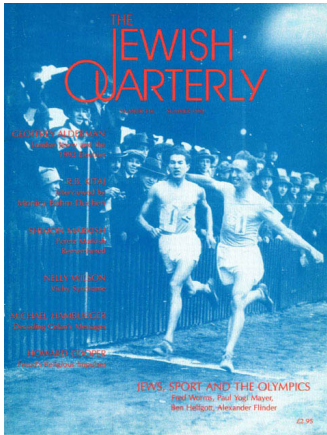


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### THE GREAT DECEPTION

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# THE GREAT DECEPTION

A PERSONAL RECOLLECTION OF  
HITLER'S OLYMPIC GAMES 1936

PAUL YOGI MAYER

PAUL YOGI MAYER came to England with his family in 1939 and served in the British Forces for five years. After the war, he was Warden to a hostel and club for children rescued from concentration camps. Before retiring in 1977, he worked as a PE teacher at Hasmonian Grammar School, as Youth Director for the Brady Clubs and as Area Youth Officer for Islington ILEA. His exhibition, "The Olympic Games 1936 in Hitler's Germany", was shown at the Wiener Library, London, to whom thanks are due for the use of the photographs in this article.



**M***ā Nishtana*—why were these Games different from all other Games? This question has been answered by many sports historians and journalists who have attempted to expose the deception that paraded

as the Berlin Games of 1936.<sup>1</sup> Despite the many individual sporting achievements, it was a violation of the Olympic spirit. When the Games closed, a mass choir sang Beethoven's "Ode to Joy". The Choral Symphony con-

**Fencing medallists:** (left to right) Ellen Preiss (Austria), Ilona Elek-Schacherer (Hungary) and Helene Mayer (Germany)

1. See the *Encyclopedia of Jewish Sport* by Silver and Postal which was published in the United States in 1965; see also the work of Dr Willy Meisl and Felix Pinczower which I reviewed in my essay in *Das Jüdische Sportbuch*, No. 2 (1937); in 1978 Professor Hajo Bennett, then Dean of the Sportwissenschaftliche Institut of Bonn University, published the comprehensive *Der jüdische Sport im nationalsozialistischen Deutschland 1933–38*. He contacted me as a so-called “Zeitzeuge” and became my mentor and friend. He assisted me in my essay on the history of Jews and sport in Germany published in the *Leo Baeck Yearbook*, 25 (1980).

2. Professor Hajo Bennett’s address at the Leo Baeck Conference in Berlin some years ago.

(left) the first Olympics, Athens, 1896—the winning German gymnasts, including 1936 Gold Medallists Gustav Felix Flatow (third from right) and Alfred Flatow (second from right); (right) “Jews, enter this place at your own risk”

cluded with the words “All men will become brothers”—an ironic ending, in view of the fate which awaited so many.

The guidelines for the modern Olympiad were enunciated by Baron de Coubertin at the London Games in 1908. “The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part, just as the most important thing in life is not the triumph but the struggle. The essential thing is not to have conquered but to have fought well.”

From the outset, the question of participation in the Berlin Olympics was problematic for the International Olympic Games Committee (IOC). At first, it was the question of including “Negros” in the American team; then it was one of Jews representing their respective countries; and finally, it was the participation of German Jews in the German team. After some misgivings, Hitler was made to understand by Goebbels that the promotion of the Olympic Games was a unique propaganda opportunity for the Third Reich. Thus, for the first time, the state supervised the training of athletes; it ordered employers to continue paying their salaries and even paid their fares in the form of a railway-warrant similar to those issued to soldiers.

The Americans insisted that no obstacle should prohibit the inclusion of black athletes in the US team—it was a condition of their participation in the Berlin Games. When the issue of Jewish participation came up, the German representatives declared that it was the prerogative of the individual country as to whether they should include Jews in their team. That still left unclear the question of Jewish participation in the German team.

