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Maccabi Canada and the Maccabiah Games: The Integration of Canadian Jewish Youth

The suggestion that the Jewish experience serve as a ‘model’ for North American ethnic minorities is a popular one, given the significant success of Canadian Jews, despite a long history of persecution. The process of facilitating their own integration through organizations and social clubs contributed to this ethnic Jewish resilience in Diaspora communities. Before the Israeli Declaration of Independence, in 1948, Jews were spread all over the world; Jews remain sprung across the globe. For scholars, the national dispersion of the Jewish Diaspora is remarkable. With the largest concentration of Jews in Israel, the rest of Diaspora Jewry is dispersed in France, Russia, Germany, Canada, and other countries. It is remarkable how well integrated Jews are within their established communities, as well as how interconnected with their homeland, Israel, they have become. The absence of scholarly academic sources on the Maccabiah Games is apparent. This study examines the impact of the Maccabiah Games, placing the Jewish experience in the broader context of global Jewish life – Maccabi Canada is a prime example of Jewish simultaneous integration, both at home and in the homeland.

From its inception, the Maccabiah Games and its muscular, athletic Judaism program pursued competing ambitions for Diaspora Jews. It actively promoted Jewish national consciousness across international boundaries, while attempting to root Jewish identity in Israel. It helped promote Jewish integration within Canada for Jewish youth, while also attempting to bring them closer to Zionism. Moreover, the Maccabiah Games actively promoted a national consciousness and integration of the Jewish Diaspora in Canada while promoting Jewish identity in the State of Israel. Maccabi Canada and the Maccabiah Games brought the Canadian Jewish youth closer to Zionist movements by using sport as a social educator, and transformed the

inferior “muscular Judaism” into the “new Jew.” The objectives of the Maccabiah Games were centralized with the State of Israel and offered opportunities to integrate with the Israeli society and localities in the country. The games fostered a Canadian Jewish mosaic that transformed the integration and experiences of Jews in Canadian society.

According to physical education, recreation and athletic scholar Joseph Levy, the Maccabiah Games played an important role in Israel’s approach to leisure planning.¹ The competitions had become a major secular leisure activity in a society that had been very “normative” about how individuals used their leisure time.² According to Elihu Katz in his 1976 book the *Secularization of Leisure: Culture and Communication in Israel*, Israel’s six-day working week, a society that struggled with the adoption of a second free day after the Sabbath – either Friday or Saturday. According to Katz, Israel continued to move toward a more relaxed leisure lifestyle very similar to the industrialized “individual self-expression” model by the beginning of the twentieth century.³ Despite the opposition to sports by the ultra-orthodox elements of Israeli society, the Maccabiah Games held its first international competition in British-ruled Palestine in 1932. Fueled by the Zionist movement and dedicated to resuscitating the “muscular Judaism” of ancient times, the Maccabiah Games aimed to resist the sports world’s prejudiced view of Jews’ alleged physical inferiority.⁴ Particularly important to this resistance were the Games’ deployment of the concept of “muscular Judaism.”

¹ Joseph Levy, *The Modern Jewish Olympics* (1989), 42.

² Levy, *The Modern Jewish Olympics*, 42.

³ E Katz and M Gurevitch, *The Secularization of Leisure: Culture and Communication in Israel* (London: Faber, 1976).

⁴ Haim Kaufman, *Jewish Sports in the Diaspora, Yishuv, and Israel: Between Nationalism and Politics* (Indiana University Press: 2005), 147.

Referred to as the “Jewish Olympics,” the Maccabiah Games was a transnational sporting event. Modeled on the Olympics, this quadrennial competition is one of the top three gatherings of athletes in the world. According to its mission statement, the Maccabiah Games was committed to the promotion of Jewish education and Zionism across the world. It aimed to instill discipline, passion, and determination in Jewish youth athletes through participation in the Games. The Games became the historical avenue for Jewish people and a foundation for building Jewish pride through sports. The atmosphere of the Maccabiah Games brought Jewish youth closer to Zionist aims and provided the new physical Jewish image as a counterweight to racial claims.⁵ Anti-Semitism and the exclusion of Jewish people particularly through the participation in sporting activities interrelated to ideas of physical inferiorities of Jewish peoples. Sport served both as a means of inclusion as well exclusion. Jews used sport as a vehicle for emancipation at both the individual and collective level.⁶ It is important to therefore recognize that sports are a part of a milieu building, and for many Jews, sports served on the one hand to strengthen their collective identity as a minority, and on the other as a means of integrating into society.⁷

The State of Israel used sport as a springboard to international recognition and greater inclusion on the international stage, which advocated for the subsequent larger gatherings and prestige of the Games.⁸ Zionism not only rose in order for the Jewish Diaspora to resettle in Palestine, but also to create a “new Jew.” Theodor Herzl aimed to transform “young Jews out of Jewish lads,” it was the completion of emancipation, not just in mental, but also in a physical

⁵ Yieri Aharoni, *The Israeli economy: Dreams and Realities* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

⁶ Michael Brenner, *Emancipation Through Muscles: Jews and Sports in Europe* (University of Nebraska Press, 2006), 2.

