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The **HISTORY** *of*
BAR KOCHBA LEIPZIG
the city's Jewish sports association

By Yuval Rubovitch
In collaboration with Gerlinde Rohr

Preface

Whether they survived the Holocaust in Israel, the USA, Australia or elsewhere, for many former Leipzig Jews and their descendants, the name “Bar Kochba Leipzig” evokes indelible and fond memories.

One hundred years after the establishment of Bar Kochba Leipzig, the authors of this book investigated the around 20-year history of this extraordinary Jewish sports association. New facts, documents and photographs were found in new sources, especially in archives in Israel and uncovered in conversations with descendants and friends of former Bar Kochba members. These include recollections recorded by Leipzig Jews who emigrated to Israel in the 1950s and 1960s about their time in Leipzig and at Bar Kochba. Together with contemporary reports and documents, these memories paint a fascinating portrait of a self-confident Zionist association.

In 1996, the Leipzig Sports Museum began its research on Jewish sports history in Leipzig. The results of these studies on Jewish sports associations founded before 1945 were presented in lectures from 2007 on. In its special exhibition “In Motion – Milestones of Leipzig Sports History” on the “Leipzig Sports Route” in 2018, the Museum of City History also presented original items from these associations to highlight the new “Jewish sports associations” station on the sports route, which is to be inaugurated at the former Bar Kochba sports ground in 2020. Lore Liebscher’s 2010 thesis formed an important cornerstone for this research by establishing a first overview of the history of Bar Kochba and the available sources. Moreover, the results of Lorenz Peiffer and Henry Wahlig’s research into Jewish sports history in Leipzig also underline the significance of the Leipzig Bar Kochba association compared with other Jewish sports associations.

The history of Bar Kochba Leipzig spans almost 14 years of growth and development into the biggest Jewish sports association in Germany, but it also includes six years of club life under increasingly oppressive and incredibly difficult conditions until the liquidation and forced dissolution of the club.

The book traces these two chapters in the history of Bar Kochba Leipzig; it also explores the reasons for its structure (comprising several sections) and the abundance of different sports and cultural events, as well as the efforts by numer-

ous members around Dr Ludwig Lehrfreund. Moreover, the book also documents the fate of association's members after 1938.

The authors hope that readers might add yet more information: After all, many aspects of the history of Bar Kochba Leipzig remain, at present, unexplored.

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Yuval Rubovitch and Gerlinde Rohr, in May 2020

Introduction and historical background

“It is, in particular, thanks to the efforts of Bar Kochba over the last fifteen years that, today, our young people look different than in the past, that – in spite of the oppressive pressure – they are strong and upright and look to the future with an unbroken spirit.”*

When the chairman of the Jewish sports association² (JSV) Bar Kochba Leipzig wrote those words on the occasion of the association’s 15th anniversary, Germany had already been ruled by the Nazi regime for one year. For the time being, the Jewish associations were allowed to continue their operations. However, the Jewish athletes and associations often faced hostility; they were humiliated and harassed. Therefore, the training grounds and sports facilities of Bar Kochba Leipzig and, in particular, the association’s sports park in Leipzig-Eutritzsch, became a haven for its members. But even this haven was not always safe. Yet, under the enthusiastic and ambitious leadership of Dr Ludwig Lehrfreund, Bar Kochba Leipzig created “a uniquely Jewish atmosphere, in which camaraderie, team spirit and a sense of community could develop – in addition to healthy ambition”³ for Jewish youths and its more than one thousand members.

The history of Bar Kochba Leipzig was shaped by hope and hopelessness, by integration and exclusion, by democratisation and oppression – and by the ever growing anti-Semitism. It was a period which ended with the annihilation of the European – and German – Jews.

On the basis of its Zionist ideas, the sports associations of the German Macabi Circle, to which Bar Kochba also belonged, prepared their members for an independent future and for building a national home for the Jews. A few of them were able to flee Germany and continue to work for this aim in Eretz Yisrael. However, many others did not escape and were murdered.