Jews had been active sportsmen and sports-women in Germany since the Middle Ages—as competitors, teachers and writers of textbooks. In the twentieth century, many Jews also excelled in non-Olympic sports. For example,

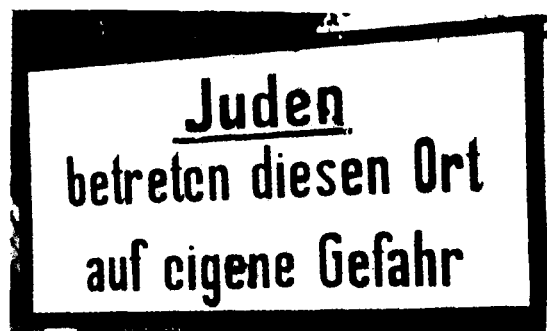
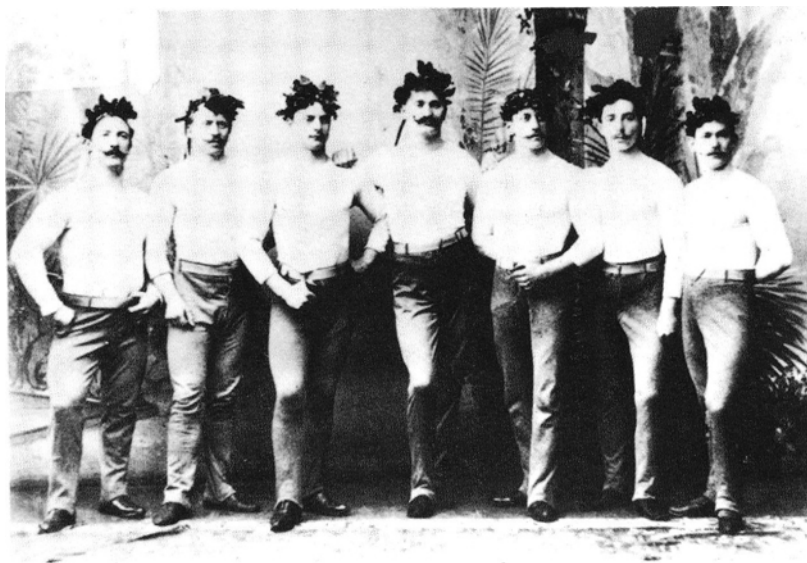
Daniel Prenn represented Germany in the Davis Cup. Lilli Henoch won ten athletics titles and held two world records—and all before women were admitted to the Games in 1928.

Jewish sport in National Socialist Germany has suffered all forms of degradation: dishonourable exclusion from the German sport community; being deprived of self-determination by the *Reichssportführer*; control and suppression by the Gestapo; collision with hostile surroundings; the narrowing of one’s living space and room for action; the destruction of organizations; the requisition of property and finally expulsion. This process is without parallel in history and in the history of sport. It can only be analysed with a sense of shame and a feeling of guilt. But that a suppressed and persecuted minority did not give up sport in spite of all pressures must be encouraging . . . Notwithstanding all differences in ideology, Maccabi and Schild practised in an identical manner sport as it had been shaped by the cultural, political and sociological conditions of Germany and Europe.<sup>2</sup>

These organizations, Maccabi and Schild, had a combined membership of over 40,000 and were soon working together in the *Reichsausschuss der Jüdischen Sportsverbände*. Shortly afterwards, the notorious Nuremberg Laws were enforced.

Due to the strenuous efforts of the two German members, the IOC awarded the 1936 Games to Germany because the 1916 Olympics had been cancelled due to the onset of the First World War. Of course, neither the German nor the Jewish press were permitted to report on the rather delicate and protracted negotiations. It was only long afterwards that the details were made public. Lord Killanin, who succeeded Avery Brundage as IOC President, published, with John Clinton Rodda, an excellent book called *The Olympic Games*. The Director of the Committee, Monique Berlioux, was asked to compile a report on those dramatic negotiations. She wrote:

Adolf Hitler acquired power on 30 January 1933. The thirty-first Session of the IOC was held in Vienna on 7–9 June of that year. Baillet-Latour officially asked the representatives of the Reich to guarantee their country’s observance of the Olympic Charter or to forgo the Games. They gave the requested guarantee. The Vienna Session noted the fact that “in principle the German Jews would not be excluded from the



Games of the XIth Olympiad". Of the two German members of the IOC, one, Theodore Lewald, half Jewish by birth, was President of the Organizing Committee of the Berlin Games; the other, Dr Karl Ritter von Halt, was President of the Organizing Committee of the Garmisch Games. . . . At the foot of the Zugspitz the two villages of Garmisch and Partenkirchen were arranged with characteristic Bavarian *Gemütlichkeit*. But signs "Dogs and Jews are not allowed" had been placed outside the toilet facilities at Olympic sites. Baillet-Latour saw them and requested an interview with Hitler. After the customary courtesies, he said: "Mr Chancellor, the signs shown to the visitors to the Games are not in conformity with Olympic principles." Hitler replied: "Mr President, when you are invited to a friend's home, you don't tell him how to run it, do you?" Baillet-Latour thought a minute and replied: "Excuse me, Mr Chancellor, when the five-circled flag is raised over the stadium, it is no longer Germany. It is Olympia and we are masters there." The signs were removed.

