

Max Schmeling: Righteous ring warrior?

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Abstract (Document Summary)

In the minds of Americans, Max Schmeling is still best remembered as the Nazi boxer who upset Joe Louis in 1936 and two years later got his come-uppance. A different interpretation of Schmeling's life and motives is presented.

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More than half a century has passed since the legendary Joe Louis dispatched the German boxer, Max Schmeling, in just 124 seconds before 70,000 delirious fans in Yankee Stadium. In the minds of Americans, Schmeling is still best remembered as the Nazi who had upset Louis in 1936 and two years later got his come-uppance. As recently as October, 1991, the author of an article on boxing which appeared in the popular history magazine, *American Heritage*, described Schmeling as 'vehemently pro-Hitler'.

That simplistic and distorted description was first spawned by the highly charged chauvinistic atmosphere of the depression-ridden decade of the 1930s. Fascism had held sway in Mussolini's Italy since 1922 and in Hitler's Germany since 1933. Their dictatorial

and expansionist policies were increasingly perceived as threats by the Western democracies. Against that background international prize fights were politicised, with the fighters symbolising governments' ideologies, races or ethnic groups. For example, in June 1935 Joe Louis and Primo Carnera became the personification of the Ethiopian and Italian causes as tensions mounted in the horn of Africa. When Louis, the 'Brown Bomber' pulverised the gargantuan but outclassed Carnera, the victory was treated as an event of enormous importance in America's black ghettos. A front-page banner headline in the widely read black periodical, the Chicago Defender, reported Louis' spectacular knockout with great relish. Clearly, it was much more than a ring victory for a black fighter. It was a triumph for the entire race. One Defender story was titled 'Ethiopia Stretched Forth A Hand And Italy Hit The Canvass'. Other Defender pieces pointedly referred to Carnera as 'Italy's Favourite Son' and 'Mussolini's pride and joy'. Pitched battles between Afro-Americans and Italian-Americans occurred in the streets of New York City.

Just as the hapless Carnera was cast in an undeserved role as Mussolini's surrogate, Schmeling's image in the United States was shaped by events unfolding in his native land which were not of his own doing. Nazism notwithstanding, Schmeling was generally well-liked in America in 1936. His pugilistic prowess and sportsmanship had earned him respect. He was gentlemanly, personable, down to earth and accessible to sports writers. They often compared him to the great Jack Dempsey whom he resembled in appearance and fighting style. There was also some sympathy for the German because the previously unbeaten Louis was a prohibitive favourite over his older opponent. Of course, to some white Americans infected with the bacillus of racism in 1936, Schmeling was the most recent in a long line of **'great white hopes'** stretching back to the era of Jack Johnson.

By the time of the return match, as war clouds gathered over Europe, Schmeling was in disrepute. In the two year interim Hitler had forged his alliance with Italy and Japan, had intensified his persecution of Germany's Jews, had annexed Austria and was beginning to agitate for the dismemberment of neighbouring Czechoslovakia. Schmeling's image suffered as a consequence.

His less-than-hospitable reception in New York City in the spring of 1938 was vividly recalled in the boxer's memoirs published almost four decades later. As the passenger ship The Bremen docked in New York harbour, Schmeling could see demonstrators on the pier. They were shouting and carrying placards sarcastically berating him as a 'model Aryan' and a 'superman'. From a safe distance, the protesters raised menacing fists at him. To avoid any untoward incident the harbour police escorted the German, taking an indirect route to his hotel. But there too pickets were marching back and forth holding aloft signs calling on the populace to 'Boycott Nazi Schmeling'. When he strolled along Fifth Avenue or Broadway, Schmeling was given the stiff-armed Nazi salute by scornful passers-by. From the day of his arrival until the day of the big fight he was deluged with thousands of threatening letters. Hurt and offended, Schmeling was in a state of despair. In the eyes of Americans he had become the front man for the feared and despised German chancellor and there was nothing he could do about it.

