish males. The riot took place roughly six months after Hitler had taken power, and what was happening to Jews in Germany was becoming known. The swastika had become a symbol of degradation and hate for Jews. After a semi-final baseball game in Christie Pits Park, Jewish

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<sup>1</sup> Alpert, Rebecca T. "Social Justice, Sport and Judaism: A Position Statement." *Quest* 71, no. 2 (2018): 138-49. doi:10.1080/00336297.2018.1547650, p. 140

players and Italians who supported them went to remove a swastika banner that had been displayed and attempted to destroy it. Once they rushed the flag they were met with hostile defenders of the flag and thus the riot broke out with fists and clubs being utilized. *The Toronto Daily Star* reported that “Joe Goldstein, Bellwoods Ave., and centre player for the Dufferin lacrosse club’s midget team receiving scalp lacerations and being knocked unconscious,”<sup>2</sup> illustrating the violent nature of the riot.

One important aspect demonstrated by the Christie Pits Riot was the unification of the Jewish community to fight against anti-Semitism. One article in *The Globe* stated, “the Jews began to assemble motor trucks and passenger cars for assault upon the Bloor Street sector, and it is reported they were joined by a carload of Italians.”<sup>3</sup> This was a critical detail because now the Jewish community was rallying together to fight anti-Semitism within the city and had support from the Italian community as well.

Although it was a tragic and gruesome event, the Christie Pits Riot proved to be somewhat positive in aspects of Canadian Jewish masculinity. In one regard, the Jewish athletes illustrated toughness and pride by taking a stand and attempting to dismantle the swastika that was on display. This act alone proved to contrast the gentile Canadian view of Jews resembling a weak and unhealthy human. The event also contributed to the sports and athletic realm because, in the words of historian Monda Halpern, “the riot’s eruption at a baseball game helped establish the welcome association between Jews and athleticism.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the Jewish population

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<sup>2</sup> "Six Hours of Rioting Scores are Injured." *The Toronto Daily Star* (Toronto), August 17, 1933.

<sup>3</sup> "'Hail Hitler' Is Youth's Cry; City in Turmoil." *The Globe* (Toronto), August 17, 1933.

<sup>4</sup> Halpern, Monda. "The "Malestrom" at Christie Pits: Jewish Masculinity and the Toronto Riot of 1933." *Canadian Jewish Studies / Études Juives Canadiennes* Vol. 28 (2019), p. 19

started to notice that athleticism was correlated with the notion of masculinity and manliness. Although the notion of the muscular Jew was prevalent for decades, it was now becoming much more relevant and appealing to Jewish men.

Despite the fact that the idea of the muscular Jew was becoming more appealing, it was not easy to engrain within the Canadian Jewish community as it also contained a conflict within itself. The celebrated ideal of the Jewish man was that of the *mensch*, or “moral, kind, gentle, and studious, traits which ran counter to the aggression and physicality of Christian manliness.”<sup>5</sup> This conception of Jewish masculinity did not favour the community in their physical fight against anti-Semitism as rabbis and leaders within the community encouraged and favoured the *mensch* over the notion of the muscular Jew. This was predominantly seen in the response within the Jewish community to the riot as there were many people who did not approve of the Jewish players fighting back. As Halpern has shown, Rabbi Samuel Sachs articulated a widely held belief in the more understated masculine ideal when he stated, “the Jewish population in Toronto will not countenance their action, because Jewish people do not believe in violence.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, not only were Jewish men combatting anti-Semitism but were battling amongst themselves over the ideal forms of masculine attitude and behaviour.

Canadian Jews not only felt they had to demonstrate to society that they were physically strong and independent; some Jews also felt they had to prove these sorts of masculine bonafides to their own community. The notion of the muscular Jew was a significant measure in the constant battle against anti-Semitism, which was widely believed to be a necessary battle. According to James Walker, “an attack on the ignorance would undermine prejudice and

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 16

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 16

discrimination caused by misunderstanding.”<sup>7</sup> A substantial aspect of the muscular Jew was predicated upon the Jewish urge “to become strong and muscular by participating in athletic associations,” particularly through gymnastics, a sport that was, according to scholar Samuel Presner, “of the utmost importance for the health of the Jewish race”<sup>8</sup> Although not portrayed as the most masculine sport in society, “Pictures of strong Jewish gymnasts with upright postures, elegant movements, developed muscles, and assured confidence were not only meant to provide inspiration and reclaim an ancient, heroic ideal; the bodies they depicted were also hailed as the precondition of a successful project of nation building.”<sup>9</sup>