Hardly had the thirty-first Session closed when Hitler decided to replace Lewald and von Halt at the head of the two Organizing Committees with the State Director of Sport he had just appointed, Hans von Tschammer und Osten. Baillet-Latour immediately requested an audience with Hitler, who felt obliged to comply. "It was in consideration of the statures of His Excellence Dr Lewald and Ritter von Halt that the IOC granted the organization of the Games to Berlin and Garmisch," the IOC President told the German Führer. "If our two colleagues should cease to be Presidents of the Organizing Committees, the IOC would be obliged to withdraw the Games from the two cities conditionally elected and to award them to other candidates." Hitler gave in.

The campaigns against staging the Games in two cities of the Third Reich nevertheless grew to a frenzy. Baillet-Latour invited von Halt and Lewald to confirm publicly their promises regarding the observance of the undertakings they had made in Vienna on behalf of Germany. The two delegates repeated their statements on the Third Reich's "loyalty" towards German Jewish athletes who, according to them, were in no way at a disadvantage compared with their "Aryan" comrades. Certainly at that time, racial persecutions were proliferating, giving a faint hint of the horrors to come in 1938-45. But the systematic killings had not begun: the world's strange passivity towards the regime was to continue for several years.

I personally took an interest in the history of Jews in sport when I encountered a popular belief—already accepted before the Nazis took power—that Jews were physically inferior and lacked courage.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, many young Jews, for national, social and even religious reasons (e.g., no sport on Shabbat) formed Jewish clubs in Central Europe to expose this misconception. Jews had been members of German sports organizations for many years. In 1885, approximately 400 of the 1,100 members of the Wiener Turnverein were Jewish. Hajo Bernett

comments that "sport presents for the Jewish citizen a medium of social integration. Here he experienced the practical impact of the equality principle as nowhere else."

The exclusion of Jews from membership of a German sports organization after 1933 robbed some former German champions of opportunities for training, coaching, proper facilities and competition with others. Some retired from sport altogether; others emigrated to continue competing. Quite a number gained championships in their new countries.

I was a member of the Berliner Sportclub (BSC). Various non-Jewish members of the German Olympic Team always found time to coach me as a member of their club—but that was 1932 when I was studying at the University of Berlin. After the banning of Jews in 1933, Jews joined Jewish sports clubs in their thousands. They enlisted in Maccabi as well as in Schild, a specifically German-Jewish organization under the auspices of Jewish ex-servicemen, the Reichsbund Jüdischer Frontsoldaten. While their leaderships were often engaged in the debate over Zionism, the majority of young Jews joined because their friends were already members or there was only one Jewish sports club in the particular town.

In June 1934, the American Olympic Committee postponed official acceptance of the German invitation [to the Berlin Games] and instructed Avery Brundage, its chairman, to make an on-the-spot study of the status of Jewish athletes in the Third Reich. Alarmed at the delay in American acceptance, the Reich Fields Sports Organization, in June 1934, nominated twenty-one Jewish athletes for the German Olympic training camps. Among the twenty-one were: Helene Mayer, fencer; Gretel Bergmann, high jumper; Erich Lorch, Hanne Manne, Erich Schild, Rudi Marx, Paul Y. Mayer, Werner Schattmann, Kurt Sternlieb and Franz Orgler, track and field men; Bernd Méysel, a swimmer; and a canoeist named Baer.<sup>4</sup>

Also organized was an Olympia Lehrgang (Olympic Training Course) for the Jewish athletes which was held at Wilhelmshöhe at Ettlingen, the training centre for German athletes in the Black Forest. Before our arrival, all Aryans, apart from the staff, were ordered to leave. The invitation to attend an Olympic Lehrgang was issued to me in the form of a travel warrant from the Reichssportführer von Tschammer-Osten, previously a leading member of the notorious SA. Of course, we, the participants, knew that this selection for special training for some Jewish athletes was designed to deceive all those who had questioned the declaration of Lewald and Halt. *L'Auto*, the French sports paper, sent their correspondent, Bing, to report; he confirmed our presence but also reported the deception.