There are five aspects which have to be mentioned in connection with the historic setting in which Bar Kochba Leipzig evolved and existed:

* Dr. L. (Ludwig) Lehrfreund) „15 Jahre Leipziger ‚Bar Kochba!‘“, in: Gemeindeblatt der Israelitischen Religionsgemeinde zu Leipzig, 9.3.1934, p. 5.

1. The historical era: The history of Bar Kochba Leipzig began in the early phase of the Weimar Republic. It was part of the history of both the Weimar Republic and the terrible events during the “Third Reich”. Then, the history of the association was brought to an abrupt end on the eve of World War Two.
2. Anti-Semitism and the Weimar Republic: Bar Kochba was founded in an era which was not only the initial phase of a promising, democratic republic, the first of its kind in Germany, but also a time of increasing anti-Semitism. As Cornelia Hecht wrote, this new republic was “far from a haven of ‘heartfelt German-Jewish symbiosis’.” After World War One and the conclusion of the Treaty of Versailles, hatred towards Jews became much more pronounced, aggressive and dangerous than during the late 19th century. Never before had “anti-Semitism in Germany been so vehement and radical as during those fourteen years [of the Weimar Republic]. In the years after World War One, political and social anti-Semitism had a different profile than during the era of the German empire. Comparisons between the years before and after 1918 show that modern anti-Semitism in Germany was characterised both by continuities and discontinuities.”⁴
3. Eastern Jews and Jewish citizens of the Reich: The considerable influx of Jews from Eastern Europe, also called *Ostjuden*, had a significant impact on the situation of the local Jewish population in Germany and divided the community. Eastern Jews were the main target of the new anti-Semitism. As a result, the first wave of Eastern European Jewish mass migration after the pogroms in Russia during the early 1880s led to the establishment of Jewish relief organisations – often with the aim of helping these “foreign brothers and sisters” to emigrate, in particular, to America as the destination for most Eastern European Jewish emigrants. In 1890, the German Empire was home to around 20,000 Jews from Eastern Europe. They accounted for only 3.6% of the German Jews. By 1910, their number had increased to 70,000 and, as a result, more than 11% of all Jews in the German Empire. During World War One, another 30,000 Jewish workers came to Germany, around one half of whom were forced labourers. Then, Germany’s defeat exacerbated anti-Semitism, as attempts were made to lay the blame primarily on the Jews. This was also confirmed by the “Jewish census” (“Juden-zählung”⁵) during the war and the “stab-in-the-back myth”⁶ from the years after the end of World War One. While anti-Semitism targeted all Jews, the surge in the immigration of Eastern European Jews was perceived as an imminent threat by many Germans.⁷

In the 1920s, around two thirds of the Jews in Leipzig were not German citizens – and almost all of them came from Eastern Europe. This situation was unique in Germany. It shaped Jewish life in the city and was a central topic for Bar Kochba Leipzig, which advocated solidarity among all Jews in the name of the Jewish people.

4. The German gymnastics movement and the Jews: The emancipation of the German Jews during the 19th century and their fully equal legal status⁸ meant that Jews could join associations and organisations like other citizens, in particular, after the establishment of the German Empire in 1871. In Germany, a strong and diverse landscape of clubs and associations flourished from the mid-19th century on. Apart from associations safeguarding professional interests, training and education, music and arts clubs, choirs, military associations and many others, the German gymnasts' associations played an increasingly important role in shaping civic society at the end of the 19th century. Therefore, they were especially important for the naturalisation efforts of many Jews – although they were not always welcome in the German gymnastics movement – even after 1871.

After the end of the “gymnastics ban”⁹ (1820 to 1842), gymnasts' associations flourished from the 1850s on and were joined by liberal and democratically minded members. Records show that several German Jews were members and even chairmen of these associations at that time.

Jewish emancipation in the German Empire (in 1871) seemed to open the gates for Jewish participation in social life. However, this era was also a time of increasing anti-Semitism¹⁰ as a pseudo-scientific and pseudo-academic phenomenon. Several associations adopted anti-Semitic policies and rules, in particular, in Austria, where “Aryan paragraphs” were first included in the statutes for gymnastics associations. For this reason, in retrospect, the establishment of the German Gymnastics Association in Vienna in 1889, as a collective movement of nationalist gymnastics associations in Austria and Germany, has to be considered as one of many steps leading to January 1933.