Gymnastics was only one sport supported by those who promoted the notion of the muscular Jew. Through a variety of activities and programs, Jews hoped to change the common perception of them that society had regarding them as an ethnic group. Throughout the mid 1930s the battle against anti-Semitism and the negative perception of Jewish men was immense, but “through ironclad self-rearing in gymnastics associations, extensive involvement with sports, and military training, Jews would become muscle Jews.”<sup>10</sup> Sports and athletics played a crucial role in Jews establishing themselves in society as a strong race, and also proved to aid in the battle against anti-Semitism as they were now starting to abolish the view of a weak and unhealthy race. Not only were sports and athletics a critical part of establishing muscular Judaism, but the Young Men’s Hebrew Association (Y.M.H.A) provided locations in which

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<sup>7</sup> Walker, James. “Claiming Equality for Canadian Jewry: The Struggle for Inclusion, 1930- 1945,” in Klein (ed.) *Nazi Germany, Canadian Responses: Confronting Anti-Semitism in the Shadow of War*. Montreal: McGill-Queens Press, 2012, p. 227

<sup>8</sup> Presner, Todd Samuel. "Generation, Degeneration, Regeneration." *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, 2017, p. 604

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 605

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 606

Canadian Jews were able to practice and partake in sports and athletics, thus promoting masculinity and muscular Judaism.

The Y.M.H.A. was first launched in the early 1900s, however it started gaining popularity and making significant contributions to Jewish communities around the mid-1930s. One of the most difficult obstacles presented to Jewish men was the inability to participate in sports and athletics in gymnasiums and community centres within Canadian society. The Y.M.H.A provided a solution to this problem as it provided community centres and gymnasiums solely for Jewish men where they could partake in athletic training and also compete amongst each other in different sporting events. However, the Y.M.H.A was much more than a community centre, it served, according to Richard Menkis and Harold Troper, as the “social, cultural, recreational and intellectual needs”<sup>11</sup> of the Canadian Jewish community. The Y.M.H.A hosted numerous sporting events like basketball games and gymnastics. These events in particular were popular because basketball was a popular sport in Canada and gymnastics was viewed as a physically demanding sport. Boxing, however, was the most popular sport of choice for the Jewish community, which benefited the athletics movement as well because boxing was a combat sport and had rough and brute connotations aligned with it.

In the mid 1930s, Jews in Toronto prominently enjoyed amateur sporting events within their communities as “Jewish gamblers and fight fans formed a boxing subculture in the Jewish fight clubs that mushroomed and shrivelled in Toronto’s immigrant Jewish neighbourhoods.”<sup>12</sup> Key athletic figures within the Jewish sports realm started their sporting careers in the Y.M.H.A.

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<sup>11</sup> Menkis, Richard, and Harold Martin Troper. *More than Just Games: Canada and the 1936 Olympics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015, p. 117

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120

such as Sammy Luftspring, who would end up becoming the first ever Jewish athlete to be inducted in the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame. Luftspring started his training at the Y.M.H.A community centre when the organization was first being established.

In addition to the Y.M.H.A contributions to Jewish masculinity and athletics, by providing a location for Jewish athletes to compete and partake in sports, it allowed for Jewish men to illustrate their potential and change the common perception that was attributed to them. The emphasis on the sport of boxing was also a significant component because it was not only popular amongst the Jewish community, but also within the non-Jewish community because “it was boxing, above all, that engaged both Jewish and non-Jewish fans.”<sup>13</sup> Consequently, the Y.M.H.A. was responsible for providing a safe haven for Jewish sports in Canada thus allowing it to grow and thrive for future years and future Jewish generations. Sammy Luftspring is an important figure to acknowledge as his accomplishments broke new barriers for Jewish sports while also strengthening the notion of the muscular Jew and Jewish masculinity.