We may have been talented but we had been deprived of intensive training for two

3. The controversial question, "Who is a Jew?", is one which also arises in the context of participation in the Olympics. As in the past, many Jews changed their names for a variety of reasons. I was conscious of these problems when I compiled a list of over two hundred Jewish medal winners at the Olympic Games. This is a problem shared by the Halls of Fame in Israel and California.

4. Report by the Americans Postal and Silver.

years. No wonder that we were far too exhausted to produce competitive times or distances when we were tested at the end of the course at Ettlingen. Non-Jews were, of course, excluded from the athletics stadium. Apart from the middle-distance runner, Franz Orgler (Maccabi), and Gretel Bergmann, the high-jumper (Schild), no one qualified for further training courses.

(right) high jumper Gretel Bergmann equals the German record; (left) Helene Mayer, German Olympic women's fencing champion, 1928



Gretel Bergmann and I trained together. Her case became a *cause célèbre*. In a letter recalling the Württemberg Country Championships in Stuttgart, she comments: "I do not remember the condition of the track in Stuttgart but no matter what state it was in, it could not compare with the climate [of opinion] as far as the officials were concerned—pretty grim." Even so, Gretel equalled the German ladies' high jump record with 1.60 metres. Germany however only selected two of the three girls. Gretel received a letter from the Reichssportführer stating that she could not be included in the German team as her performances were '*zu unbeständig*'—too inconsistent. But he enclosed two complimentary tickets for her. In response, Gretel decided to return the ticket to him marked "personal" but with nothing else, not even a note of explanation.

In another letter, she wrote:

Your question—"If Gretel had been offered a place in the German team, would she have accepted?"—is easily answered. I suppose you mean would I have competed in the Olympics had I been given the opportunity. Let me say first that I *was* on the team, I signed the Olympic oath and, if you remember, only two women

(one not a woman) competed in the high jump.<sup>5</sup> You might also remember that I was blackmailed, in 1934, to return to Germany under threats to my family and the whole Jewish sports movement, thus ruining a hope of becoming a member of the British Olympic team. I had absolutely no choice but had to do what I was told to do and the same would have held true as far as competing in the Games was concerned. Those certainly were not the days when you could do as your conscience dictated; you did as ordered to do. One thing is sure, had I been allowed to compete I would have done my damndest to win, which would certainly have shot huge holes into Hitler's theory of the inferiority of the Jews.

The womens' high jump was won by Ilona Czak of Hungary with a jump of 1.60 metres. Dorothy Odam (UK) came second; she was beaten by Bergmann in the English championships.

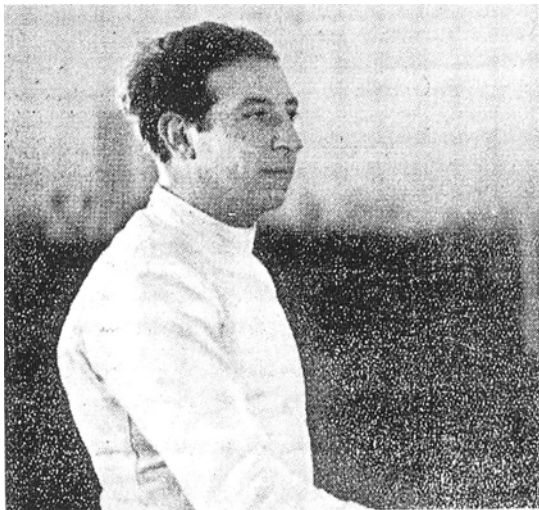


At the Games, there were nonetheless quite a number of Jewish participants. Two "half-Jews" were members of the German team: Rudi Ball, who returned from Milan to become a member of the ice hockey team; and Helene Mayer, who had won a fencing Gold Medal as a schoolgirl in 1928. Being "non-

5. Dorothy Ratjen was disqualified for being a man and became the father of two children.

Aryan”, she had accepted a teaching position in the United States, where she won various championships. The German Sport Authorities invited her to return to Germany and to become a member of the womens’ foils team. The Americans urged her to call Hitler’s bluff. Helene had been a member of the famous fencing club in Offenbach which had produced various Jewish champions. She was the daughter of Ludwig Mayer, a Jewish lawyer, and was registered on her birth certificate as “mosaisch”.