⁷ Brenner, *Emancipation*, 5-6.

⁸ Paul Yogi Mayer, *Jews and the Olympic Games: Sport: A Springboard for Minorities* (London, 2004), 29.

sense.⁹ Zionists longed for the physical transformation of the Jew. According to historian Todd Samuel Presner, Zionism emerged as a politic obsessed with imagining, through visual means, the regeneration of both the Jewish body and the Jewish people.¹⁰ The “regeneration” of the Jewish body, in other words, was an aesthetic project of modernism, and the origins of the muscle Jew and the Zionist imaginary.¹¹

The interdependence of the association of the Maccabiah Games and the project of Zionist bodily regeneration is visible in the very limited scholarship about the Games, though recently scholars have begun to seriously explore both. According to historian Ofer Ashkenazi, “a true Zionist is a marathon runner, a person who, like any other well-trained athlete, is prepared to overcome numerous obstacles along his path toward the finish line,” liberation of their holy land, the State of Israel.¹²

Such ideas found expression in the early writings of the leaders of the Maccabi moment in Israel. Yosef Yekutieli, one of its heads of the Maccabi movement in Israel, defined the aims and the vision of the Games in both physical and spiritual terms. The Games developed Jewish culture. Jewish competitors were not just representatives of their respective diaspora home countries, but were rather part of the Jewish people as a whole. Yekutieli’s emphasis on Jewish transnational “peoplehood” implicitly underscored the Land of Israel as the centre of the Jewish

⁹ Brenner, *Emancipation*, 4.

¹⁰ Presner, *Muscular Judaism*, 13.

¹¹ Todd Samuel Presner, *Muscular Judaism: The Jewish Body and the Politics of Regeneration* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 13.

¹² Ofer Ashkenazi, “German Jewish Athletes and Formation of Zionist (trans-) national Culture,” *Jewish Social Studies* (Indiana University Press, 2011), 124-125.

world.¹³ The Maccabiah Games, a central coordinating organization, representing a group of smaller interdependent bodies is symbolic to the Jewish Diaspora.

Historically, within the traditional Jewish framework, studying Torah and praying were more lauded than athletics. Only when sport was seen as a necessary training ground for physical survival, one of militaristic association did it begin to be accepted by the more liberal Jews of Europe, South America, North America and Israel.¹⁴ According to scholar Harold U. Ribalow, Jewish people do not need a lengthy, scientific dissertation that can prove Jews are tough because an admirable war record can prove it, therefore he argued that when a Jewish fighter wins a title, as Barney Ross and two dozen others did, it meant to sports fans that Jews can fight.¹⁵ Ribalow argued convincingly that when individuals are aware that when the Jewish man from Brooklyn became a bullfighter and faced death, “they bowed to his fortitude.”¹⁶ For Ribalow, there is a larger intake than victory. For Jews sport can transmit national consciousness. It is this physical environment that can formulate a national identity, giving people a sense of pride and purpose. Through sport, Jews found acceptance and challenged the racial claims.

Along with many other contributors to the broader experience of Canadian Jewish athleticism, Roy Solomon was a participant in the 1969 World Maccabiah Basketball Games. Solomon was the past president of Maccabi Canada, Honorary Vice President of the Maccabi World Union, Yakir Maccabi and Maccabi Spirit Award Recipient, and founder of the Montreal Jewish Sports Hall of Fame in 1979. In an interview he suggested that the merging of sports and Judaism had become an educational transmitter for the movement of the young Jewish people on

¹³ Yieri Aharoni, *The Israeli economy: Dreams and Realities* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

¹⁴ Levy, *The Modern Jewish Olympics*, 43.

¹⁵ Harold Ribalow, *The Jew in American Sports* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1966), 3.

