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## What are the reasons for the success of so many Hungarian Jewish Athletes

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### Abstract:

It can be considered normal that the smaller nations strive to win those competitions where the odds are even and they have the same chance of winning as the bigger nations. The best thing in sports is that we (can) believe that at least the competition on the grass of the stadium

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or in the swimming pool will be won by that athlete who gives the best performance at that time. In the competition, intellectual faculties will play an important- role. This is one of the theses of Nordau, who declares that *"the precondition of physical elasticity and skilfulness is mental elasticity and a clear mind." But no physical strength is enough if born with – or obtained by – a dull-minded, simple, boorish man to make him an athlete'. That sportsman whose nation had to fight for centuries even for its mere existence we may say carries the will to fight in his chromosomes"*. Another important question is the character of the sport of the Jewish in Hungary. Can we characterise it as Jewish sport, as a Jewish sports movement or must we regard it as the sport of Jewish sportsmen.

**Keywords:** Jewish Hungarian sportsmen, Olympic Games, Maccabi,

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## 1. Introduction

Below I will try to give an answer to the question raised in the title. The question is generated by international statistics of Jewish sports successes around the world. If you read the article titled "Olympic Games" in the Encyclopedia Judaica and the attached statistics, you will find that up to 1968 Hungarians won nearly one third of the Jewish Olympic medals and nearly a half of championship medals. The result is even better if we add other Hungarian sportsmen of Jewish origin who are missing from these statistical data.

## 2. Who can be regarded as a Jewish sportsman

First of all, the researcher faces a problem: it is very hard to decide who can be regarded as being of Jewish descent. In Hungary, in most cases, you cannot unambiguously decide the issue on the basis of the name or the religious denomination because the majority of Hungarian Jewish families changed their names and/or denominations during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As a result of the 'Hungarianisation' process was simultaneously the tool and result of assimilation – the mostly German surnames were dropped and replaced by Hungarian ones, and the Jewish faith was abandoned in favour of one of the Christian denominations. As the open assumption of Jewish identity in Hungary – due to the long-lasting effect of well-known historical and political reasons – is an issue based on individual decision, the protection of individual rights should be especially taken into consideration, and the researcher must avoid at all costs branding anybody as Jewish against his or her will.

We can accept it as an individual decision if the sportsman has declared his (or a sportswoman her) affiliation to the Jewish community (by choosing a school, a cemetery or a synagogue), is a member of the VAC (the Fencing and Athletic Club) or has participated in the Maccabi Games, settled in Israel or accepted membership in the "International Jewish Sports Hall of Fame". Another sure sign is if the sportsman's parents or grandparents were regarded as Jews during the era of the anti-Jewish legislation and this fact is openly known. But, even so, you have to consider the sensitivity of the sportsman in question or that of his or her family.

The appearance of modern sports and the establishment of a sporting life as understood today occurred in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it was simultaneous, in Hungary too, with the emergence of the middle class and the strengthening of national awareness. These

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processes affected the urban population first of all. At that time, a significant part of the townspeople were either Germans or German-speaking Jews. The latter group mostly made a living as merchants or pursued financial or other, intellectual careers.

Most of the founders of modern sports were liberal noblemen, but as a matter of course the emerging middle class (including physicians and teachers) soon joined the budding sports clubs.

The Hungarian Jewry participated in the 1848–49 bourgeois revolution and war of independence in far more significant numbers than its proportion within the total population, helping Hungarians in their just struggle against tyranny. By doing so, the Jewry declared both its commitment to civic ideas and its identification with the Hungarian nation state. Emancipation, which was simultaneous with the 1867 Compromise between Austria and Hungary, accelerated the modernisation of Jewish society. Very soon, this caused a conflict between religious-conservative Jews and the so-called “neolog” groups that followed modern ideas and shed all religious restrictions. In the area of sports this conflict resulted in two contradictory solutions.