Helene declared in a letter to von Tschammer-Osten that she would return only if her German nationality was restored to her—which of course was contrary to the Nuremberg Laws. She competed and gained a Silver Medal behind the winner Iлона Elek-Schacherer of Hungary. Ellen Preiss, an Austrian, came third. It is said that all three women were Jewish or of Jewish origin. When the medals were presented to those three girls, Hitler had left the stadium. Being a member of the German team, Helene Mayer wore the white tracksuit with the German *Hoheitsabzeichen*, the eagle and swastika. She gave the official German salute and returned to the United States as soon as the Games were over.



With hindsight, it is easy to criticize those of Jewish origin who participated in the Games. Theirs must have been an extremely difficult decision. There were also other Gold Medal winners in Berlin who were Jewish, such as Károly Kárpáty who won a first in wrestling, representing Hungary. Endre Kabos won the sabre and the Hungarian water polo team which won the Gold Medal were György Bródy and two others. In a letter I received in 1986 from a Hungarian journalist, he mentions by name sixteen Jews who competed for Hungary in 1936. In addition he wrote:

The oak sapling presented to the victorious water polo team was planted in front of the National Swimming Stadium on the Magarethen island, but was destroyed by gunfire during World War Two. After their return from Berlin, the water

polo players went to the grave of Béla Komjádi (known to everyone as “komi bácsi” or uncle) in the Jewish cemetery and there placed a large laurel wreath with the inscription “komi bácsi, again we have done our duty”. Béla Komjádi was the coach of the Hungarian water polo team which won five Gold Medals in various Olympic Games and which included a number of Jewish players.

Komjádi’s tombstone was designed by Alfréd Hajós, the first Hungarian Jewish Olympic champion (1896), who also gained an Olympic Art Silver Medal for his design of a stadium. Hungary’s team in 1936 included sixteen Jewish athletes, of whom five won Gold Medals. Today the National Swimming Stadium is named after Alfréd Hajós, the pool in Buda after Béla Komjádi.



(far left) Endre Kabos (Hungary) won a Gold Medal in fencing; (left) the victorious Hungarian water polo team, trained by Béla Komjádi; (below) Jesse Owens and Lutz Loug in Berlin

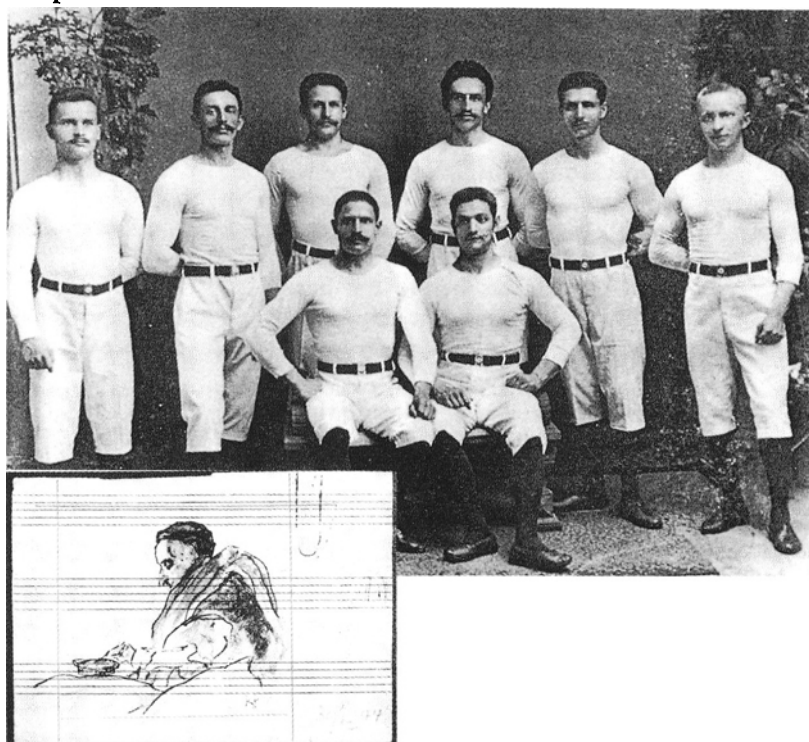
The Jewish-Canadian Irving Meretzky was a member of the basketball team which won a Silver Medal, but two American Jews, Marty Glicksman and Sam Stoller lost their chance of a Gold Medal. A few hours before the heats, their places in the sprint relay were taken by Jesse Owens and Ralph Metcalfe, who had won Gold and Silver in the 100 metres. The inclusion of two black runners, one of them Jesse Owens who had become the darling of the spectators, was a demonstration against the superiority of the so-called Aryans. Nobody would have known, had this exchange not taken place, that two of the American runners had been Jewish.