¹⁶ Ribalow, *The Jew in American Sports*, 3.

the global scale. Solomon, a Montrealer, grew up in a sports family. With a brother who was a professional baseball player, his other brothers who played college sports, and an older sister who was a professional ballet dancer, it was without a doubt that Solomon would reside in some sort of athleticism. “Sports were a very important part of our lives” he affirmed.¹⁷ According to Solomon, the main mission of the Maccabiah Games remained to “introduce young people through sports and through athletics, an interest in Israel, a pride in their Judaism, and just a feeling of giving back to their community.”¹⁸ In other words, he argued “sports is a means to an end, that’s really what it’s about.” Solomon recalled his own personal experience in 1969 as a very emotional one. He had thought that the reality of watching in Ramat Gan Stadium, 50,000 people and thousands of other Jewish athletes from around the world was definitely a life changing experience. He reflects on the very exact moment looking around the stadium and he thought of how strong the Jewish people were, and how many people they were. He felt a sense of pride within that stadium, and he recalled thoughts back to the Holocaust, to the pogroms, and he thought how “all through the centuries people were trying to destroy us, but here we were in Israel stronger than ever.”¹⁹ The importance of that particular experience was that when he returned back from Israel, he decided that he had wanted to introduce the Maccabiah Games and the Maccabi Movement to as many young people as he could. Over the next four years, Solomon contributed to the broader Maccabi Movement, working to advance its pedagogical goals beyond the necessary preparations required for the athletic competitions themselves, which required training for the Games every four years.

¹⁷ Author's Interview with Roy Solomon. Toronto. January 28, 2016.

¹⁸ Interview with Roy Solomon.

¹⁹ Interview with Roy Solomon.

A similar youth Zionist movement is the Birthright educational association, an organization that brought Jewish youth to Israel for a journey discovering their pride in Judaism. The Maccabiah Games that had existed long before the organization of Birthright, differed in bringing youth through sports to Israel which made the movement different from others. The prestige of the Games is inextricably tied to the assimilating effect of sports, which provides the opportunity for mass participation of youth. It is necessary that the continuance for Jewish agency relies within the Jewish youth, not only to be educated but be able to educate for the future Jewish successors.²⁰ It is a vital aspect to consider how the movement allows for the young athletes to acclimate themselves to Israel, learn more about their country, and interact with Jewish athletes from all over the world, especially the Israeli athletes.²¹ Solomon recalled speaking to an American Jewish athlete who had confessed “I never knew that there were so many Jewish athletes in the world.”²² It was an awakening for people Solomon stated. He reflected his concern that Jewish athletes were not aware of the large diaspora of Jews, and that coming to the Games was the reality. Solomon concluded by introducing the recent European Maccabi Games, in Germany where all the teams assembled at the same place that Hitler was at during the 1936 Games, when the Nazi’s were in power. He recalled how special the event was to the Jewish athletes and the fact that Jewish Games were being hosted at the same place, where Jewish people were once not allowed to compete, was momentous.²³ The global awareness the Maccabiah Games has brought to young Jewish athletes signifies the growth of the organization situated with the Games. Not only are the Games bringing Jewish athletes together in Israel, they are in fact building communities together back home. Examining the affect the Maccabiah

²⁰ Interview with Roy Solomon.

²¹ Interview with Roy Solomon.

²² Interview with Roy Solomon.

²³ Interview with Roy Solomon.

Games has had on the participants is vital to conclude on the success of the Games and essentially what the future holds for this movement. The Maccabiah Games actively promoted for the national consciousness and integration of the Jewish Diaspora in Canada while embodying Jewish identity in the State of Israel. For Maccabi Canada, the Maccabiah Games brought the Canadian Jewish youth closer to Zionist movements by using sport as a social educator, while subsequently transforming the inferior “muscular Judaism” into the “new Jew.”

Maccabi Canada is a member of the Maccabi World Union, the largest Jewish organization in the world with over 450,000 registered members world-wide. In addition to being the organizing body of the Maccabiah, the Maccabi World Union is committed to promoting Jewish education and Zionism across the world. It is through the passion of sports that Maccabi Canada is promoting Jewish identity and cultivating the future for Canadian Jewish youth. Maccabi Canada, in particular, is actively engaging with Jewish day schools, camps and sport leagues, and is becoming synonymous with Jewish sports in Canada. Through Maccabi Canada the athletes are involved in giving back to the community and to the State of Israel. Maccabi Canada is fostering the “Maccabi Dream,” where every Jewish child will aspire to become an athlete and lead a healthy lifestyle so they participate in the Games, thus the games will become one step on the path of their Jewish journey. Maccabi Canada had brought young Jewish athletes to compete, and expose them to a rich Jewish culture, proud traditions and gave them an Israel educational experience of a lifetime (Maccabi Web). The effect is paramount internationally, and the reality and awareness of Jewish existence through Israel and through the Games challenges the marginalization of Jewish individuals in mainstream society and fuels the national consciousness of the Jews, this apparent in a 1985 Maccabi Canada book.

