

# HAARETZ

## Baseball: An American-Jewish love story

National Museum of American Jewish History's exhibition tells how the game helped Jews blend in.

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PHILADELPHIA – Baseball may not have been in Esther Schimmel's blood, but it certainly was in her purse.

Schimmel, an immigrant from Goworowa, Poland, owned a hot dog stand near the corner of Dodier and Spring Streets, across from Sportsman's Park, the home of St. Louis's two major league baseball teams, the Browns and Cardinals.

From the 1920s to 1966, the year the stadium was abandoned, Schimmel dispensed all-beef hot dogs to game-going fans. She did so without touching the non-kosher meat because she kept strictly kosher, and as a Sabbath-observant woman staffed the business with non-Jews for Friday night and Saturday games.

A circa 1946 photograph showing her at the stand illustrates "the commerce of baseball, not just the sport of baseball that I viewed as a child,"

Schimmel's grandson, Harvey Tettleman, whose 5-year-old face is visible behind the counter, said by telephone from his Missouri farm. "Baseball was everybody's sport, whether you were an Orthodox Jew, Catholic, black or white. It brought everybody together."

So when the National Museum of American Jewish History solicited photographs, mementoes and memories to tell of baseball's role in Jews' enculturation in this country, Tettleman offered his bubbe as Exhibit A.



Her observance of kashrut and Shabbat notwithstanding, Esther Schimmel made a living for more than 40 years operating a hot dog... / Photo by Courtesy of Harvey and An...

Schimmel isn't the best known of those depicted in "Chasing Dreams: Baseball and Becoming American," but the display set to open March 13 (just in time for the start of baseball season) at the Philadelphia museum would be poorer without hers and other common folks' stories.

Plenty of Jews-in-baseball books, films and exhibits go the predictable if understandable route of ensconcing Hank Greenberg and Sandy Koufax as the key actors and dribbling the story outward to other prominent Jews. To be sure, the two deserve their thrones for being among baseball's best-ever players and admirable Jews who took symbolic stands by sitting out key games on High Holy Days.

What sets the Philadelphia exhibition apart is its presenting baseball as the social magnet that pulled Jews and other Americans into the mainstream. It does so through three themes: baseball as the shaper of identity, agent for overcoming adversity and role in peoples' lives. Any enormous photograph of Greenberg might have welcomed visitors to the fifth-floor gallery, but the curators selected a 1939 image showing the Hebrew Hammer chatting with Joe DiMaggio – the slugger-sons of Romanian and Italian immigrants, respectively.

The experience will have begun in the lobby of the Market Street museum – built, quite intentionally, across a park from the Liberty Bell – where an even larger mural shows fans cheering the hometown Phillies to the 2008 World Series championship. Set against the photograph are 85 baseball cards of Jewish players.

"Cards are so symbolic of childhood and of love of the game," said curator Joshua Perelman while giving "Haaretz" a behind-the-scenes peek at the exhibition being mounted. "For some people, cards are symbolic of fandom ... and are a nice gateway to America for children of immigrants."

Such was the case for John Thorn, Major League Baseball's official historian and the exhibition's consultant. Born in a displaced persons camp in Germany, Thorn settled as a boy in New York City where baseball, specifically the sport's cards, held an early fascination.

Plenty of other alluring artifacts will elicit oohs and ahhs, like the 1955 Brooklyn Dodgers uniform, 1963 Cy Young Award that Koufax lent the museum and the Dodgers warm-up jacket belonging to Jackie Robinson.

Robinson wasn't Jewish, but as the first black major leaguer in six decades, he earned Jews' admiration for staking out his rightful place in America. To a lesser degree, Roberto Clemente, Ichiro Suzuki and Shin-Soo Choo also are honored here as prominent pioneers instilling pride in the Hispanic, Japanese and Korean immigrant communities.

Perelman reached beyond symbolism. Viewers can gaze at important historical items such as a pin presented in 1871 to Brooklyn and Philadelphia players competing for the Dauvray Cup, the precursor to the World Series; the 1903 document establishing the World Series as the sport's championship, signed by Pittsburgh Pirates owner Barney Dreyfuss; and the original sheet music to "Take Me Out to the Ballgame," the 1908 song composed by Alfred Von Tilzer that fans still belt out at U.S. stadiums.

Helen Dauvray, Dreyfuss and Von Tinzler were Jewish. So was Moe Berg, whose catcher's mask is displayed, along with an autographed menu from a 1934 barnstorming tour of Japan in which he participated with such baseball luminaries as Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig. The multilingual Berg contributed far more to America than his meager .243 batting average over 15 seasons: During World War II, he spied for the Office of Strategic Services, which became the Central Intelligence Agency.

Then there are the bar mitzvah certificate with which current Oakland Athletics first baseman Nate Freiman established his Jewish bona fides to play for Israel's World Baseball Classic team in 2012; the bar mitzvah kippa painted by Karen Zeid, whose son Josh pitches for the Houston Astros; a ticket to the 1919 World Series, in which gambler Arnold Rothstein might have played a role in baseball's infamous scandal; and even a 1909 "Jewish Daily Forward" article attempting to explain in Yiddish the confounding American sport.

Those everyday items illuminate the grander themes and promise joy for visitors drawn to the exhibition to indulge in discrete slices – of baseball, Jewish life, democracy, Americana, immigration and assimilation – or to gobble the entire apple pie.

Baseball's greatest legacy among American Jews might be this, however: While Esther Schimmel's great-great-granddaughter, Thalia Stuber, age 3, hasn't yet sampled her first hot dog, she wears the Cardinals' crimson shirt and socks.

"Baseball's been just a huge part of our family life," said Tettleman, 72. His grandmother lived to be 93, having launched a baseball dynasty of five generations and counting.



This 1909 article in New York's Yiddish newspaper, Jewish Daily Forward, sought to explain the game of baseball to new American... / Photo by Courtesy of The Forward ...