One solution, the Maccabi sports movement, was the result of Zionism. Two of the most important Zionist leaders, Theodor Herzl and Max Nordau, were born in Budapest. At the 2<sup>nd</sup> Zionist World Congress in Basle in 1898, they proposed the idea of “muscular Judaism”, which was to be embodied later by the Maccabi sports movement.

The other solution was specifically Hungarian. This concept was introduced three years before the Nordau proposal in an IMIT (Jewish Hungarian Literature Society) yearbook article written by a Budapest school physician and teacher, Henrik Schuschny. He, too, emphasised the importance of physical education; however, contrary to Nordau’s proposal, Schuschny’s aim was assimilation.

“Physical training increases not only bodily strength but also self-confidence (...) If the Hungarian Jew, aside from being a patriot and well-educated, has a trained body and self-consciousness, then the only difference between him and any other patriotic inhabitant of our country will be his religion.”<sup>19</sup>

With these words Schuschny summarised the essence of Hungarian Jewish sports. But what happened in reality?

In the 1880s sport underwent a democratisation process. The earlier exclusive domain of noblemen was transformed into an arena for sports-loving members of the lower classes, and club membership was greatly enlarged. This transformation is also witnessed by the articles of a short-weddy sports magazine, “Hercules”. In the autumn of 1885 a leading article is published there titled “A Jewish Sports Club”. The author complains that middle-class citizens, Jews and non-Jews alike, are excluded from the aristocratically-minded clubs. This article is not so much against anti-Semitism but is rather an encouragement:

“In Budapest, there are at least 5,000 intelligent young Jewish people who could show their mettle in any sports. And still, Jewish members are barred from joining any club except for the NTE (National Physical Training Association), the Budapest Fencing Club, the Iron Stallion Association and some others. Let non-anti-Semitic members of the Christian world

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<sup>19</sup> Schuschny, 1895, pp. 369-373.

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leave their present clubs and join Jews to establish new sporting associations, where both religious and social differences would be unknown.”<sup>20</sup>

This article must have played a part in the establishment of MTK (Hungarian Athletes' Circle) by a group of NTE sportsmen after an athletic contest held without a permit. Soon, of all clubs with an obviously Jewish orientation, MTK turned out to be the main basis for Jewish sportsmen and became the most familiar and popular club of all.

### 3. The VAC

The only club with an exclusive Jewish membership was the Fencing and Athletic Club. It was established in 1906 by a well-known Zionist leader, Lajos Dömény (Deutch), who was simultaneously the founder of the Kadima scout group and the “Jewish Popular Magazine”, the first Zionist paper in the country. VAC was the first truly Jewish sports club in Europe to be able to surpass the gymnastics movement in popularity. VAC's basis was the Jewish High School: the club used the school's facilities, most club leaders were simultaneously teachers (e.g. Zoltán Dückstein) and the bulk of the sportsmen were students of the school. For any sports club the only way to join the sporting life of the country was to participate in various national championships. Although the best Jewish sportsmen were not VAC members, VAC was able to achieve an outstanding position in many sports. Apart from fencing and athletics, the club had gymnastics, soccer, swimming, water polo and boxing divisions. Later, from the 1920s on, table tennis, handball, basketball and tennis divisions were established. National championships were won by VAC's men's gymnastics team and men's and women's table tennis teams. At the beginning of the 1920s the soccer team was in the Premier League. VAC played an outstanding role in the introduction and popularisation of handball and table tennis in Hungary.

When reading the names of sports clubs with a Jewish orientation, you will find a regional or national adjective at the start of the name (Budapest, Újpest, Hungarian, National, etc.). This is evidence of the patriotic orientation already stressed by Schuschny as a desired objective of Hungarian Jewry.

Outstanding Jewish sportsmen could be found in almost all sports, maybe with the exception of such traditionally aristocratic or military ones like polo or the pentathlon.