Located in the Ontario Jewish Archives, the Maccabi book that combined primary documentation dating back to 1951 from the Maccabiah Games and Maccabi Canada organization revealed the impact of the Games and organization to the Jewish Canadians. What is revealing through this documentation is a vast collection of newspaper articles taken from the Jerusalem Post, letters and acknowledgments from members of Unions associated and presidency accords, an immense gathering of photography, proceedings of the Games, and documentation on the organizations purpose and aims. Through the photographs gathered by Maccabi Canada in this book, the visuals provide a glimpse of reality of the different events, but it also reveals an identification of the “new Jew.” The visuals present the Jewish participants with this demeanor of pride, relief, and contentment and fulfillment. The ability to represent Canada is remarkable for young Jewish participants coming together from all parts of North America to compete in their homeland against thousands of other Jewish athletes from across the global scale. What the authors, editors, photographers and other redactors aimed to contribute for the purpose of the book through portraits and official documentation, present for the future Jewish youth what Maccabi Canada is all about and how the Jews can join the movement of Maccabi Canada and the Maccabiah Games. Other primary source gatherings collected in association to Maccabi Canada and the Games also spread the awareness of Jewish people taking action throughout the world.

According to a 2013 newspaper article in the Jerusalem Post, the Games coined the first anniversary of the death of Fred Worms, a former president and later honorary president of the Maccabi World Union, who fought long and hard for the opening of the Maccabiah Games to be held in his beloved Jerusalem, to which he had given so much. To Worms, sport was seen as a means of promoting pride in Jewish identity –particularly in young people who had grown up in

assimilated environments.²⁴ In an article published in the New York Times in 2009, Jason Lezak, an Olympian from the United States had been chosen to light the fire of the 18th Maccabiah Games at the opening ceremony. The Games gave Lezak a chance to visit Israel for the first time, where he toured with the rest of the members of the United States delegation. Lezak wandered the Dead Sea, learned the history of the ancient desert Jewish fortress of Masada while walking among its ruins, and explored Jerusalem's Old City. Lezak was especially moved during his visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial. His grandfather's relatives were killed by Nazi Germany.²⁵ "Walking where history happened made me want to learn about my culture," Lezak stated.²⁶ The importance of resuscitating the historical alleged Jewish inferiority, the impact the Games have had for Jewish women particularly is notable due to the long history of female physical inferiority in the history of sport. Alana Eliwatt, a former member of the University of Maryland's NCAA champion field hockey team, among 5,500 Jewish athletes in 35 sports at Israel's 15th international Maccabiah Games, "this experience changed my life and outlook on being Jewish. I came to realize I need more of that in my life." "It's a very personal, strong, intense feeling coming here," she went on to say that "even if you don't identify with the religion, you identify with the people and country."²⁷ The progression of the Maccabiah Games and the organizations affiliated with the Games has had on Jewish people throughout the world is apparent. It is clear to see how far the Maccabiah Games have come in building the future of Jewish youth.

²⁴ Greer Fay Cashman, "Maccabiah Memories," *Jerusalem Post* (2013).

²⁵ Dina Kraft, "Drawn to Israel for Maccabiah Games," *The New York Times* (2009), 158.

²⁶ Gellman Barton, "Maccabiah Games: 'This Experience Changed My Life' At Maccabiah Games, U.S. Athletes Expand Fields of Vision," *The Washington Post* (1997), 1.

²⁷ Barton, "Maccabiah Games," 1.

The Maccabiah Games actively promoted a national consciousness and integration of the Jewish Diaspora in Canada while embodying Jewish identity in the State of Israel. The recognition the Games have had over the decades will associate for the future scholarly debates and discussion of the field of scholarship associated for Zionist and Jewish sport historians. Moreover the Maccabiah Games actively promoted a national consciousness and integration of the Jewish Diaspora in Canada while embodying Jewish identity in the State of Israel. Maccabi Canada and the Maccabiah Games brought the Canadian Jewish youth closer to Zionist movements by using sport as a social educator, and transformed the inferior “muscular Judaism” into the “new Jew.” The objectives of the Maccabiah Games as a transmitter in the interdependence with foundations associated with the competitions on a global scale, particularly Maccabi Canada will continue to develop and affect the future of the young Canadian Jews. Without the Maccabiah Games and other movements associated, the ability of giving young Jews an opportunity to explore the pride in their Judaism through sport will be merely a forgotten journey and opportunity for the future of Jews. With the emergence of the recent Pan American and European Maccabi Games, the Games prestige is looking at a brighter future for the Jewish population.

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