Around the turn of the century, 10,000 to 15,000 Jews were members of the German gymnastics movement: Most of them were members of associations of Deutsche Turnerschaft, which, at the time, was the biggest physical exercise organisation worldwide and which was based in Leipzig. According to Wahlig, many (albeit not all) Jews felt that this

commitment was the epitome of being a German citizen. Dealing with open or concealed anti-Semitism could, therefore, be seen as a stage en route to equal rights and full integration.

However, many Jewish members were more fascinated by the equal status and sense of community that these associations offered. They did not primarily want to be part of the nation as a whole or assimilate into non-Jewish society.¹¹

5. Jews and sports: Not all Jews in Germany and Europe could, or even wanted to, be part of the general gymnastics and sports associations. In the 1890s, political Zionism evolved with the aim of creating a national home for the Jews as a refuge from anti-Semitism. Therefore, it was important to the renowned Zionist Dr Max Nordau to call upon Jews throughout the world to promote their physical well-being through sports, gymnastics and physical exercises – and to finally leave behind the so-called “degenerate ghetto life”. In his speech at the Second Zionist Congress in Basel in 1898, Nordau coined the term “Muscular Judaism” (“Muskeljudentum”).

“Muscular Judaism” – The foundation of Jewish sports associations around the turn of the century

A Jewish Gymnastics and Sports Association (JTSV) was formed in Constantinople (renamed Istanbul in 1930) as early as in 1895. However, this did not immediately herald the establishment of other associations of this type. Finally, in the year in which Max Nordau gave his speech on “Muscular Judaism”, the Jewish gymnastics association Bar Kochba was founded in Berlin. This is considered as being the starting point of Jewish Zionist sports in Germany.

In the years after 1898, Nordau repeated this message in several Jewish journals. One such article by him in the *Jüdische Turn- und Sportzeitung* in 1900 also explained the name of the association in Berlin – and, subsequently, in Leipzig:

“For long, far too long, we have practised this mortification of our flesh. Actually, this is an imprecise phrase: The others have killed our flesh – with the utmost success as was clearly borne out by the hundreds of thousands of Jewish corpses in ghettos, in churchyards, and on the highways of medieval Europe. This is a virtue we would have preferred to forego. We would have preferred to look after and care for our bodies rather than killing them or – figuratively and literally – having them killed. [...] But now this force is broken – we are given the space to, at least, physically enjoy life. Let us reconnect to our oldest traditions: Let us become broad-chested, strong-limbed and bold-eyed men.

This intention of drawing on a proud heritage is strongly reflected in the name selected by the Jewish gymnastics association in Berlin. Bar Kochba was a hero who would not accept defeat. When he realised he would not be victorious, he knew how to die. Bar Kochba is the final embodiment of the combative, well-armed Jews in world history. Invoking his name shows

ambition. But ambition is well placed in gymnasts who aim to achieve perfection. [...] May the Jewish gymnastics association flourish and grow into a role model eagerly emulated at other centres of Jewish life!”¹²

It would take almost two more decades for the first Jewish sports association to be set up in Leipzig. But the Jewish gymnastics association established in 1919, JTSV Bar Kochba established from it in 1920, and the Bar Kochba sports club would become one of the biggest and most important Jewish sports associations in Europe.

Until 1921, the Jewish gymnastics and sports associations in Germany and Austria, Poland and Constantinople were members of the Deutscher Kreis der Jüdischen Turnerschaft, the German Jewish Gymnastics Circle.