Fencing was the area we achieved most of the successes, as shown in the Olympic statistical data already mentioned at the beginning of my presentation. This ardent interest in fencing might be explained by the extremely high educational level of Hungarian Jewry. Fencing duels were fashionable at that time, but only men with a high-school education were permitted to fight. The great probability of anti-Semitic insults and a desire for better means of self-defence may have been the reasons why young people turned to fencing, which was also a subject at almost all high schools in the country. At least before World War I, success was partly made possible by the fact that the joint Austro-Hungarian Army forbade its officers to participate at the Olympic Games. This prohibition served the interests of sportsmen of non-military – in many cases Jewish – origin.

In addition to fencing, Olympic medals were also won in swimming, wrestling, athletics, gymnastics, water polo, soccer, kayak and canoe paddling, figure skating and the arts (architecture, literature).

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<sup>20</sup> Zsidó sportegylet, 1885, p. 1.

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Of course, Olympic statistics do not list sports that are not disciplines at the Olympic Games. Take table tennis: in this area Hungarian sportsmen of Jewish origin achieved even more success than in fencing. Between the two world wars, these athletes (Barna, Bellák, Dávid, Kelen, Mechlovits, Sipos, Szabados, just to name the very best) won more than a hundred medals for their country at the world championships.

Another area is chess. At the separate Chess Olympics the successes of Steiner and Lilienthal should be mentioned, not to forget the Polgár sisters, who are among the best in the world even today.

Soccer deserves special mention. Maybe it is difficult to believe it today, but this is one of the most successful Hungarian branches of sport. The representatives of Budapest Jewry were present both at the cradle and during the first half century of soccer. This branch of sport mostly attracts the lower-middle-class urban masses, so it was not by accident that many players and a large number of fans were Jews. Both the first soccer club (the Budapest Gymnastic Club) and MTK were regarded as clubs with a Jewish orientation, but to some extent UTE (the Újpest Gymnastic Association) and the III. District TTVE could be – and were – counted as such as well. MTK won one national championship after the other, and these clubs produced innumerable champions, scorer kings, players for two Olympic gold medal-winning national teams, famous players and trainers of national and international teams for Hungary and the world.

	Austria	Belgium	Brazil	Canada	Denmark	Finland	France	Germany	Great Britain	Hungary	Italy	Poland	Rumania	South Africa	Uruguay	U.S.A.	U.S.S.R.
Basketball			1											1	2		
Boxing				1										1	5		
Canoeing										4			3				1
Cycling	3																
Fencing	2	8			1		10		4	31						2	13
Gymnastics								6		14						2	3
Ice Hockey								1									
Ice Skating-Figure	2						1									2	
Ice Skating-Speed																2	2
Judo																1	
Rowing																1	
Shooting																	2
Soccer					1					2							1
Swimming	9	1								6						6	2
Tennis											1						
Track and Field				2		2			4	3		7				15	
Water Polo		5								13							2
Weightlifting	2															4	1
Wrestling	2				1				1	3						4	2
Yachting																1	1

9. table Encyclopaedia Judaica, 1373 p.

In Hungary the following 'firsts' were achieved thanks to sportsmen of Jewish descent: the first Olympic gold medal (Alfréd Hajós-Guttmann, swimming); the first world championship (Lili Kronberger, figure skating); the only Helms Award for the best sportsman in the world (Sándor Iharos-Israel, athletics); the world's most successful woman in sports (Ágnes Keleti, gymnastics). Without false modesty, it should be mentioned here that the family of the world's most successful man in sports, the swimmer Mark Spitz, emigrated to the U.S. from Hungary.

A number of Hungarian Jewish sportsmen became representatives in various international sports organisations. Ferenc Kemény (Kaufmann) was one of the founding members of the International Olympic Committee. Ferenc Mező (Grünfeld) was also an IOC member. Leó Donáth was the founder of the European Swimming League and the General Secretary of FINA. Alfréd Brüll, the president of MTK, was simultaneously the president of the

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International Amateur Wrestling Association. The “pope of football”, Mór Fischer, and the popular radio reporter, György Szepesi (Friedländer), were both leaders of FIFA.