In 1938 the American press attributed numerous racist statements to Schmeling himself, statements which he has always denied making. For much of the 'Negro press' which mirrored a black pride terribly ravaged by the depression, Schmeling was a Nazi and a racist. Did the German carry Hitler's 'torch of Aryan supremacy' asked the influential Pittsburgh Courier a week-and-a-half before the return match. Answering its own question, the Courier quoted Schmeling to the effect that 'the black dynasty of pugilism must come to an end'. Max then supposedly predicted:

I am going to stop this black domination by regaining the crown ... As for the rest of the divisions that is up to the other white fighters to follow my example.

On June 18th the Courier published a photograph of Schmeling with the caption, 'The Nazi-Man Who Would Be King'. In the same issue a sports columnist wrote that the 'Nazi-man is suffering from cockiness' and claimed that he was crowing like a rooster.

It was no wonder that throughout black America Louis' swift and decisive victory was greeted with jubilation. In Harlem the reaction was ecstatic and, at first, non-violent. However, by early morning missiles of all description were being flung from roof-tops and out of windows. In Chicago crowds celebrated by firing shots in the air and by setting off firecrackers. Blacks of all ages celebrated in the streets. Years later, Jersey Joe' Walcott remembered that in his hometown of Camden people came 'pouring out of their houses. They were so happy. It was like New Year's Eve'. In Detroit, meanwhile, the city most closely associated with Joe Louis, 10,000 blacks in the 'Paradise Valley' section joyously sang and danced.

In the pre-Civil Rights era most black heroes were entertainers and sports stars. Joe Louis was fast becoming the greatest of black idols. At a time when 'coloured people', to use the term then in vogue, were overwhelmingly poor and powerless, Louis was becoming rich by dint of his power to render whites unconscious. At the same time a growing number of whites in the United States who had come to regard Hitler's totalitarian regime with dread and disgust embraced Louis as the standard bearer of Americanism.

In America and in Europe, most Jews derived a special satisfaction from Louis' humiliation of Schmeling. Some in Germany looked forward to the second fight with hope and with trepidation. Sports writer Barney Nagler in his biography of Joe Louis was not alone in believing that the radio broadcast of the June 1938 fight beamed to Germany was deliberately interrupted to spare the population there the ignominy of Schmeling's lightning defeat. But boxing fans in the Third Reich did hear the entire fight and one, a thirteen-year-old Jewish boy then attending a boarding school, recently recalled the German announcer pleading in vain with Schmeling to get up from the canvas. In sharp contrast, he and the other Jewish students were elated when Louis triumphed. His victory was seen as a ray of hope for Jews:

We had grown up among Nazi pomp and muscle-flexing, witnessing repeated accommodations of the West to Hitler and almost believing that they were unbeatable and that all others -- including ourselves -- were as inferior and weak as they wanted us to

believe.

Among the Nazi rulers in Germany, Schmeling's star rose and fell with great rapidity. Before his upset knockout of Louis in June 1936 Schmeling was not promoted by the Nazis as the great Aryan hope. That was too risky. After all, a few years earlier he had been knocked out by Max Baer, a half Jew, and had been beaten by several mediocre fighters.

But following his unexpected success in 1936 Schmeling was lionised in the Fatherland. He received a congratulatory telegram from Hitler and following his VIP flight back to Germany aboard the zeppelin, the Hindenburg, he dined with the Fuhrer. For the tightly controlled Nazi media Schmeling had become a propaganda bonanza, proof of the validity of Hitler's racial theories. A documentary film on the fight which was distributed throughout Germany drove the racial message home. There was little Schmeling could do, even if he was so inclined, to stem the patriotic tide which was sweeping his country and to which his own victory had contributed.

Nazi Germany's response to Schmeling's 1938 loss was predictably gloomy. Even before his return journey aboard the Bremen, while Schmeling was still convalescing, Josef Goebbels spread rumours that Louis had been guilty of intentional fouling. The black American had won, said the propaganda minister, by using lead padding in his gloves. In his remembrances Schmeling wrote that for Hitler as well as Goebbels he no longer existed after his loss. Receptions in the Reich's chancellery, honours and trophies were a thing of the past. For a considerable period of time his name virtually disappeared from the press. Not only Schmeling, but the obnoxious master race theory, had been dealt a severe blow. Decades later a much older Schmeling found some good in the June 1938 debacle. A victory over Louis, he wrote, might truly have transformed him into the model Aryan of the Third Reich.