In 1919, this organisation explained its vision as follows:

“The strongest Jewish activism must be generated in our gymnastics associations. But this activity means one thing: Zionism! The gymnastics movement is a child of Zionism – it only makes sense and is viable as such. [...] However, we do not want to blackmail the young people joining our organisations to commit to Zionism - if this might not be in line with their true conviction at that point, simply on account of our Zionist programme: We should still give them the time to find a Zionist ideology for themselves.”¹³

However, this was not always a consistent approach within the Jewish gymnastics movement. While Hermann Jalowicz from the board of JTV BK Berlin admitted as early as in 1900 that “the ‘Bar Kochba’ gymnasts association was [...] a son of the Zionist organisation”, the broader definition of “National Judaism” was preferred. This was intended to prevent Jews who still saw themselves principally as Germans from being excluded. “Zionism forms a field within Jewish national ideology – the latter constitutes a more comprehensive field, while the former is narrower. The concept of nationality appears to constitute a general precondition and the basis for Zionist ideology; however, the recognition of a Jewish nationality does not lead to the specific result – to Zionism.”¹⁴ While this question was discussed within national Jewish circles in Germany until the 1920s, the answer was clear for the Jewish gymnasts movement immediately after World War One: Jewish gymnastics was principally Zionist oriented.

During the early days of the Weimar Republic, a new Zionist Bar Kochba association was founded in Leipzig. It felt that the protection of the Jewish community’s members was not only based on equal rights but focussed on the development of a national, independent Jewish life – with gymnastics and sports helping to serve this purpose.

Leipzig after World War One and Ludwig Lehrfreund's return

"I usually take a walk in Leipzig's squares and streets at twilight. I like the city and its crowds at sunset and at nightfall. This is not the case during the day when I frequently have a grievance about the city.

As night falls the city extricates itself from the work of the day and the stars prepare to come out. These were not the stars I was used to in the skies of my town and in the Land of Israel, but they are stars, nevertheless. I'm grateful to them because even in a strange land they console me. Perhaps I'm the only person in Leipzig who notices their light."¹⁵

This was Leipzig as observed by the Israeli author S.Y. Agnon, who would go on to win the Nobel Prize in literature, at the beginning of World War One. However, when Ludwig Lehrfreund, a former officer of the German army, returned to Leipzig in late 1918, the city had changed completely.

In spite of his birthplace, Lehrfreund, who was born as the son of a distinguished Jewish family in Krakow in 1893, was a citizen of the German empire and a patriot – just like his father, the merchant Benjamin Wolf Lehrfreund. In describing his experiences during the war in a song, he spoke of the longing for the "cosy home fires". This was a sentiment experienced by him and his comrades as they were encamped on "the icy ground in Poland". When he was "imprisoned in far-away Siberia" and had to spend one year as an inmate in a POW camp, the "wonderful songs" and the love of home dispelled the worries and gave hope of liberation.¹⁶

This patriotism was not unusual among German Jews. Until 1938, the majority of German Jews identified with the C.V.¹⁷, the Central Association of German Citizens of the Jewish Faith. Agnon, who as an Eastern European Jew was influenced much more by Judaism than the typical German Jew, described his protagonist, Mr Lublin, along those lines:

“When the war broke out Mr Lublin was already a German citizen and considered himself to be like all the other German Jewish citizens who regarded themselves as Germans of the Mosaic faith. The Mosaic faith didn’t mean much to him, but he was a German citizen with all his heart and soul.”¹⁸

This patriotism was prevalent among German Jews. After Ludwig Lehrfreund witnessed the October Revolution under the assumed name “Gospodin Galpern” (Mr Galpern) in Petrograd, he only returned to Leipzig in 1918. The lyrics to the song referred to above describe this situation:

On this day, one year ago, finally I came home
after much wandering and travelling,
but home looks at me with a strange eye
after all those long years:
My father in his grave, many friends dead,
my girlfriend moved on long ago,
All order gone, every dream destroyed,
Mammon now rules supreme.