The question of Jewish participation was not a problem only during the Games. Before the

Games had even begun, Harold Abrahams, of *Chariots of Fire* fame, a leading member of the British Olympic Games Committee, voted to support the Games. Sir Arthur Gold, the present Chairman of the British Olympic Games Association, told me that only an illness stopped him from competing in Berlin. He, so he said, “dreamed of standing on the rostrum as a Jew”. But nobody would have known. We had received instructions from the Nazi Press Office that under no circumstances were we permitted to write about the Games. All I could do was to print an interview with Alfred Flatow, who won two Gold Medals in 1896. He and his cousin had been invited as “*Ehrengäste*”, as was Rudi Ball and, surprisingly, Harold Abrahams. Three Austrian swimmers, all members of the famous Hakoah Wien, refused to take part and were suspended by the Austrian Committee: Judith Deutsch, Ruth Langer and Lucy Goldman. The same happened to Franz Fischer, a member of the Czech water polo team; but other Jewish players, Epstein and two others, all members of Hagibor, went with their team to Berlin.

(top) Berlin gymnastics champions, 1900, including Olympic Gold Medallists Alfred Flatow (second from left) and Gustav Felix Flatow (third from left); (inset) drawing of Gustav Felix Flatow, 30 December 1944, by R.P., a fellow prisoner in the concentration camp



When the Games finally began, Lewald walked beside Hitler into the stadium. The signs “*Juden unerwünscht*” had disappeared, and so had the notorious pornographic *Stürmer*, the hateful paper of Julius Streicher who was later hanged as a war criminal.

The Olympic Village for the male competitors was situated close to the stadium and not far from the Oranienburg concentration camp. But none of the competitors had any idea of those “KZs”, as they were called. The Commandant of the Olympic Village was a Captain

Wolfgang Fürstner. When it became known that he was a “non-Aryan”, he was dismissed. He shot himself and the German Army gave him, very much against the wishes of the Nazis, a special funeral with full military honours.

Hirsch, who was a member of the German football team in 1912, died in Auschwitz, as did Leon Sperling who had played for France. The two Baruch brothers (German wrestling champions) perished, one in one camp, his brother in another. They had been our decorators in Bad-Kreuznach where I was born. I remember them well, giving me a ride on their shoulders. Roman Kantor ended his life in Maidanek; Illyia Scraibman in the Warsaw Ghetto, where Kazimir Karponski fell during the uprising. Endre Kabos and Attila Petschauer froze to death in Russia and János Garay and Andreas Szekely were killed in Mauthausen. There are many others who disappeared. When the archives in the East are fully opened for research, we may learn more about their fate.

Hajo Bernett succeeded in persuading the Deutsche Turnerbund, a national gymnastics association, to award an annual “Flatow Medal” to their most outstanding member. I was recently informed that a street in former East Berlin will now bear the name of Lilly Henoeh. After an exchange of letters, I was glad to hear that Bad-Kreuznach will now honour the Baruch brothers by calling a new road “Die Gebrüder Baruch Strasse” with an additional small plate, relating the place of their deaths.

Long before we learned about the fate of so many who lost their lives, stonemasons carved the names of the Olympic winners into the walls of the Olympic Stadium in Berlin, including the name of Jesse Owens as the hero of the Games having won four Gold Medals. A Jew, Agnes Keleti of Hungary, equalled his achievement many years later in gymnastics; and the American Jewish swimmer Mark Spitz won nine Gold Medals in freestyle, butterfly and various team events—seven in 1972 alone.

The Berlin Games were an island in a sea of militarism and state control few can forget. Peter Wilson, a British sports journalist who attended the Games, summed up his experience:

Sadly, though, the overall memory of the 1936 Games was the “*Deutschland über alles*” atmosphere engendered by Hitler and the Nazis. Everywhere the eye was affronted by flags upon flags, bearing the crooked cross, like so many weeds among the flower beds of less provocative devices; everywhere the ear was assailed by loud-speakers playing martial music or relaying the hysterical *Sieg heil* responses of the thoughtless multitudes to the appearance of the Führer. There have been other Games where tragedy has intruded—but never again, I hope, will there be a world festival of sport where the prevailing air was so odiously chauvinistic and military.