Such a reflection on the political implications of the second bout was that of an older and wiser man. But, to what extent, was the Schmeling of the 1930s seduced by the Nazis?

Certainly he sometimes allowed himself to be exploited by them. When American anti-Nazis attempted to generate support for a boycott of the Berlin Olympics of 1936, Schmeling, as the German athlete best known in the United States, was asked to contact key people and to undermine the boycott movement. He agreed to serve as a courier for the worried German Olympic Committee and delivered a letter to Avery Brundage, president of the American Olympic Committee, guaranteeing that all participants in the games would be treated fairly and cordially regardless of race or religion. Schmeling personally told Brundage that German sportsmen would not permit discrimination of any kind. In hindsight, Schmeling realised how innocent he had been. Writing in 1977 he observed that such matters were beyond his influence. Hitler could do what he wished. In his autobiography Schmeling further acknowledged that Jewish and black medal winners were not given their due at the Olympiad. Moreover, he conceded that his plea may have averted an American boycott. The Germans thought so. They awarded Schmeling a

medal for his efforts.

In 1936 Schmeling also allowed himself to be used when he wrote a one-page foreword to a book on German boxing which was published by the Nazi party. The author, Ludwig Haymann, was a former amateur boxing champion and sometime professional fighter. Sub-titled 'Boxing As A Race Problem', the book made the case for Germans to develop a unique style of boxing in line with Nazi racial ideology. Ultra-nationalism permeated the text which contained a few anti-Semitic slurs. Schmeling's brief foreword was generally inoffensive and bland in tone, although it did refer to 'our leader Adolf Hitler' and to the Fuhrer's belief that boxing built character. Max also wished the book the success it deserved.

On the other hand, Schmeling never joined the Nazi party. Nor was he a spokesman in Germany or in the United States for the Nazis. He denied to reporters in the US that he was a 'superman' and insisted that he was a pugilist rather than a politician. One American journalist did quote Schmeling speaking in positive terms of economic conditions in his country, of low unemployment and the absence of strikes, but it is possible that the quote was apocryphal.

He did make one clearly hostile comment about Hitler in 1936 to Harry Markson who recently corroborated the fact. Markson, then a newspaper reporter who shortly thereafter became the publicity director for the Twentieth Century Sporting Club, visited Schmeling at his Adirondack training camp. Markson was carrying a copy of the New York World Telegram which featured a picture of Norman Thomas, the perennial Socialist Party candidate for the presidency. Schmeling was curious about Thomas, but Markson assured him that Thomas was a dark horse who was not taken seriously and had no chance to win the White House. Schmeling retorted derisively that they had had a fellow like that in Germany and now he was running the whole country.

One might wish that Schmeling had publicly denounced Hitler or had refused to serve as a paratrooper in the Second World War, or had defected from the Third Reich and had sought asylum overseas, but such courses of action were most unrealistic. In trying to fathom Schmeling's behaviour it must be recalled that although he was intelligent he was a man of limited formal education. His origins were working class. His father had been a merchant seaman and Max may well have been flattered by the attention lavished upon him in the highest echelons of Nazi power. It has also been suggested that he was influenced by his actress-wife. Born in Poland, Anny Ondra had become a very popular film star in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere before achieving considerable fame in Germany. She may have harboured sympathy for the Nazi regime. The Schmeling social circle did include some prominent Nazis such as Heinrich Hoffmann, Hitler's personal photographer. Above all, Germany under the swastika was an extremely ruthless police state which did not shrink from using terror against dissenters from Nazi policy.