The young writer S.Y. Agnon did not know Ludwig Lehrfreund at the time, as he had already left Leipzig when Ludwig Lehrfreund returned to the city after the war. However, before leaving Leipzig, when Lehrfreund’s father passed away on the first day of Passover in 1918, Agnon wrote the inscription for his gravestone. Agnon was a friend of Regina Lehrfreund, Benjamin Lehrfreund’s widow, ever since they had been schoolmates in the eastern Galician town of Buczacz. Therefore, he was a frequent guest at the Lehrfreund’s home in the Waldstrassenviertel district.¹⁹

Many of those who later became Zionists stated that their war experience at the eastern front, where they witnessed first-hand the poverty and vulnerability of the Eastern European Jews, was one of the reasons for them to develop a more profound Jewish identity, paving the way for Zionism.²⁰ While this claim perhaps does not hold true for the majority of the Jewish soldiers in the German military during World War One, it does apply to Ludwig Lehrfreund, who had even been educated at a non-Jewish grammar school. By 1920, Ludwig Lehrfreund obtained a doctoral degree after publishing his doctoral thesis on trade relations between Germany and Russia.²¹ Dr Lehrfreund was a fully assimilated German Jew – even though he came from an orthodox family.

However, after his return from the war, he spoke up for Eastern European Jews, for a Jewish national identity and the Zionist ideology. In addition to his numerous Zionist activities, he was one of the founders of JTSV and the Bar

Kochba Leipzig sports club in 1920. Moreover, he was probably the most renowned member of Bar Kochba Leipzig, whose history was intricately connected with Dr Lehrfreund's own personal biography.

Bar Kochba Leipzig I *The Gymnastics Club*

The “Jüdischer Turnverein Bar Kochba Leipzig”, the “Bar Kochba Leipzig Jewish Gymnastics Club”, was founded in May 1919. From its inception, it was part of the German Maccabi Circle, which replaced its predecessor, the German Jewish Gymnastics Circle, after its foundation in Munich in August 1919. The German Maccabi Circle included all Jewish-Zionist gymnastics and sports associations in Germany. Maccabi supported these associations which participated in the general German leagues and competitions with non-Jewish associations. Moreover, it also organised many Jewish competitions between Maccabi associations to help them support each other and their common goal.²²

The co-founders of JTV Bar Kochba Leipzig, Karl Reinsch and Ernst Pawel, came from the Jewish gymnastics association Gewuro Gedaulo (“Great Bravery”) in Lissa (present-day Leszno, Poland).²³ The newly established association and “Turnbruder” Reinsch were welcomed in the July edition of Jüdische Turn- und Sportzeitung (JTSZ).²⁴ Soon after, at the circle's meeting in Munich on 8th September 1919, the new association joined the German Maccabi Circle – together with Chemnitzer JTV.²⁵

According to the report, Schilem Ptaschek, who represented BK Leipzig, stated: “The young association is still facing difficulties – despite significant growth in

the number of members and sports successes, at a general meeting. Many Eastern European Jews. Youth teams still unsatisfactory because of passive leadership".²⁶ Such a meeting took place at Allgemeiner Turnverein Leipzig-Volkmarisdorf on 31st August 1919. The Bar Kochba athletes took part in four athletics competitions – winning two, with Ptaschek being of the winners.²⁷

Initially, JTV Bar Kochba used the gymnasium of TV Leipzig Volkmarisdorf on Torgauer Strasse for its gymnastics and boxing training sessions.²⁸ This gymnasium, which still exists today, was the first training facility for the new association.

Right from the outset, JTV BK Leipzig organised gymnastics events. In the February 1920 issue of JTSZ, the Berlin Bar Kochba athlete Rudolf Loewy wrote about a gymnastics festival on 17th January with 2,500 visitors at the Leipzig Zoo conference halls (present-day: Kongresshalle am Zoo). Loewy described the event as follows: "For the first time, the Leipzig Jews who are not yet familiar with gymnastics had an opportunity to attend a Jewish gymnastics festival".²⁹

A second gymnastics show was held on 17th February 1920: "The crowded hall at the zoological gardens testified to the interest with which our efforts meet here." Speeches were given outlining "our objective, the physical regeneration and education of our youths, in detail". The exercises in which the guests from BK Berlin participated also worked "very well" leaving a "profound impression on both young and old" among the audience.³⁰