Just a few of the numerous trainers and division managers may be named: Béla Komjádi, water polo; Károly Kárpáti (Kellner), wrestling; Zsigmond Adler, boxing (László Papp’s trainer); Marcell Hajdú, fencing; Béla Guttmann (Eusebio’s discoverer) and Gyula Mándi (Mandl), soccer.

A separate chapter should be reserved for the generous sponsors who sacrificed large amounts of money for the maintenance of the clubs. The most popular ones were Alfréd Brüll (MTK), Lipót Aschner (UTE), Manfréd Weiss (Csepel SC) and Ignác Goldberger (Goldberger SE).

Although my topic does not include the role of Hungarians in the development of sporting life in Israel, some of these people also deserve mention here, for example, Mr. and Mrs. Dückstein (gymnastics and physical education), Ágnes Keleti (gymnastics), Alfréd Nóbél (fencing) and Gyula Mándi (Mandl) (soccer).

We must never forget the terrible losses caused by the Holocaust. The Hungarian Jewry’s will to assimilate proved to be a dead end. The terror of the far right and the Nazi occupation cut a painfully wide swathe through them. The same destiny was shared by the president of MTK, Alfréd Brüll and two Olympic winners in fencing, János Garay and Oszkár Gerde, who all perished in death camps. Another Olympic winner in fencing, Attila Petschauer died in a forced labour battalion. Still another Olympic winner in fencing, Endre Kabos, died on the Margaret Bridge when it was blown up. Ferenc Kemény, one of the founding members of the IOC, could not endure the Arrow Cross persecution any more and committed suicide.

Finally, let me recount a most strange story that occurred during the Holocaust era. When Hungary entered World War II, Jenő Fuchs, the four-time winner of the Olympic gold medal in fencing, volunteered as a Hungarian soldier. As a Jew, he was assigned to a forced labour battalion. His battalion’s task was to remove and lay mines. On one occasion, the Russians killed all the Hungarian regular soldiers that escorted the battalion and only the Jews remained. Fuchs and his comrades took the weapons of the fallen soldiers and picked up the fight against the Russians, who had to withdraw. The commander of the nearby German unit was Colonel Trompeter. A fencing and pentathlon sportsman himself, he knew Fuchs from earlier times and proposed that the Jewish fighters should receive the Iron Cross. They duly received the awards. Upon hearing this news, the Hungarian Army Commander, Gusztáv Jány, issued a statement: “I do not know Jews or Hungarians, only heroes.” After that, the Hungarian Army Command sent the battalion home.

After this short review of the history and successes of Jewish sportsmen in Hungary, it might sound odd and unjustified to raise the question of whether Jewish sports exist in Hungary. In my humble opinion, Jewish sports do not exist in Hungary, and my views correlate with Schuschny’s intentions mentioned earlier. We can “only” speak of Jewish sportsmen in Hungary, who adapted to (or, if you like, assimilated into) the whole of Hungarian sporting life and fought for the success of the Hungarian colours with an energy that sometimes surpassed that of their non-Jewish compatriots. This opinion of mine was reinforced by a personal experience gained during the opening of our exhibition titled “Jews in Hungarian Sports”, organised in Tel Aviv during the 1993 Maccabi Games. Formerly Hungarian

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sportsmen settled in Israel told me that, in their hearts, they felt first, second and third Hungarian and only fourth Jewish. Maybe this will to assimilate gives the answer to the question raised in the title of my presentation: this is the reason for the world-wide success of Hungarian Jewish sportsmen.

#### 4. Conclusion

The question mentioned in the title of the paper is generated by international statistics of Jewish sports successes around the world. If you read the article titled “Olympic Games” in Encyclopedia Judaica you will find that up to 1968 Hungarians won nearly one third of the Jewish Olympic medals and nearly a half of championship medals.

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