Nevertheless, anti-Semitism was a cardinal principle of the Nazis which Schmeling regularly flouted. His willingness to fraternise with Jews even after enactment of the infamous Nuremberg Laws of 1935, which stripped them of German citizenship, was no

secret. Schmeling himself has recalled a chance meeting with Josef Goebbels. The propaganda minister, a leading anti-Semite, took the opportunity to chide him:

What do you really think, Herr Schmeling? You do what you wish. You don't bother about the law. You come to the Fuhrer, you come to me and still you constantly associate with Jews.

Among the Jews in Schmeling's circle was his dentist, Dr Kurt Schindler, who accompanied Max to New York for the first fight against Louis. Shortly afterwards Schindler found himself in a concentration camp. Fortunately for him he was able to escape and make his way to South Africa. Another close Jewish friend of Schmeling's was Paul Damski, a manager and boxing promoter in Germany. It was the Russian-born Damski who first introduced Schmeling to his future wife, Anny Ondra. Damski had fled to Germany during the civil war that followed the Bolshevik Revolution and was forced to flee again in the mid-1930s, this time from Germany.

To the Nazis the most galling of Schmeling's Jewish associates was his long-time manager, Joe Jacobs. In Schmeling's expert opinion, the diminutive Jacobs knew nothing about boxing per se, but he had the best connections in the business and was able to negotiate the most advantageous contracts for his fighters. Schmeling found him honourable as well as clever. A Runyonesque character, Jacobs had shepherded several fighters, including Schmeling in 1930, to world championships. Along Broadway, the great white way, Jacobs was popularly known by his Yiddish first name, Yussel. Colourful, streetwise, brash, combative, argumentative, especially where referees and boxing judges were concerned, he was sometimes referred to as 'Yussel the Muscle'. Although he had been born in America, he routinely mangled the English language. Some have credited the irrepressible Jacobs with two seemingly immortal if ungrammatical observations. Supposedly, he exclaimed 'We wuz robbed' after Jack Sharkey was given the decision and the heavyweight championship in the Sharkey-Schmeling 1932 rematch. And, arriving at a baseball stadium on a wet, very cold day, he allegedly remarked, 'I should of stood in bed'. What an unlikely pair they were, the German gladiator, a Nazi to the core, it was said, and his Jewish manager, the son of an Orthodox Hungarian-Jewish tailor. According to one contemporary account, Yussel was wined and dined on his trips to Germany in the hope that he would work against Jewish efforts to boycott German-sponsored sports events and German athletes. When Schmeling fought an American boxer Steve Hamas, in Hamburg, Jacobs, who was as naive about politics as he was shrewd about ring matters, gave the Nazi salute. Moreover he told the press that Jews in Germany were not being persecuted. Money was plentiful and Jews were free to worship in their synagogues. He knew nothing of concentration camps and apparently cared less, for he personally was treated like a king.

At the time of the second Louis-Schmeling fight, Jacobs was under suspension in New York because he and another of his fighters, the brawling 'Two-Ton' Tony Galento, had not met certain contractual obligations. Jacobs suffered a fatal heart attack in 1940 before the Holocaust claimed the lives of six million of his co-religionists. In recent years it has been disclosed that Schmeling not only maintained friendships with Jews during the dark

years of the Third Reich, but, at least once, protected non-Aryans from anti-Semitic outrages.

We now know that on the occasion of the infamous Kristallnacht, November 9th, 1938, when pogroms raged throughout Germany, Schmeling sheltered two Jewish youngsters -- Henri Lewin, fourteen years old and his brother Werner Lewin, aged fifteen. The assassination of the third secretary at the German embassy in Paris by a seventeen year old Jew provided the Nazis with an excuse for unleashing vicious attacks on Jewish communities. Skilfully organised, the assaults were aimed at frightening the German Jews and harrying them out of the land. During and right after the 'Night of the Broken Glass', synagogues were put to the torch, Jewish homes and shops were razed, thousands of Jews were interned and approximately a hundred were killed in the outbursts which the Nazi hierarchy dishonestly called 'spontaneous'.