Sammy Luftspring was a significant role model within the Jewish community for not only his achievement in sports, but also for his fight against anti-Semitism for the Jewish community. Returning to the event of the Christie Pits Riot in 1933, Sammy Luftspring was one of several notable Jewish athletes who participated in the riot. The event was crucial in portraying muscular Judaism and Jewish masculinity and Luftspring’s participation influenced the Jewish community substantially. Furthermore, in 1938 Sammy Luftspring would win the Canadian Welterweight Championship making him the first Jewish boxer to do so, was ranked third in the world in all Welterweight boxers and would also go on to be the first ever Jewish

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 120

athlete to be inducted in the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame. As depicted in a letter from the Jewish Community Centre of Toronto, Michael Silverman, a co-ordinator of the organization, stated “as the only Jewish Athlete elected to the Canadian Sports Hall of Fame, it would be an honour and a highlight to give our participating youth the opportunity of meeting and speaking with you.”<sup>14</sup> Luftspring was much more than a boxer, he was a symbol of Jewish strength and masculinity as he portrayed the complete opposite of what was the common perception of Jewish men.

Sammy Luftspring, as well as many other Jewish athletes in Canada, was presented with a conflict in 1936 regarding the Olympic games that were to take place in Nazi Germany. The Nazis treatment of Jews in Europe was widely known in North America thus outrage struck athletes of all ethnicities, especially Jewish athletes. There were calls for athletes and countries to boycott the games in order to illustrate the world did not support Germany in the treatment of Jews, and despite the efforts, Germany still hosted the Olympic games. However, there was a conflict within the Jewish community as well in Canada, the conflict of whether Jewish athletes should or should not boycott the Olympic games. This conflict, although not precisely having an impact on muscular Judaism, can be met with critical analysis because this could have been an influential opportunity to showcase their athletic ability and use the worldwide platform to illustrate that the common perception of Jewish men is false and fabricated.

It was clear as to why Jewish athletes did not want to attend the Olympic games in Germany. The treatment of Jews by Nazi Germany was horrendous, and Canadian Jewish

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<sup>14</sup> "Jewish Community Centre." Michael Silverman to Sammy Luftspring. July 21, 1986. Canada, Toronto, Ontario.



athletes wanted to boycott to depict their disapproval of the country and also possibly sway other countries to also boycott the games. However, there were also Jewish athletes in Canada who felt that it was a perfect opportunity to prove not only to Germany, but also the world, that the common perception of Jews being weak, fragile and unhealthy was a fabrication. Luftspring was one of the Jewish athletes who wanted to attend the Olympics in Berlin, however he was met with very hostile criticism. Many members of the Jewish community were not pleased with his decision to attend the Olympics in Berlin and his parents also told him “the correct Jewish thing to do was not to go to Berlin.”<sup>15</sup> As previously discussed with the Christie Pits Riot, the Jewish community was once again clashing amongst itself. Executives of the Canadian Jewish Council (CJC) saw it as extremely disrespectful because while the CJC was attempting to convince the government and others that supporting the Olympics was immoral, Jewish athletes themselves did not want to boycott their chance of participating in the Olympic games.

Although Jews had proper reasons to want to boycott the Olympics, it is also clear as to why other Jews and Jewish athletes were motivated to attend the event in Germany. Many Jewish athletes were eager to attend the Olympic games in order to depict a new perception of Jews and replace the common view of Jews being weak and fragile. Moreover, Sammy Luftspring was a heavy favourite and “a likely Olympic medal winner because of his talent and because the boxer made no secret of his desire to win that medal.”<sup>16</sup> If Luftspring had attended the Olympic games and placed high enough to receive a medal, it would have aided in the fight against anti-Semitism substantially. Not only would a Jew have won a medal on the biggest

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<sup>15</sup> Menkis, Richard, and Harold Martin Troper. *More than Just Games: Canada and the 1936 Olympics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015, p. 167

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164

athletic stage in the world, but it would have been for one of the toughest and most popular sports in North America at the time. However, there was an alternative to the Olympic games in Barcelona, Spain but even there the Jewish athletes did not have much luck either.

Barcelona was hosting the 1936 People's Olympiad, an alternative option to the Olympics that did not discriminate against Jews. Sammy Luftspring was one of several Canadian Jewish athletes who traveled to Spain to participate in the games with their travel costs guaranteed. When the fundraising had begun, "the stag brought out a crowd of enthusiastic fight fans and members of the gambling fraternity"<sup>17</sup> In addition, Luftspring and another Jewish boxer, Norman "Baby" Yack, were presented with both the Union Jack flag (United Kingdom flag) and a "Jewish flag" by the supporters "as if symbolically declaring that there was no conflict between being a good Canadian and a good Jew."<sup>18</sup> This significant gesture illustrated that sports was a one of the only social engagements that had the power to unify the Jewish community with other aspects of Canadian communities. However, the games in Barcelona never took place because 1936 was the year that the Spanish Civil War erupted.

