

Indonesia's Bar of Israeli Gymnasts Recalls 1936 Tragedy of Gretel Bergmann

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By Amy Neustein, Ph.D.



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FORT LEE, New Jersey — A triumphant week that began with the release of the remaining 20 living hostages held captive in Gaza for two years, ended with a chilling declaration of defeat by the International Olympic Committee. Despite all of its efforts, the IOC was still unable to persuade Indonesia to give visas to Israeli gymnasts so that they can come to Jakarta and compete in the World Artistic Gymnastics Championship, a pivotal qualification event for the Olympic Games.

In their unabashedly political decision, Indonesia, home to the largest Muslim population in the world, publicly asserted that their decision to bar Israeli gymnasts from this critical sports competition was a form of protest against the Jewish state for its launching a counter-offensive against Hamas following the October 7 massacre. Nonetheless, this crushing blow meted out to the young Israeli gymnasts who trained round the clock, often missing family events, parties, and even a good night's sleep, resonates with me for a very personal reason.

My late mother, Shirley Friedberg Neustein, was a counselor at the Raleigh sleepaway camp in 1937 in South Fallsburg, New York – the heart of the Borscht Belt. She was athletically inclined and quite nimble (in fact, she was a private student of legendary choreographer and modern dancer Martha Graham). It was there that she met renowned track and field athlete Gretel Bergmann, who was known for her outstanding performance as a high jumper. Since Gretel Bergmann had just come to the US at that time, and hadn't even found a place to live, the camp director immediately offered her a stay at Raleigh for the summer. And my mother was instructed to take charge and see to it that Gretel would be welcomed with open arms.

Listening attentively to her stories of how she left Germany in disgust after Hitler had barred her from participating in the 1936 Summer Olympics, hosted that year in Berlin, my mother immediately called home to ask her parents if Gretel could come to live with them. Though that never happened, my mother never forgot the humiliation and pain that Gretel endured having been excluded from the Olympics, a place that she rightfully earned. It wasn't until 1996 that my mother and Gretel would fortuitously reconnect.

My mother had opened the newspaper and learned of Gretel's recent induction into the National Jewish Sports Hall of Fame. But what made the story newsworthy was that she was invited as an honored guest of the German Olympic Committee at the opening ceremonies for the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games. She called Gretel, who was then known as Gretel Lambert, following her marriage to Bruno Lambert. They spoke at length, sharing memories of their summer at the Catskill sleepaway camp.

But what stood out for my mother, as relayed to me, was how difficult it was for Gretel to heal from the assault on her integrity and character by a Nazi regime that discriminated against her because of their unbridled hatred for Jews. The emotional scars never seem to go away, while the journey to overcome the shock, dismay, and distrust is a long and painful process. This is precisely what has occurred with the Israeli gymnasts who were precluded from the Olympic competition in Jakarta. And unfortunately the assault does not end here.

Israeli scientists, researchers, entrepreneurs, inventors, creative and performing artists, and so on are enduring the wrath of world disapprobation in the aftermath of October 7. The halo of hostility has no geographic delimitation either. In a recent discussion with my Israeli neighbor, he relayed that his friend who bought a piece of property in Hungary a few years ago has been told that he is no longer welcome there. I found this disconcerting. After all, if a country such as Hungary – whose leadership under Prime Minister Viktor Orban has steadily favored Israel in international fora – can express such contempt for Jews, then what can be said of those countries whose public policies have been to consistently chastise the Jewish state?

What I fear more than the barring of Israeli gymnasts from this critical sports competition – which is certainly of paramount concern – is a systematic, routinized exclusion of talented Jews from all areas of life. In essence, a sociological regression to the era of quotas on Jews permitted into schools of higher learning, government, and industry, which is something that cannot be tolerated. This is why Indonesia's ban on Israeli gymnasts must be fought with strength and might, and with the same resolve shown by Gretel (Margaret) Bergmann Lambert when Hitler barred her from competing in the high jump at the 1936 Summer Olympics.

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