Schmeling had been a friend of the Lewin brothers' entrepreneurial father since the mid-1920s. David Lewin was well-known in show business and sports circles. Schmeling had purchased suits from his modish clothes shop, The Prince of Wales, had eaten at his restaurant, The Gypsy Cellar, and had stayed at Lewin's Aristocrat Hotel in Potsdam on the outskirts of Berlin. The boxer had also been a guest in Lewin's home.

Fearing the worst, in November 1938 Lewin senior asked Schmeling to hide his sons from the Nazi terror and Max unhesitatingly agreed to do so. For some days the Lewin boys remained in Schmeling's apartment in the fashionable Excelsior Hotel in Berlin. Schmeling informed the front desk that he was ill and gave orders that no one be allowed to visit him. When the anti-Jewish rioting abated, Henri and Werner were transferred to another location in the German capital. In 1939 the Lewins fled Germany and spent the war years in deprivation in the sizeable Jewish refugee community in Shanghai. The brothers emigrated to the United States in 1947. Starting as a waiter in San Francisco, Henri Lewin went on to become a highly successful hotel owner in California and Nevada and a sometime fight promoter. Not until 1989 was Schmeling's Crystal Night heroism made public. At a party honouring Schmeling which was held at Las Vegas' Sands Hotel, of which he was president, a tearful Henri Lewin told the story of how the German pugilist had risked fame and fortune to save the lives of two frightened Jewish adolescents. Schmeling had placed in jeopardy his name and reputation, said Lewin. 'If we had been found in his apartment, I would not be here this evening and neither would Max', he added as Schmeling wept. While it is probably an exaggeration to suggest that Schmeling would have forfeited his life for his courageous deed, his standing as a national hero would surely have been undercut. Not surprisingly, it is Henri Lewin's opinion that Schmeling is 'a man of the highest character -- a champion outside the ring as well ... a truly great German.'

Schmeling himself has never discussed the Kristallnacht incident: not in the countless interviews he has given, nor in his published reminiscences. He has modestly told the Lewins that what he did for them in 1938 was the 'duty of a man'. The melancholy truth is that there were precious few real men in Germany in that era, righteous men, who

fulfilled their moral duty. Max Schmeling, the reputed diehard Nazi, was one.

It has often been said that insulting remarks laid to Max and his camp before and after the 1938 fight, exacerbated by the bitter conflict between Nazi Germany and the United States, caused an estrangement between Schmeling and Joe Louis. However, some who knew Louis best, including his son, Joe Louis Barrow Jr., say that he never had any animosity toward Schmeling. In Schmeling's mind there was a misunderstanding and, at his initiative, the old warriors buried the hatchet, if in fact, any ever existed. On a visit to the United States in 1954, Schmeling sought out Louis in Chicago. In his memoirs, Max described their emotional reconciliation which was sealed with a firm handshake. Schmeling wrote that that experience was more meaningful to him than a third bout would have been.

Schmeling in retirement has prospered as a Coca Cola distributor with headquarters located in a suburb of Hamburg. He continues to enjoy a lofty status as a sports icon that may be unequalled in twentieth-century Germany.

Fate was less kind to the 'Brown Bomber'. In his last years he was plagued by mental problems which were compounded by financial woes. Had Louis not been given a job greeting guests at Caesar's Palace Hotel in Las Vegas, he might have been forced on to the public welfare rolls. That surely would have been a national tragedy as well as a personal humiliation. During those difficult times, Schmeling often gave financial assistance to his old foe, and after Louis' death in 1981, Schmeling gave \$5,000 to Louis' widow. It was Henri Lewin who served as the conduit for this thoughtful gift. Characteristically humble, Schmeling has never talked publicly about his extraordinary generosity. Again, he has demonstrated righteousness and humanitarianism, qualities which few associated with Schmeling in the late 1930s when he was contemptuously labelled a Nazi. He deserves better.

FOR FURTHER READING:

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Robert G. Weisbord is Professor of History at the University of Rhode Island and author of *The Chief Rabbi, The Pope and the Holocaust: An Era in Vatican-Jewish Relations* (Transaction, 1991).

Norbert Hedderich is Assistant Professor of German at the University of Rhode Island.