Although the Jewish athletes boycotted the games in Berlin and never had the opportunity to compete in Barcelona, these two events still hold a significance. In regard to the Olympics in Berlin, it can be argued that the Jewish community missed an opportunity to illustrate to the world that they were not a weak, fragile and unhealthy race. As previously stated, the reasons for boycotting the Olympics are justified and understandable, however one can argue that an opportunity was missed to significantly shift the societal perception of Jews. In regard to Sammy Luftspring, he was a heavy favourite to receive a medal on the global stage, which would

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 167

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 167, 168

have benefitted the Jewish community greatly, especially to receive it in Nazi Germany. He would have proved to Canadian society and the world that Jews were not a weak and fragile race but are capable of competing on the highest level in the toughest sport in the world on the biggest stage in all of sports.

Though it never took place, the People's Olympiad in Barcelona still benefitted the Canadian Jewish community. The process of sending Jewish athletes to Barcelona proved to be a venture that contributed to the unification for not only Canadian Jews but also Canadian society as a whole. That is not to ignore that anti-Semitism was still a substantial problem, however this process illuminated for a brief moment the Jewish community with support from other Canadians in the community. This was a major example of how sports and athletics truly played a crucial role in Jewish society in the mid 1930s as it was able to bring communities together. Non-Jewish Canadians who donated money to send Luftsprung and Baby Yack to Barcelona illustrated for a brief moment, that whether the athletes were Jewish or not did not matter, they were viewed as Canadian athletes going to represent their Country on the world stage. Through this, ethnicities and backgrounds did not matter for a small moment in time and Canadians of multiple cultures felt proud. Therefore, through these examples, it is clear that sports and athletics played a vital role and had great power and potential in unifying not only the Jewish community, but a significant part of the Canadian community as well.

The idea of muscular Judaism therefore was at the root of not only Jewish masculinity, but also of Jewish sports and athletics. Through contributing muscular Judaism with sports and athletics, Jewish Canadians were able to start the transition of popular views of Jewish men. Instead of the *mensch* type, Jews in Canada had taken on a new image, one of physical strength

and masculinity. Further, muscular Judaism also aided in fighting the conflict within the Jewish community where certain Jewish figures did not approve of the growth of aggressiveness in the Jewish community and advocated for a *mensch* and more peaceful Jew.

This internal conflict should not be misunderstood however as these figures were advocating for peace. The reasoning behind the beliefs of Jews who opposed violence and physicality in Judaism, was that if Jews illustrated their peaceful non-violent side, they would be accepted as good people within the community. However, the majority of the Jewish community did not view this belief as sustainable, most certainly not in the hostile society that they were inhabiting at the time. Thus, they pursued the notion of muscular Judaism, which illustrated to be a strikethrough for the community as a whole. Over the years following the mid 1930's, the Jewish community built upon this notion and World War II would be another platform where Jewish Canadians portrayed their masculinity and braveness to the rest of the country. One can confidently declare that the mid 1930's sports and athletic movement guided by muscular Judaism was one of the most significant time periods for Canadian Jews. Not only in unifying the community, but also changing the common perception of the Jewish male from being weak, fragile and unhealthy to a strong, physically built muscular human being.

Therefore, during the mid-late 1930s, when anti-Semitism was prevalent and destructive to Canadian Jewish life, the establishment of Jewish masculinity and the notion of "the muscular Jew", along with key figures in popular sports, changed the common perception of Jewish men. Through this, it aided in combatting anti-Semitism and helping bond Jews to one another by promoting physical fitness, sports and athletics. Anti-Semitism and the persecution of Jews has been active for centuries, and the mid 1930s was not an exception, but a highlight. The common

perception of Jews has always been an undermining one, consisting of poor hygiene, poor physical stature and weakness. What the era of the mid 1930s illustrated was the rise of the Jewish community and the emphasis on muscular Judaism through the means of sports and athletics. Along with the representation of key Jewish athletes, such as Sammy Luftspring, the common perception of Jewish men was slowly transitioning to a more positive one. Thus, it is clear that Jewish masculinity and the participation in sports and athletics aided in the battle against anti-Semitism and unifying the Jewish community in Canada.